

Dressed for Succes

By Robotech_Master, with JonBuck

Uplift
Horne Street Apartments
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Kim Lane stepped out of her apartment and closed the door behind her. She brushed a wisp of long blonde hair out of her face, and glanced down at her shopping outfit. Sensible flat shoes, slacks, a colorful blouse she'd picked up the other day, and of course her very practical brown leather purse. She was all good.

There was still a lot to do before they could fully settle in. They'd spent yesterday more or less arranging the new apartments Quinoa Steader had gotten them to their liking--fabbing furniture, dishes, and cookware from the public fabbery down the hall, or even going out to buy some from the nearby shops. Without really consulting each other, they'd decided to do the shopping on their own--they felt like they needed a little "alone time" after the big adventure they'd been through together.

In the afternoon, Joe Steader had commed them with a job offer. It amounted to a paid internship as an archivist's assistant at Steader Entertainment. The job was to get acquainted with how the archive worked, and help people find the stuff they needed--kind of like a librarian, only less formal. The salary was okay--good but not *too* good. Kim got the feeling that Joe didn't want to set up any kind of expectation that he was going to be their sugar daddy after getting them settled; they were going to have to earn their own keep.

But that was fine with Kim. All she wanted was an even break--the chance to make her own way in this brave new world. And it looked like that was just what she was going to get--and the others as well. Kim wasn't sure how good an archivist she'd necessarily *be*, but the job came with the chance to ransack the Steader Entertainment archives in depth--and the history geek in her was eager for that chance.

The job was going to start on the first of the month, so today Kim was going to go out looking for a wardrobe to wear on the job. She and Madeira had been fiddling with her biosculpt settings, and they'd settled on a cup size of B going forward, with the option to change it later if the situation called for it. Now she just needed some nice work clothes to match that.

As she headed to the elevator, Kim reflected bemusedly on just how easily she'd settled into the new "her." Once the pesky sculpt issue had been resolved, she supposed didn't really have any complaints. Now that the shock had worn off, she felt...what was a good word for it? *Serene*, she decided. She was who she needed to be--and so was everyone else in her world. Even Tim.

Ah, poor Tim. He'd certainly gotten more than he--*she*--had bargained for, when she'd jumped at the chance to swap genders over her RIDE's changes to her body. *Bet he's sorry now that she didn't just live with those things 'til she got here and could have had them readjusted, like I did.*

But she was surprised that she actually *didn't* take more satisfaction in it. She could certainly have felt a bit smug at Tim's comeuppance, given that Tina's spur-of-the-moment decision to become Tim hadn't left Kip any choice about becoming Kim. But...she felt more sorry for him than anything else. Tina had always been a bit impulsive--and Kip's own behavior had admittedly set her off.

Beyond that...she did still *like* the guy. Maybe even *love* him, she wasn't sure. They'd been getting on well enough back on Earth as the opposite sexes, and had moved past the "friends with benefits" stage some time ago. If things had kept going the same way, they might have gotten married before they graduated from college, or maybe soon after if they felt it would be too distracting from getting their degrees.

And Tim was still going to need help settling in--probably more than she was. With that in mind, Kim resolved to try to be more supportive the next time she saw him.

Which, it turned out, was going to be sooner than she expected. As she was leaving the building, she heard his voice behind her. "Hey, wait up!"

Kim turned to see Tim hurrying up to her. "Hello, Tim. What's up?"
"Didn't see you yesterday. Madeira said you're going out shopping, was wondering if I could come along. In case you need any help with, uh, girl stuff or anything...and maybe you could help me with any guy stuff I don't know about?"

"On this planet? I'm not sure either one of us would necessarily know

that much.” She smiled. “But sure, you’re welcome to come along.”

“Thanks. The mall’s this way, right?”

Kim nodded. “Maddie took me there yesterday. But she’s charging and defragging right now, and anyway, I felt like seeing things without her along to explain everything.”

“I know what you mean. I think that’s what Quentin’s doing, too.” He shrugged. “So I guess it’s just the two of us humans, alone together in a strange new world.”

