

Dog Day Morning

By Robotech_Master and JonBuck

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With an ear-splitting ring, the big round replica 20th-century “Big Ben” mechanical alarm clock went off. An arm reached out from under a pile of blankets and fumbled for it on the bedside table, finally knocking it onto the floor, where it continued its merry serenade.

Ugh, Rhianna thought.

“Oh, fer cryin’ out loud,” Kaylee said from across the room. “I’m goin’ downstairs to spare my sensitive hearing.” Rhianna’s own sensitive lynx ears could just make out the sound of aggrieved feline feet going thumpity-thumpity down the stairs.

Rhianna sighed. The wind-up alarm could continue for a good couple of minutes, and was more than loud enough to penetrate the blankets. Indeed, it was loud enough to go through *earplugs*, which was why Rhianna had gotten it in the first place. There was nothing for it. She was just going to have to get up.

Rhianna rolled out of bed, stretched, and yawned. (She’d noticed that lately the tip of her tongue curved up like a cat’s when she did that. Zane thought it was cute. But then, he thought almost everything she did was cute, which was cute enough in its own way.) She grabbed the alarm clock and shut it off, then padded into the bathroom and hit the shower.

Needle-sharp jets of hot water massaged some wakefulness into her body. It had been a late night last night. One of the local Steader cousins’ Donizettis had developed a peculiar twitch issue, and what she’d thought would be a simple fix devolved into staying up half the night dismantling the anterior Fuser nano reservoir. *Might even have to bite the bullet and ask Shelley for some coffee this morning.*

:Hey, Rhi!: Kaylee commed excitedly. *:We got company! Get down here!:*

Rhianna blinked. *:Company? Do I need to look nice?:*

:Nah, it’s family, you can be as frumpy as usual,: Kaylee smirked.

:Gee, thanks,: Rhianna sent dryly. Nonetheless, she grabbed her makeup mask and set it to “basic,” applying a nearly undetectable layer of cosmetics that she thought made her look nice without being too obvious about it. At least, it *usually* did. She was in the habit of checking carefully in the mirror afterward all the same, ever since that one time Uncia had thought it would be funny to hack the mask’s firmware into applying clown makeup at all settings...

A few minutes later, Rhianna came down the stairs in a fresh set of coveralls to find Kaylee rubbing noses with another lynx RIDE of the same model, with a hardlight Uplift Gendarme badge pinned to one shoulder. “Hey, Ben!” Rhianna called. “What brings you out here this morning?”

“Greetings, Aunt Rhianna!” Ben replied cheerfully. “The call of Duty, as it happens.”

“Duty,’ is it?” Rhianna said. “You’re one of the only people I know who’s in the habit of pronouncing capital letters.”

Ben chuckled. “You do indeed have my number. But yes, the Gendarmes had a request for you. It concerns this fellow.” Ben nodded toward the form of a deactivated RIDE next to him that was also new to the garage.

Rhianna quirked an eyebrow. “Oh, really? What have we here?” She approached the RIDE, professional interest piqued. It was a husky or malamute dog model—the same base frame was used for both breeds, hard to tell which with the hardlight off—

similar to the ones she'd set up for the Munn twins a few years back. It appeared to be in good condition.

"Well, therein lies a tale," Ben said. "They found him in the garage of one Travis d'Aubigny during repossession proceedings. The fellow apparently cleaned out his bank accounts, maxed out his charge accounts, and then skipped the system on the *Axiom* last month. In the old days, this chap would have been put up on the block to offset the debts to d'Aubigny's creditors, but with the new RIDE rights in, we'll be treating him as we would any other abandoned RIDE."

"And they want us to look him over?" Rhianna asked.

"My colleagues inform me you've attained a certain, ah, *reputation* for being terribly effective at waking longsleepers," Ben said, with just a tinge of irony. "And the cyber-forensics department is busy enough with actual *crimes* that they felt they could afford to farm this one out. They'd like to know anything he could tell us about his erstwhile partner's plans, so they sent me along to observe."

"Well, then, let's get him into a cradle and see what we've got," Rhianna said, rubbing her hands together. "Kay, could you comm Uncia and tell her if Shelley doesn't get her butt down here in fifteen minutes I'm *fabbing* coffee?" She held out her arms, and Kaylee Fused onto her.

Kaylee chuckled. "Oooh, that'll motivate her. Right, let's get this guy set up."