“Looks like.” As they started walking, Kim glanced over at him. “How are you getting on? ‘Mister Happy’ calming down any? Oh, I guess not.”

Tim rolled his eyes. “You just *had* to mention him. I hope that book of yours is right and this will *stop* after a while. I’m ready, I swear. If I’d just *known...*”

“You don’t have to apologize again. If anyone’s to blame here, it’s me. You just...caught me by surprise back then is all, I guess.” She shrugged. “Anyway, I don’t blame you...and I hope you don’t blame me. Can we maybe just get past the recriminations? It is what it is, and will be for three more years. So how ‘bout we just try to deal with it?”

“Yeah...I guess that’s fair.”

They walked along in silence for a while, neither one quite sure what to say after that. The street was lined with a number of small shops, with a mall just a few blocks away. “So...what do you think of this new job offer?” Kim tried at last.

“The archivist thing? Well...it’s worth a try, isn’t it? If nothing else, it’ll give us the chance to poke around in all the old media files. Joe said there was just so much furry stuff on the early internet they’ve barely even scratched the surface, and dumb AI can’t catalog it very well.”

“Yeah. Something about taking sentient eyes to do it properly,” Tim said, nodding.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m looking forward to seeing some of the old stuff I’ve only ever read about. Surely there’s gotta be more of it there than made it back to us.” Kim grinned. “So much history locked up in all those digital files...I’ll bet there’s more stuff on the old furry fandom and conventions, too.”

“Uh-huh...” Tim said. “Um...Kim...”

“Hmm?” Kim asked.

“It’s nothing I guess, but...I’m just really glad you’re here with me. And you’re still *you*.”

“Well, of course I’m me. Who else would I be?”

“I know, I just...uh...”

Kim smiled, and leaned over to kiss him. Tim blinked. “Uh...what was that for?”

“Oh, you know. Just for being you.” Kim giggled. “It’s funny, kissing feels different. I guess my lips are shaped a little differently now.”

“Yeah.” Tim wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Still...liked it, though.”

“Yeah...me too.” Kim smiled at him. “And I liked what we did...right after the change, too. I don’t think there’s any reason to change *that*.”

“Uh...great!” Tim said. “Neither do I.”

“Well, good.” Kim grinned, nodding at the large flat mall building ahead. “Now...let’s do some *shopping!*”

The East Dome Gallery Mall was arranged so the south end was styled after the early 1980s, while the north was just at the end of the heyday of malls in the early 2000s. There were two floors, selling the ubiquitous replicates of consumer goods from that era alongside more modern versions, including imports from Earth and the other colonies sold at Spaceport 1. Though the apparent market for Eridanite marble equine busts and Zheng He wicker furniture seemed improbable.

Among the stores were several that catered specifically to crossriders: Yin-Yang Clothiers, Sharp-Dressed Man, and Material Girl. Tim regarded them with more than a little disbelief. Crossriding was really *that* big a deal around here? *Well, duh. RIDEs being what they are, of course it would be.* There were even posted offers for clothing resizing and refitting, so couples who both crossrode could wear each other’s old clothing.

“It says here Yin-Yang is for couples who crossed together. Should we check it out?” Kim asked, looking at the directory map.

“Eh...I’m not so sure. It looks like the kind of thing for cute married couples who like to wear matching outfits.” He pointed to a display in the window, featuring a dress emblazoned with “World’s Greatest Dad” right

next to a blazer that said “World’s Greatest Mom.” It was far too much kitsch for Tim's taste. “We were never really into that even before the swap.”

“Hmm...yeah, point.” Kim nodded. “Maybe we can just wander around and see if anything catches our eye.”

“Honestly, I'm just looking forward to seeing what a shopping mall *looks like* here. We haven't had them on Earth as such since...I don't know when.” Tim wanted a hand at the map. “And this one is stocked with tech you can't get anywhere else, even.”

Kim glanced at him. “What do you mean we don’t have them? There are plenty of places like that on Earth. We used to hang out in some of them.”

“There are fabbery annexes, which have interior open spaces for people to hang out, hold meetings, walk for exercise, and stuff. For all I know, maybe some of them used to *be* old-style malls. But there’s nowhere like this, with actual different *stores* in it rather than fabber output bins.” Tim grinned. “I’m really looking forward to seeing what some of these stores have in them.”

“Hm...okay, well, let’s start with...*that* one.” She pointed at one of the brightly colored rectangles on the mall map.

Tim looked over at it. “What’s that?”

“Let’s go and find out. It’s just around the corner.” Kim giggled and started walking.

“Oookay...” Tim shook his head and followed her. She had that same “I’ve got a *surpriiiiise* for you” expression Kip had worn when he’d given Tina some big gift. Like that going-steady ring, or a pair of earrings, or...

Tim rounded the corner to come face to face with a big placard reading “InstruMentality,” and a storefront featuring a broad assortment of musical instruments from harmonicas to bass fiddles.

...or my guitar. Tim had almost forgotten that. Kip had been over to Tina’s place and seen her teeny little training guitar that she’d learned to play on in high school. She’d gotten pretty good at it, Tina had thought, but she didn’t really have the funds to get a bigger one, and she’d gotten tired of people snickering about her “ukelele” when she played it in public. But at Kip’s insistence, she favored him with a couple of tunes--old furry or

Disney classics, from the stuff other fans had unearthed or brought back from Zharus.

The next day, Kip had shown up with a big box and a bigger grin. When she'd opened the box, she'd found a full-sized acoustic guitar. Not a very *expensive* one, but it was the thought that counted. She'd kept and played that guitar ever since, but left it at home when they went to F3. Tim wondered what had become of it after the four of them had disappeared. Had his parents thrown it out or sold it? Or kept it as a memento of their vanished daughter? He wondered if he'd ever know.

As they approached the store, they were met by a salesman with ears as large as Tim's, though they looked more fox-like, but dark brown.

"Welcome! How can I help you today?"

"I think my boyfriend needs a guitar!" Kim said.

"Uh...nothing too expensive," Tim said. "Actually, what's the cheapest guitar you have?"

"Electric or acoustic? The former is cheaper than the latter. I have a Fab Four-Minute Special for five *mu* for electrics, and the Cigar-Box Special is about twice that for acoustic." He gestured at a stand of a half dozen instruments. Hanging on the wall above it were several far more expensive guitars, one of which had a "Handmade! Real wood!" tag and went for a few thousand *mu*.

"Maybe I'll get something better quality once I have steady money coming in," Tim said. "I just need to make sure I still know the chords." *Especially with these meatier fingers.*

"It won't be the best-sounding instrument, but with ears like ours you'll keep it in tune," the salesman said with a grin. Sitting on his haunches nearby was a bat-eared fox RIDE.

Tim grinned in spite of himself. "Yeah, I think I will."

"Is there any way you'd like it personalized? Since we're fabbing it to order, we can make little adjustments. Left-or-right handed, maybe put your name or favorite cartoon character in the inlay...stuff like that."

"Uh...right-handed. As for the rest..." Tim shrugged. "Doesn't really matter, I guess. It's cheap enough, I can always just get another if I change my mind."

"Oh, come on. Where's your spirit of adventure?" Kim said. "We can

do better than that. They're *making this guitar to order for you*. I think that's pretty special."

"This is Zharus. They do that," Tim mumbled.

"I think...we'll put 'Tina' on there above that hole thing, and 'Tim' on there below it," Kim said firmly. "In fancy curvy fonts...can you show me a preview?"

The clerk nodded. "Sure thing. I can even do a hardlight mock-up."

"Oooh, neat! Show me, show me!"

Tim rolled his eyes a little, but didn't object. The guitar was going to be her present to him, after all. So let her have her fun.

After a few minutes of tinkering, Kim was satisfied with the result.

"Okay, print that. Or fab it or whatever."

"Okay. I've locked in the pattern and it's running." Behind the clerk, one of the fabbers along the back wall lit up with a whirr. Neon blue light illuminated the chamber, which quickly filled with fog. Very soon the vague shape of a guitar was visible within as the nanites linked together into the programmed instrument.