Fourteen minutes later, Uncia hovered into the garage in Fuser form. "That's dirty pool and you know it, Rhi," Rochelle said. "I'd have come anyway, you know."

"Just wanted you to know it was urgent," Rhianna said. "Police business, after all."

"Oh, hey, Ben!" Uncia said. "How's life behind the thin blue line?"

"Quite well, thank you," Ben said. "Training went well enough; they have me running traffic stops and 'gofer' tasks for the nonce until they decide who to offer as a partner. I'm rather enjoying it, actually. Reminds me of our Army days. At least they haven't asked me to fetch any 'single-origin organic Fuser nanos' yet."

"This guy was left shut down in his garage by his human," Rhianna said, nodding to the cradle. "The jerk skipped system leaving a pile of debts behind."

"Ugh," Rochelle said. "I thought that was more Nextus people's thing."

"There are bloody gits all over, if you'll pardon my French," Ben said. "We believe the fellow's been asleep for only a couple of months at most, but weren't sure, and deemed it worthwhile to consult an expert."

"I'm interfaced with the cradle's cyber-linkup now," Uncia said. "Let's check him out."

"Right." Rhianna nodded. "The shell's in decent shape. Shows wear patterns of a few years' normal use, frequent maintenance. Seems to be well kept up, so that's one thing anyway."

"Hmm. That's funny," Rochelle said. "I haven't seen this kind of a RI core housing in use before."

Kaylee's ears perked up. "What do you mean?" Rhianna asked.

Uncia threw up a hardlight hologram for Ben's benefit showing a cylinder containing two walnut-sized spheres. "It's a double core. Looks like they're mounted in tandem. One's full, one's empty. Why would a RIDE have two cores?"

"Onboard RAID backup?" Rhianna suggested. "That wouldn't explain why one's

completely empty, though. You'd expect them to be nearly identical if one was a backup of the other."

"Maybe we can ask him when we wake him up," Rochelle said. "Hmm. His personality's really fragmented hard. No signs of damage or anything, but he'll be really scatterbrained—literally—if we wake him up now. We're going to need to run a couple defrag cycles on him to get him ready, I'd say. Unnie and I will get right on that."

"Okay. While you're doing that, we'll give him a tuneup, battery check, the usual," Rhianna said. "Since it's all coming out of the Uplift Fund for Wayward Orphan RIDEs, no need to skimp." She glanced at Ben. "You might find the next couple of hours a little boring."

"Oh, that's all right," Ben said. "I can find things to occupy myself."

"Actually, there's little enough for us RIDEs to do consciously that I was thinking we might do a trio Nature Range hunt while you-all do your thing," Uncia said.

"Sounds like fun," Kaylee said. "I can multitask well enough for this. If you don't mind, Rhi..."

"Sure, go ahead," Rhianna said. "Pot a virtual rabbit or two for me."

"Will do!" Kaylee said happily.

Rhianna straightened up and wiped Kaylee's Fuser brow. Not that there was any actual sweat there, but skeuomorphics would have their way. "Okay, that's that. He's got new solid B-grade batteries, replacing the ones that were wearing out. Fuser nanos flushed and topped off. Lifters tuned; hardlight projectors ditto. He's got about as good a bod as he can without spending more than the Fund allots. By the way, you got a name for him, Shelley? So we can stop calling him 'he'?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. Sorry, thought I'd mentioned," Uncia said. "Metadata on his core says his name is 'Kerberos,' but I suspect he probably goes by 'Kirby.' At least, I would if I had a name like that."

"How's the defrag going?" Rhianna asked.

"Oh, that finished fifteen minutes ago," Rochelle said. "We were just waiting for you to finish up."

"Well, I am," Rhianna said. "Kaylee, could you let the others know we're ready out here?"

"Already done," Kaylee said. "That was fun. Y'know, I gather *real* cats always hunt alone. They don't know what they're missing."

"Quite, Mother," Ben said. "So, shall we greet our mystery guest?"

"Let's instantiate a Bambi's Forest for this," Uncia said. "We can drop into Nature Range from there if we want, but domestic dog breeds usually do better in a no-threat environment, especially if there are cats involved."

"Sounds like a plan," Rhianna said. "Boot him up and network him in."

A few moments later, the two humans, two lynxes, and one snow leopard were in a peaceful forest glade along with a sleeping Husky dog, with grey fur, white face, and curled tail just like the sled dogs of old.

"Wakey wakey, Kirby!" Uncia said cheerfully.