"It's really just...making it out of nanites?" Tim asked. "Not crafting it from raw materials? The public fabber in my apartment building looks better."

"Well, this is the cheapest one you can buy, sir. This one is built out of a new type of utility fog. The end product will still look like a wooden instrument and sound decent. There are some better models a bit more expensive than that one, but the next *real* step up in build quality is the hundred *mu* Stratocaster 100 behind you. Models like that are more standard nano-assembly."

Kim smirked. "Ain't technology grand?"

Tim shook his head. "I didn't mean I'm not *impressed*, but...I thought what fabbers did was they took raw materials and *shaped* them with nanotech, rather than just...building from pure nanites."

"And this is the cheap stuff," the salesman said. "Rather counterintuitive, but what can you do? Do you still want this instrument, or do you want to upgrade?"

Kim pulled the large coin out of her purse that worked as her wallet. There was about 1800 *mu* on it after yesterday's shopping. The coin worked

as cash, without needing a bank account.

“Kim, I’m good with this,” Tim said. “I don’t even know if my fingers still work right, let alone if I’ve got any kind of a good singing voice anymore. I don’t want to waste the money ‘til I know.”

Kim nodded. "Okay. Then we'll keep that one. Maybe we'll come back if you want one of those fancy ones on the wall."

Soon after, the fabber beeped completion, then the top opened with a dramatic hiss. "You can fab a case for this at your apartment building," the salesman said. "It sounds like you nice folks have some shopping to do. So why don't I keep this here until you're done?"

“*She’s* got the shopping to do,” Tim said. “If you could just put a strap on that for me, and throw in a couple of picks--oh, and that thumb pick ring there--I think I’ll just get acquainted with it as we go.”

He nodded. "Okay then. That'll be a total of twelve and seventy, and you're good to go."

“Worth every...penny? Centi-*mu*? Whatever.” Kim tapped the coin on the counter, and the near-field shook hands with the shop’s system and deducted the funds. Then Tim slung the guitar over his shoulder and walked out of the store with her.

As they stepped out into the mall, Kim glanced at him. “So...what do you think?”

“Well, give me a minute here...I just got this thing.” Tim glanced around for somewhere to sit down, and found a handy bench. “Lemme see here...” He settled the guitar on his lap and reached for the neck. His fingers found their usual positions after a second, and he experimented with positioning for chords. The fingers seemed to reach all right. But then, that was what fingers did.

Kim looked at him expectantly. “Well?”

Tim sighed. “I guess I am gonna have to try this thing out sooner or later, huh?” He took a deep breath. “Okay.” He took a good grip, positioning three fingers for a C chord. Then he raised his other hand, and gave the guitar a strum. It sounded pretty good, Tim thought. Just a little flat--the material the guitar was made of wasn’t *quite* as resonant as real would would have been. But it was good enough.

“Great!” Kim said. “Go on, play something. *Sing* something.”

“Uh...I dunno,” Tim said. “I’m not sure if I have the voice for it. And...I don’t think I know any ‘guy’ songs anyway.”

“Oh, come on. You won’t know until you try,” Kim said. “And it doesn’t matter what you sing. Just change the pronouns if you have to. C’mon, just try it!”

“Try...hmm...” Tim strummed another C, and adjusted one of the pegs on the guitar. “All right. Let’s try this.” He took a deep breath, and began to sing.

“I messed up tonight, I lost another fight, I still mess up but I’ll just start again. I keep falling down, I keep on hitting the ground, I always get up to see what’s next...”

As he sang, Tim tried to listen to himself. *Hmm, not bad. I guess I’m a tenor now. At least I can still carry a tune...* He also noticed out of the corner of his eye that he was starting to gather an audience, but he tried to tune it out, concentrating on what he was playing.

Finally, he bright the song to a close. “...try everything.” He looked up from the guitar to a smattering of applause. “Uh...thanks...” he mumbled.

He felt something in his pocket vibrate, and tugged out his wallet to see he’d just received 7.37 *mu* in near-field-beamed tips. “Uh...wow, *thanks*,” he said again. He looked at the wallet, then down at his guitar, then back up at the assembled crowd, and said the only thing he could think of at the moment.

“Uh...any requests?”

A half hour later, Kim led the way up the mall again. Tim had played a couple more songs before mall security had trundled up on their Segways to break up the crowd and insist the two of them move along lest they be cited for busking without a permit. Tim hadn't known many of the songs the crowd had suggested, but they'd been understanding when they learned he was just in from Earth.

But it seemed to have done wonders for his confidence, Kim observed. He actually seemed less nervous now, more reminiscent of the self-confident girl Kip had fallen for.

Which in turn brought Kim to wonder what had happened to *her*. She was starting to see that her own personality had taken a bit of a turn for

the...well, *bubbly*. She was a lot less reserved than she remembered being as Kip. She wondered if it was the new hormones. Or maybe that plus being on a new world without any of the responsibilities from her old life. It was remarkably *freeing* to have lost everything in her old life, including her original sex.

Of course, on the border of the back of her mind was the understanding that her parents were still out there, back on Earth. What they'd think of her new self was a bit of a worry. But at the moment, at least it was a distant one. Who knew how long it would be until she saw them again?

But now, it was time for some serious clothes shopping. "So, I need some good business attire," Kim said. "What do you think would be right for working for Crazy Joe Steader?"

"Didn't your brother say this was a very informal sort of place?" Tim asked. "Something about the city government not even wearing pants all the time?"

"Yeah, but Crazy Joe is from Nextus, where you can get a ticket for using the wrong color e-ink on a form."

"But he's crazy, so I don't think those rules necessarily apply here."

"Point." Kim shrugged. "Well, I guess a local business apparel store might have some ideas. Let's try that one." She pointed to a store displaying clothes ranging from suits to dresses at different levels of formality. The store's placard read "Dressed For Success."

Tim shrugged. "All right. Looks interesting enough. I can help you pick out some things, maybe."

"Then come on!" Kim led the way into the store. Inside, it seemed to be about half business dress and half casual-wear. A sign explained coyly that business is only *half* of what you need to dress for success in. "Huh, I think I like this place already."

"Excuse me, miss." Tim hailed a woman in a nice dress with a gold name badge. "We're new on the planet. Can you show us what passes for business casual around here?"

"Well, this is Uplift. Our Consuls rarely wear pants to official meetings," the woman said. "Welcome to Zharus, by the way."

"See?" Tim said. "I knew I remembered that about the pants."

Kim smirked. "Well, you're the only one of us who *has* to worry about pants anymore."

"We're going to be working over at the Steader Entertainment building here," Tim said. "You know what sorts of things they might consider appropriate?"

"I see you've already found RIDEs to partner with. I've read that Steader Ent employees usually use Fuser-form RIDE VR environments to view and catalog material. So you'll want to use easy-fuse fabrics that work well with that process. Style-wise, just keep in mind we're not Aloha. So don't show *too* much skin. Other than that, however you want to look."

"Why don't you show us a few things?" Kim asked. "We just came from Earth, where there doesn't seem to be much style or fashion anymore. This is kind of a new experience."

"Not to mention, this is also kind of our first time shopping for, uh, these particular genders," Tim added. "So, uh, help?"

The saleswoman gave them an understanding smile. "I suspected, but it's considered tacky to say you notice fresh crossriders. I've never done it myself, but you get used to other people switching teams here, as we way. Perhaps we should start with tops."

Tim patted his guitar. "I know all about taking it from the top. Show us what you've got."

They followed her further back into the store, and she showed them aisles with a variety of fashions. They were organized by decade, with markers positioned so they could shrink or expand the spaces as particular periods went into or out of style.

"Ooh, tie-dye," Tim said. "The seventies really were something else, weren't they?"

"Pretty. But wow, look at all this flannel."

"Nineties grunge. Tends to be more unisex than the other decades," the saleswoman said. "*Plaid* flannel, acid-wash jeans with holes in them, that sort of thing. It's pretty comfortable, really."

"I'll take your word for it," Kim said. "Don't really think it's my cup of tea, though."