The dog stiffened, blinked, then slowly opened his eyes—and as he did so, his avatar flickered and changed abruptly into a naked dog-eared human. "Uh...what? Who?"

“Kerberos?” Rhianna said.

“What?” The man looked around. “Where?” He got slowly to his feet. “Wait. Where am I? What’s going on here?”

:*What the hell?*: Kaylee wondered. :*Why’s a RIDE have a human default avatar?*: They could put on any shape they wanted in VR, of course, but usually the one you woke up in was your base state.

“It’s natural to be a little confused when you just wake up,” Rochelle said. “We found you shut down in Travis’s garage. We were wondering if you could tell us how you got there.”

The dog man again. “What? But...I *am* Travis. Why are you calling me Kerberos? That’s my RIDE.” He glanced around the clearing, puzzled. “And why am I in a VR?” He looked down at himself. “And why am I naked?” A suit of coveralls appeared on his body a moment later. “That’s better.”

Rhianna stared for a moment, before uttering a single, deadpan syllable. “What.”

“Uh-oh,” Uncia said. “You know, I *thought* there was something both a little bit off and a little bit familiar about his personality engrams while I was running the defrag, but I didn’t want to say anything...”

“It’s like Jeanette’s RI core makeup,” Rochelle said. “Isn’t it.”

“Terribly sorry, but might you unpack a little?” Ben asked. “I’m having a hard time following.”

“That makes two of us,” Travis said. “What’s going on here?”

“I...think we better call Dr. Patil,” Rhianna said.

Dr. Patil picked up the comm on the second ring. She’d told Rhianna she assigned Kaylee’s caller ID top priority. “Hello Kaylee, Rhianna. Apologies, but can this wait? I’m in a meeting at Martinez University right now...”

“Well, we’ve just run across a rather confused RIDE,” Rhianna said. “He seems to have been template-transferred from his human.”

“Oh dear,” Dr. Patil said. “*Another* one? I’ll excuse myself from this meeting and be there in a few minutes.” She disconnected with no further ado.

“As Julius would say, ‘Dafuq?’” Kaylee said. “Did she just say ‘*another* one?’”

“I think your Mom’s got some ‘splaining to do,” Uncia said.

“Why can’t I disengage from VR?”

“Uh, yes, about that,” Rochelle said. “Maybe we should go ahead and drop back to the Real. Get all the shocks out of the way at once.”

“It...might be easier than trying to explain,” Rhianna said. She wasn’t sure whether it would be a good idea, but didn’t have anything better to suggest at this point. She terminated the VR, and they all opened their eyes on the real world.

With his hardlight up, the dog looked pretty much like the husky he had been when he was sleeping in VR. He swiveled his head around, bright blue eyes taking in the garage, then looking back at himself. “What...what’s happened to me? Why am I...this can’t be right. I’m a *dog!*” His voice trailed off into a full-throated husky howl. Rhianna winced, ears twitching.

“Take it easy there, fella,” Rhianna said. “The important thing is, you’re all right *apart from* being a dog. Try to relax and we’ll fill you in on what’s going on.”

Travis jerked his head back and forth. “Why can’t I move?”

“We’ve got your motors from the neck down locked off for the moment, to

prevent damage to the cradle,” Rhianna said. “Take it easy. Deep breaths and all that.” She sighed. “This isn’t going to be easy to explain.”

“Travis,” Rochelle said. “If you are Travis...well, somehow you’ve ended up in the body of your RIDE, Kerberos,” Rochelle said.

“Or maybe it is,” Rhianna said.

The dog—Travis—turned his head and stared back at his body. “This can’t be real. I have to be dreaming this!” His head jerked back and forth again.

“Hey. Hey! Easy now!” Rhianna said. “I promise you, unfortunately this is real, but we’re going to do the best we can to help you. But we can’t do anything useful if you panic.”

“Panic? You haven’t *seen* panic!” Travis said. “I...I can’t be a dog! I’ve got too much stuff to *do!*”

“I suspect that ‘stuff’ is going to have to wait,” Ben said. “I’m afraid it appears you’ve been bodyjacked, in a rather literal sense.”

“What?” Travis said. “Oh, son of a *bitch.*”

“Literally,” Uncia said. Kaylee sent her a paw-swat emoticon.

“I know he was acting weird and kind of secretive lately. The last day or so, he was downright gloating at me,” Travis said. “But *this?* How is this even possible?”

“Well, in the last few months there have been some...accidental breakthroughs in nanotech implants,” Uncia said. “Someone figured out how to implant something functionally equivalent to an RI core in a human brain. Then you can copy and upload the brain.”

“And it *theoretically* works the other way, too,” Rochelle said. “I think I’m seeing why there’s two cores now. One for uploading Travis while Kirby’s still on board. Then Kirby downloads himself from the other core into Travis’s body, and, uh, wow. That’s a whole implication we never thought about with Jeanette.”

“I fear it is an implication a number of RIDEs *have* become conversant with,” another voice said, as a red doe Fuser hovered up into the garage. Dr. Patil and Rohit touched down, walked up to the cradled dog, and put a hand on his temple. The deer’s ears drooped, and Dr. Patil sighed. “It is another one. I am sorry...Travis. It appears your RIDE has...played a prank on you.”

“Prank? *Prank?* How the *fuck* is this a ‘prank?’” Travis said angrily. “Where is he? What’s he done with my body?”

“I fear your human body has...left without you,” Ben said. “‘Travis d’Abigny’ was listed as a passenger on the *Axiom*’s most recent departure. By now it’s left Wednesday and is well on its way to Zheng He.”

“A number of RIDEs?” Rhianna asked. “What did you mean by ‘another one?’”

Rohit peeled away from Dr. Patil, who clasped her hands together and sighed, deer ears flicking in embarrassment. “I was going to mention it the next time I saw you. Word leaked out about the new advancements brought on by Miss Leroq’s new brand of enhancements shortly after we were able to restore her to a new human body.”

“Uh-oh,” Rochelle said. “I see where this is going.”

Dr. Patil spread her hands. “Indeed. RIDEs were quick to latch onto the implications, and given that the schematics for the designs were already in the public space due to the nano-implant community’s propensity for sharing, they were readily adaptable. All that was required was for a RIDE to add an additional core for swap space, which could be done by any black-market mechanic; their Fuser nanites were

already close enough to medical constructors that they could be used to build the requisite implants into their humans without even telling them. Complete instruction sets have been circulating on the same class of RIDE bulletin boards that used to host FreeRIDE and Amontillado.”

“And RIDEs have been doing this?” Rhianna said.

“Indeed,” Dr. Patil said. “Most, of course, have been trying it willingly on the part of both participants, in the spirit of experimentation. Mostly successfully, though in a few cases things went...badly.” She shook her head.

“Ugh,” Rochelle said.

“Some of them even decide they’re happier that way,” Dr. Patil said. “But a dozen or so cases of...we’re calling it ‘true bodyjacking’ have come to the attention of the Marshals. Roddy and I have been consulting. I suppose it was only a matter of time until one happened here. Some of them, we have been able to recapture the runaway RI-human and switch them back. But others seem to have learned from their forbears’ mistakes and left the planet before they could be found out.”

“You mean I’m *stuck* like this?” Travis whined. “Can you put out a warrant for him and get him sent back here at the next stop?”

Dr. Patil smiled sardonically. “The fundamental problem is, what charges do we list on the warrant? Body theft? That would rather call attention not only to the fact that we not only have true synthetic intelligence, something we’ve tried to hide for over thirty years, but also that it is now possible to transfer consciousness between man and machine. Indeed, if we attempted to arrest them on *any* pretext, they might very well give the matter away in an effort to avoid being returned home.” She shrugged. “The most we can do is send them a private message *asking* them to return.”

Travis’s head drooped, and he emitted a very canine whine. “Terrific.”

“Can’t you just...clone him a new body, like you did for Jeanette?” Rhianna asked. “Surely he’s got enough genetic sample data on file to use for a template.”

“Theoretically,” Dr. Patil said. “The thing is that existing facilities were not made to keep up with that kind of heavy demand, and trauma patients come first on the list. There is already a backlog of several months just from the cases we already know about, and I am sure they are only the tip of the iceberg. Roddy and I are endowing new cloning centers to add capacity, but it will take time. You can’t simply throw up a prefab building and call it a nanosurgical facility.”

“Hmm, that’s odd,” Ben said. “I combed in this development to the Precinct, and was advised to hold Mr. d’Aubigny for questioning. I explained that he is not the one who actually took the money, but they aren’t replying.”

“Hold me for *questioning*?” Travis helped. “I haven’t *done* anything! Except get bodyjacked.”

Dr. Patil sighed. “Oh, dear. This could be...problematic, couldn’t it.”

Rhianna frowned. “What are you thinking?”