"Anyway, now you know where everything is...I'll just let you look through it on your own. The fitting rooms are back there." The saleswoman

gestured toward the back of the store. “And if you want anything in a different size or color, just let me know and we can alter it for you in the fabbers. I’ll be up front, if you need any more help!”

Kim considered the shelves and clothing racks. “Huh. Well...I can’t say I’ve ever bought a dress before...but there’s a first time for everything, right?”

“I think that black one would look good on you,” Tim said. “It would set off your hair. I think you can give the high heels a miss, though. I never saw any point in those things. If I want my legs to hurt, I can just bicycle all day or something.”

Kim nodded. “Good point. Uh...I wish I had some good ‘guy advice’ for you, but honestly, guy clothes just aren’t as fiddly as it looks like girl stuff is. Uh...well, maybe try out both briefs and boxers, decide which one you like. I always preferred briefs, never could figure out why I’d want to wear a pair of flimsy pajama shorts instead of something nice and snug that kept everything securely where it belonged.”

“Uh...I guess that *sounds like* good advice...” Tim said. “Do I need a cup? You know, for protection?”

“If you plan to play sports? Sure. Otherwise, no.” She considered. “Or unless you think you might make me *really* mad at you...”

Tim chuckled. “Noted.”

“You *think* I’m kidding.” Kim grinned to show that she was, indeed, kidding. “Anyway...let’s pick out a starting wardrobe and meet back at the changing rooms. Try to stay below a hundred *mu* to start, okay?”

“Got it!”

It actually wasn’t too hard to find a number of decent things to wear. Some jeans and slacks and a couple pairs of shorts; some t-shirts and nice blouses for work. She was a little hesitant to pick out skirts, but she did go ahead and take the dress Tim had suggested. *I guess I should get at least one.*

Everything was remarkably cheap, too. Doing a quick currency conversion in her head, Kim figured stuff here cost about half of what it would have in Earth. Even just 100 *mu* was enough to get quite a lot.

When she got back to the dressing rooms, Tim was also just arriving with his arms full of clothes. “Shall we?”

“Let's,” Kim replied. “Oh hey, it says here we can retract the partition between these rooms if we want to share. You wanna?”

“Since we've both already seen everything anyway, why not?” Tim said. “Save time on us stepping outside to show each other our new looks.”

“Right!” Kim pressed the button and the partition just disappeared. “Huh, it was just hardlight?”

“They use that for everything here, don't they?” Tim shook his head. “I guess if energy is cheap and they've got the tech, why not. Well, let's try some of these things on.”

Kim set the dress aside for later, then stripped down and pulled on a pair of pants and a light green blouse as Tim changed into blue jeans and an alligator polo shirt. They turned around to consider each other. “Well, you *do* clean up nicely, don't you?” Kim mused.

“You don't look so bad yourself.” Tim grinned. “I guess these will make good work outfits, at least until we get a better feel for what they want.”

“Yeah. Let's try on some of these others...”

They worked their way through the various pants and shorts and tops they'd respectively picked out. Kim thought they all seemed to look pretty good. There was certainly a lot more variety available here than back on Earth--probably due in no small part to all the ancient media they had here that showed so many different outfits in them.

At last, there was just one thing left that Kim hadn't tried on yet--the dress Tim had picked out. It was black and sheer, with a couple of spaghetti shoulder straps, and actually looked a little intimidating now she examined it. *But I did bring it in here, so...*

Kim pulled off the latest blouse and slacks she'd tried on, and slipped into the dress. It felt cool and smooth against her skin. Then she turned to look at herself in the mirror--an attractive blonde woman, in a sleek black dress. “Well,” she said, turning back and forth. “Dressed for success.”

“You certainly a—” Tim began--but was interrupted by music coming from hidden speakers. “*Yeah, yeah, yeah!*” a woman's voice sang, followed by drums and electric guitars. An inset screen appeared in a corner of each mirror, showing a sepia-toned image of a band standing in front of a crumbling brick wall. A woman with spiky blonde moussed hair sang,

*Tried to make it little by little
Tried to make it bit by bit on my own.
Quit the job, the grey believers
Another town where I get close to the bone.*

Kim blinked. *Some kind of Easter Egg, maybe?* Well, the whole planet was twentieth-century crazy, so it wasn't surprising they'd incorporate it in odd ways--like playing a song when you happened to mention the name of the store in the dressing room. But then the song continued...