“In my time living here, I have found that Uplift might not have as bad a bureaucracy as Nextus, but it still has *some*,” Dr. Patil said. “Especially in the law enforcement departments. And when you come across a crime so new, it often takes a while for jurisprudence to catch up.”

“Travis d’Aubigny committed credit account fraud,” Ben said. “We have someone claiming *he’s* Travis d’Aubigny here, so arrest him.”

“Wait. If they’re ready to believe Travis could be in this body, why can’t they

believe whoever's in *his* body now committed the theft, not him?" Rochelle said.

"They don't *know* that," Ben said. "From their perspective, it could be Travis set the whole thing up and sent Kirby off as a scapegoat. I'm sure we can clear this up easily enough."

"Well, I guess I'm not going anywhere," Travis said. "I can't even *move*."

"Sorry about that," Rhianna said. "I'll pop the cradle open and let you down. Assuming you're not going to try to run."

"Where would I run *to*?" Travis said. "I have no idea what I'm doing. I don't know *how* to dog."

Rhianna opened the lid, and Travis got slowly to his feet, then jumped down to the garage floor. He shook himself, then raised a paw and looked at it. "This is unreal," he said. "I keep thinking I'm going to wake up, or drop out of VR."

"What's it like?" Rochelle asked. "Being in the wrong body like that..."

"It's...very strange." Travis sat on his haunches and scratched behind one ear with a hind foot. Then he stopped. "Uh? How did I even do that?"

"Instinct is a funny thing," Kaylee said.

"I suppose we should return to the precinct for questioning," Ben sighed. "Are you capable of assuming a skimmer form, Mr. d'Aubigny?"

"I...don't know. I...guess I should be," Travis said. "Hold on." He looked distant for a moment, then his hardlight flickered out and his body unfolded into a ski-equipped skimmer bike form. "Huh. Would you look at that?"

"Nice lines," Rhianna said.

"I'd say thanks, but, well, they're not *mine*," Travis said. "Okay, well, lead me to your precinct, I guess..."

Just then, motion in the still open door made them look up. Another skimmer bike came cruising up, this one in a more black and white style. Mounted on the back was a man in a business suit with the ears and tail of a skunk poking out. "Uh...is there a Travis d'Aubigny present?"

The snow skimmer collapsed back into a dog. "Uh...yes?"

The inboxes of everyone present pinged with a new arrival. "I hereby serve you with a Writ of Indenturement."

"Wait, what? Hold on just a minute," Travis said. "I'm not...that doesn't..."

Rhianna frowned. Indenturement for RIDEs to pay off debts, was one of the few holdovers from the old pre-RIDE rights era. The reasoning went that RIDEs were capable of doing enough work, and were likely to have a long enough lifespan, that if they ran up debts (or wanted to take a big cash payment up front), a couple of years of indenturement to pay it off wasn't considered an undue hardship as percentage of lifespan went. It was generally a voluntary thing, but in certain cases it could be imposed by a court. There was still some controversy over the practice, and it was likely to be addressed in the next round of RIDE rights legislation, whenever that happened.

"But I'm not a RIDE!" Travis protested.

"You look like one from here," the process server said.

Ben cocked his head. "I begin to understand," he mused. "If he were Kirby, he would be immune because the debts are considered to accrue strictly to Travis d'Aubigny, and RIDEs are separate people. But if the RIDE itself *is* Travis, he is culpable for the debt—even though it was Kirby who ran it up in his human body."

"I see," Dr. Patil said dryly. "It appears I was wrong about jurisprudence being

slow to catch up. In this case, it appears to have sprinted ahead. Rohit, might I have a moment to review this document with you?" The deer walked over to her and Fused back up. Rhianna had trained herself by now not to stare, but she *still* couldn't get over how smooth that Fuse was. The deer nodded, then addressed the skunk-man on the bike. "The amount in question is 32,741 *mu*, is that correct?"

"And thirty-four centi-*mu*," the man added.

"I will transfer the funds immediately if you will kindly cancel the writ and *go away*," Dr. Patil proposed.

The man blinked. "Uh...I'll consult with my client." He tilted his head for a moment, then nodded. "That will be acceptable."

"Done, and done," Dr. Patil said. "Now *Go. Away.*"

Their inboxes pinged again with a writ cancellation notice. "Very well, ma'am. Pleasure doing business with you." The skimmer backed out and pulled away.

"Well, that was...distasteful," Dr. Patil said.