*Whatcha gonna tell your brother?
Oh oh oh
Whatcha gonna tell your father?
I don't know!
Whatcha gonna tell your mother?
Let me go...*

*I'm gonna get dressed for success
Shaping me up for the big time, baby.
Get dressed for success
Shaping it up for your love yeah yeah yeah.*

And then, it was the oddest thing. Kim had been able to avoid thinking about what she would tell her *own* parents for all this time since the change, but something about actually *hearing* the words spoken aloud seemed to strike a chord. Her brother already knew, of course, but what *was* she going to tell her father and mother? She felt the calm serenity flee her, and she was standing in front of the mirror with some stranger looking back at her. Quite to her own surprise, she began to sniffle and then to cry, as the band played on.

Tim blinked. "Kim? What is it?"

Kim wiped at her eyes and tried to stop. "I...I just...what *am* I going to tell them? How'm I going to explain that one of their sons is now...their

daughter?”

“Hey. If you ever *do* have to explain it, I’ll be right there with you,” Tim said. “*I’ll* take the blame for that. I’ve already said I deserve it.” He smiled wryly. “I think they’ll forgive me. They *liked* me. Thought I was such a *nice* girl.”

Kim looked back at the mirror. “But...it’s not just the change. I mean...I’m *becoming* a girl. Look at me, trying on dresses. Why am I even trying to pretend? I should just be...should at least be *dressing* male until I can change back.”

“There’s not any point to that,” Tim said. “I mean, you *are* a girl now. Just like I’m a guy. *I’m* certainly not going to try to pretend the change didn’t happen, because *I’d* look pretty stupid in a dress now.”

Kim giggled despite herself. “But...what kind of a woman can I even *be?*”

“You can be the right kind for me,” Tim said. “Kim, or Kip if you prefer, the way I feel about you *hasn’t* changed. Even if you can be kind of a jerk sometimes, well, so can I.” He waved a hand downward at himself. “I mean, case in point. And I’m *not* going to leave you.”

Kim sighed. “I’m sorry. I just...it’s all so sudden, and...it feels like this is all catching up to me.”

“Well, that’s why I’m here. I’ll help you through it, if you’ll help me. We’ll explain this to *both* our parents together. In fact...” Tim paused. “Well...I’ve been thinking about this for a while, but this kind of caught me by surprise right now, so I don’t really have what I need yet. But...” He shoved aside the clothes he’d been trying on until he found his original pair of pants, and reached into the pocket. “...this’ll have to do for now, I guess.”

Kim blinked at him. “What’re you doing?”

Tim grinned at her. “Well. If I’m going to have to be a guy for the next few years, at least that means *I’m* entitled to do *this* now.” And then, to Kim’s utter shock, he went to his knees in front of her, reached up and took her hand, and slipped something onto her finger. “Kim Lane...I want nothing more in my life than to spend the rest of it with you. Will you marry me?”

Kim stared at him, then looked down at her hand...where the guitar pick thumb ring he’d gotten at InstruMentality hung loosely from her ring

finger. It was at the same time one of the most touching and one of the most ridiculous things she'd ever seen. She wasn't entirely sure whether to laugh or cry, so she just stared. "Tim, I...are you serious?"

"I've never been more so," Tim said. "I know the ring doesn't exactly fit, but...just consider that a placeholder. I'm sure there must be a jeweler in this mall we can hit once we're done here. So...how about it?" He looked hopefully up at her. "Will you?"

Kim stared down at him, but saw no doubts or deception in those eyes. Suddenly, she felt a surge of warmth sweeping through her, seeming to burn all her doubts and misgivings away. She had no doubt they would return, but just now they didn't matter. *Nothing* mattered but the man on his knees before her.

She took her hands in his and pulled him to his feet. "Yes. Yes, of *course* I'll marry you." She sniffled, and thought she might just cry again. "Uh...when?"