"Thirty three kilo-*mu*?" Travis said. "He must have maxed out every card I had. How am I ever going to pay that much back?" He sighed. "I guess I'm indentured to you now?"

"Do not worry about it," Dr. Patil said. "While I am no Steader or Walton, I am well off enough in my own way that it is of no consequence. I will not see *any* RIDE put in such a position. Even a human RIDE."

Rhianna sighed. "Just how many world-changing technologies are we up to lately?"

"That depends how you're counting them," Ben said. "When you get right down to it, they are all just branches of the same one, are they not?"

"A trigger effect," Dr. Patil said. "History is full of them."

"So what do I do now?" Travis said. "Do you still want me for questioning?"

"It seems to be academic given that Grandma made restitution for you," Ben said. "But you could at the least swear out a complaint against Kirby, should he ever return to this jurisdiction."

"Yeah, fat chance of that," Travis snorted. "He's got the whole galaxy to play in, now."

"I wouldn't be too worried. Thirty-three grand won't go *that* far," Uncia said. "Well, unless he sells some organs when he hits Earth. They pay a lot for organics there. He might even sell your whole body and come back to Zharus in a brainbox!"

Travis plopped to the ground, put both paws over his eyes, and whined.

Kaylee sent another paw-swat emoticon. "Uncia? Stop cheering him up, it's really not helping."

"Sorry!"

"So there's really no way I could just...get a new body cloned?" Travis said.

"All the available slots for cloning are filled," Dr. Patil said. "Depending on how many trauma cases there are, it could be months. We can put you on the waiting list."

"It may be a good thing this happened to you, y'know," Uncia said. "I mean, you don't have any money left at all now. Kirby took it all. If you were a human, you'd have to eat and stuff, and that costs a lot. But all you have to do now is plug in."

"Gee...thanks, I think," Travis said. "For that matter, how am I going to pay for the cloning?"

"Don't worry about that," Dr. Patil said. "We have set up a fund to cover it for the

time being, and there is legislation in the works for something longer-term.”

“But if you’re looking for something to do, have you considered getting a job?” Ben suggested. “They do have those for RIDEs now. I’m proof.”

“What did you do when you were human, anyway?” Uncia asked.

“I’m—I was a shift manager at one of the atmo plants,” Travis said. “Oversaw the wind generators on third shift.”

“Oooh! You’re the reason Shelley’s hair blows around so much!” Uncia said.

“Well, part of the time, anyway.”

“You know, they use a lot of atmo specialists on Zane’s mining platform,” Rhianna said. “Lots of RIDEs out there, too. We could comm him and see what he says.”

“I imagine the Marshals could find a spot for you, too,” Rochelle said. “Maybe Jeanette would have some advice for you.”

“This is all going a little fast for me,” Travis whined.

“Or you could just hang out here for a while until you get on your feet,” Rhianna said.

“All four of them,” Uncia supplied. Kaylee sent the paw-swat emoticon again, twice.

“If you really must, you could simply find a quiet spot and power down for several months until your number comes up for cloning,” Dr. Patil said. “I would generally advise against it. You only live once—make the most of it.”

“Perhaps he might wish to visit the museum?” Ben suggested. “It seems quite the place to go for RIDEs having trouble adjusting to their new circumstances.”

“With all due respect, officer, I don’t think there’s *anyone* there who can help me,” Travis said. “I’m *not* a RIDE!”

“You are now!” Uncia said.

Kaylee rolled her eyes. “Uncia? *Not helping.*”

“Sorry, great-great grandma!” Uncia said.

“Oh, fer cryin’ out loud,” Kaylee said. “Right. I’m doing what I shoulda done to begin with and calling in an expert. Lucky thing, she’s living round here these days.”

Dr. Patil brightened. “That’s right, she is, isn’t she? I should have thought of that myself.”

“She’s on her way,” Kaylee reported.

“She who?” Travis asked.

“The girl who started all this,” Rochelle said. “She’s had first-hand experience being human and RIDE, so she should be able to get you straightened out.”

“I don’t think *anyone* can help me, but what do I have to lose?” Travis slumped to the floor, resting his head between his paws.

:He’s certainly got the whole doggie posture thing down, anyway,: Kaylee observed.

A few moments later, a big utility skimmer truck pulled up outside the garage and a dark-haired teenaged girl hopped down as the truck converted to an immense lioness. “Hey, everyone! I’m here!” Jeanette said. “What’s up?”

“Someone in a familiar boat to you,” Kaylee said, nodding toward the husky on the garage floor. “He used to be human.”

Jeanette frowned. “Another one? Crap. If I’d known what was going to happen...I feel responsible. Hey, guy.”

Travis blinked. “Who’re you?”

“Copper Star Marshal Jeanette Leroq.” Jeanette tapped the badge on her chest. “And my partner, Gold Star Tamarind. I kinda accidentally invented the tech they used to put you in that.”

“Oh. Well, hooray for you,” Travis said.

“And I know how it is to be stuck in the wrong body,” Jeanette said. “Doesn’t much help to have people telling you to make the best of it, does it?”

“No,” Travis said. “No, it doesn’t.”

“On the bright side, at least you’re still alive,” Tamarind put in from outside the garage. “We’ve heard of a couple cases where the RIDE wanted to make dead sure their new body couldn’t be reclaimed. With the key word here being ‘dead.’”

Travis shuddered. “Ugh. Don’t go into detail on that, please.”

“So what I’d like to do would be to put you in touch with a few people in your shoes who are further along, who can maybe help you adjust,” Jeanette continued. “I’m passing you their comm codes now. A lot of them have decided to go into Marshals service themselves, as a way to stay close to the investigation and not just sit around twiddling their thumbs. Well, if they *had* thumbs. You might consider doing the same. There’s a lot of jobs for RIDEs that don’t require a Fuse partner if you don’t want one.”

“But I’m not a—” Travis sighed. “I guess I have to admit it. I *am* a RIDE.”

“They say the first step is admitting you have a problem,” Jeanette said. “No matter what happens, I’m afraid you’re going to be stuck that way for a while. A lot of people do actually end up liking it once they get over the initial shock. Kind of like crossriding that way, I guess. It’s something new and different. Some of them *have* even taken human partners, but again, nobody says *you* have to.”

“Uh...thanks, I guess,” Travis said. “I have a hard time imagining that happening to me, but...this is all still so new to me.”

“That, at least, will fix itself,” Dr. Patil said.

“You want my advice? Go for a cruise outside the domes. Run around some in that new bod of yours, find yourself a nice spot in the sun away from anybody else to spend some time alone, thinking about things,” Jeanette said. “And comm me if you need me.”

“That’s...an idea, I guess,” Travis said. “Something to do, anyway.” He glanced at Ben. “You still need me to come to the station?”

“I’ve taken care of that,” Tamarind said. “I just filed the paperwork for the Marshals to take over jurisdiction from the Gendarmes, given that your body skipped the polity and all. Get with us when you can, you might know something useful for down the road. But given where Kirby is right now, there’s not exactly any rush.”

“Well, it looks like my work here is finished, then,” Ben said. “I should get back to the Precinct; they’ll have more errands for me, I’m sure. It was good to see you, Mother, Aunt, Grandmother, Great Aunt, and everyone else.”

“See you around, Ben. Don’t be a stranger,” Kaylee said, de-Fusing to pad forward and rub cheeks with Ben before he left.

“Uh...thanks for getting me woken up, I guess,” Travis said.

“All part of the day’s work,” Ben said. “Call upon me should you need me for anything. Farewell!” He padded to the garage entrance, transformed to a skimmer hoverbike with light bars to the front and back, and sped away past Tamarind.

“And...I guess I’m gonna go, too,” Travis said. “Try out this skimmer mode...be alone and stuff. Uh...I might come back by later, if that’s all right.”

“Drop by any time,” Rhianna said.

“Yeah, don’t *you* be a stranger, either,” Kaylee said. “Whatever you end up doin’, hope it works out.”

“Uh...yeah. Thanks.” Travis got to his feet and converted back into the skimmer bike again, a little faster this time. Then he was past Tamarind and moving up the street.

Tamarind turned her head to watch him go. “Hopefully he gets his head on straight.”

“On a scale of 1 to 10, I’d give him about a 7,” Jeanette said. “He’s shocked, but at least he’s not having hysterics. I think he’ll get by.” She shook her head. “Sheesh. If I’d known what this whole thing was going to turn into...”

“Have you and Tammy ever considered trading?” Uncia wondered.

“We’ve talked about it a time or two,” Jeanette said. “Not really seriously. I’ve already *been* Tams, pretty much, and she’s not too interested in being me.”

“I’ve looked at her *memories* of having to poop often enough that I can get by without having to do it myself,” Tamarind said complacently. “And you just can’t give yourself a decent grooming with a human tongue.”

“Ew,” Jeanette said, wrinkling her nose. “Let’s just not go there, okay?” She shook her head. “Anyway, I suppose I might not mind being a *different* RIDE for a while, someday. Might be fun to try being one of the lighter scout lions, or maybe even a Laurie body with a skimmer car. But I’m not exactly in any hurry to go sticking my brain in more weird places right now. It’s been in more than enough ones already.”

“If there’s any other way we can help with the situation, let us know,” Rochelle said.

“We’ll do that,” Jeanette promised. “Anyway, Tams and I need to get back to training, so I guess we’ll see you around.”

“Have fun with that,” Rhianna said.

“Thank you for coming,” Dr. Patil said. “I am glad to see you are doing so well in your restored body.”

“Well, thank *you* for helping with it, Doc,” Jeanette said. “Call me if you need me!” Tamarind converted back into a skimmer truck, the girl climbed aboard, and they headed away.

“We should return to the meeting,” Dr. Patil said. “I will pass along all we know of these cases, and keep you apprised of further developments.”

“Say hi to Gramps and Dr. Clemens for me,” Kaylee said.

“We shall,” Dr. Patil promised. Then Rohit reconverted into her sleek skimmer bike form and they, too, sped away.

“Well, that was an interesting development,” Rochelle said, de-Fusing from Uncia and shaking out her hair.

“That’s one way of putting it,” Kaylee said.

“Uh...” Uncia said, looking over at her. “Shelley? Do you think maybe we...?”

“What, you want to get my body drunk again without me even being *in* it this time?” Rochelle asked.

Uncia’s ears drooped. “You’re *never* gonna let me forget that, are you?”

“Sorry, Un-hon. It was just the first thing that came to mind.” Rochelle reached out to scratch her behind the ears. “I dunno, it might be fun. It’s just I’m still on the fence about brain implants. The thumb drive was one thing, but...well, you know.”

Rhianna stroked a hand over Kaylee's hardlight fur. "You ever wonder what it might be like to be human, Kay?"

Kaylee snorted. "Why, are *you* wantin' to see how the other half lives now?"

"Well, I suppose it might give me a new perspective on fixing RIDEs to be one from the inside for a while," Rhianna said.

"You're already the best there is at it," Kaylee said, rubbing her head against Rhianna's side. "And I like us both the way we are."

Rhianna chuckled. "Yeah, me too." Though she wasn't sure she was *entirely* convinced. Even if Kaylee wasn't interested in swapping, it would be awfully easy to get ahold of a spare DE shell, after all...

"Well, enough standing around," Rochelle said. "I'm gonna make us some breakfast, then we'll see what other jobs we got waiting for us."

"Works for me, pard," Rhianna said. "I'll go wash up."

THE END

Author's Note

So, uh, yeah.

This story was, of all things, partly inspired by a picture from the “Moon Moon” Internet meme: a picture of a goofy-looking German Shepherd saying, “I forgot how to dog.” It just occurred to me...what if someone didn't know “how to dog” in the first place?

But I'd had the fundamental idea, of “true bodyjacking,” in mind for a while. Since I first wrote “Second-Hand Lioness,” when you get right down to it. I had realized the implications of the tech as soon as I'd invented it. I just wasn't really sure I wanted to go there. Even after I wrote this story, I kind of sat on it for a while, for that very reason.

You see, in the “Chakona Space” setting, which I dabbled in before coming here, the setting's creator, Chakat Goldfur, inadvertently opened a can of worms with a story about a transporter accident that could turn a person into a chakat. Next thing you know, *everyone* was writing wish-fulfillment fish-out-of-water “I get turned into a chakat” (or foxtaur or whatever) stories, to the point where they quite outnumbered any other kind of story for a while. (I dabbled with the idea a bit myself, before writing an alternate future story that took the idea to its logical extreme, with *everyone on Earth* getting turned into something else, but that's another story.)

And here I am doing the same thing in *our* setting, opening the door to scores of “I get turned into a RIDE” stories. I thought long and hard about it before posting...but then, given that the idea pops up later on in our Totalia stories, I'm pretty much going to have to bite the bullet. On the other hand...we haven't really had too many other writers express interest in the setting, so if this should bring a few more in, well, why not? A number of those chakat copy-cat stories were actually rather good, after all.

So, I hope you enjoyed it...and if it inspires you to write something yourself, don't be shy.

—Robotech_Master, 10/22/2014