"Well, as soon as we reasonably can," Tim said. "Do they have Vegas-style wedding chapels here?"

Kim blinked. "*That* soon, really?"

"Well, okay, maybe not quite *that* soon," Tim said. "We should have *some* kind of ceremony. Tom can be my best man, and Clara could be your maid of honor. We can vid it to show our folks whenever we see them next."

"I...I think I'd like that." Kim rubbed her eyes. "Yes. We can plan it out later."

"I'll hold you to that." Tim smiled. "Or, really, I'll just hold you in general. As often and for as long as I possibly can. But...maybe right now we should get back into our own clothes and go and pay for these, huh?"

Kim sniffled again. "I...yes. Yes, let's go do that."

"And then we can find that jeweler." Tim grinned. "If I'm gonna be any good at playing that guitar, I'm gonna need my pick back."

"I'll buy you another one." Kim clenched both her fists around the pick ring. "Even if you give me another ring to wear, this one's *mine* now."

As far as Tim was concerned, the rest of the shopping trip was more than a little anticlimactic. After paying for all their clothes, they stopped at "Family Jewels," a jeweler that specifically catered to crossriders, and got

Kim a nice-but-not-too-expensive ring with a fabbed diamond stone.

In bygone centuries, the rock might have been called a cubic zirconium or some such thing, but modern fab tech could make rocks that were so close to natural diamonds that fabbers were required by law to embed markers in fabbed diamonds to make it easier to tell them and natural ones apart. Not that Tim minded, and he doubted Kim did either. The ring was just a symbol; it didn't need to have much cash value. (Though Tim pledged to get her a better one anyway once they had a little more money.)

"I *love* crossrider engagements," the koala-eared jewelry salesman said. "You're such a lovely couple, if I may say so."

"I think you just did," Tim said. "Thank you."

"I mean it. My spouse and I switch every few years. We have four children, and we've shared the childbearing. She's done two, I've done two. It's a *lovely* experience. Zharus has true sexual equality. Barring a couple notable exceptions to our northwest and south."

Kim grinned. "Even then, from what I've read, they still sort of balance out, so on *average* you've got true sexual equality *everywhere*."

The salesman had a dreamy smile. "I've met more than a few longtime couples who only married *after* they switched, when they realized just how they felt for one another. A change of hormones can be rather clarifying, in my personal experience. I wish happiness to you both."

After that, they hunted up the mall food court, and took turns watching the shopping bags while the other went and got some food. Kim got a burger and fries, while Tim adventurously tried some fried kraken from a local seafood place. It was interesting, a spicy-sweet taste quite unlike anything he'd ever had on Earth. (Except maybe chicken. But then, *everything* tasted like chicken.) Kim politely declined an offer to try it, declaring herself to be perfectly happy with her burger.

When he thought she wasn't looking, Tim stole little sidelong glances at Kim, admiring the ring on her finger in addition to her general looks. She *was* gorgeous, at least in part due to the biosculpt capabilities of Madeira's fuser nanos, but she also had that *inner* beauty that Tina would have envied. When she didn't get bogged down with self-doubt, she had confidence and poise, and Tim still couldn't believe she wanted to hang

around with him--especially since Tina's temper had been responsible for making a girl of him in the first place.

Of course those glances were also stiffening the...*resolve* of a certain portion of his anatomy. Tim pulled his chair a little further under the food court table and tried not to blush. Fortunately, Kim either didn't notice, or else was very good at *pretending* not to.

But at this point, Tim wasn't sure he cared anyway. After all, the most wonderful woman in the galaxy had just agreed to marry him. Beside that, any worry was trivial.

They dumped their trash in the recycler bins, and headed outside. There was a small park just across the street from the mall, and Tim sat down at a picnic table and unslung his guitar. "Think I need to get in a little more practice, and I'm probably not going to get busted for busking here."

"Go for it. It's a nice day, we don't have anywhere we need to be...and I wanna hear your singing voice again." Kim put down their shopping bags and sat down at the other end of the table. She propped her chin on her elbows and settled in to listen. "Go on, play something."

Tim cleared his throat and strummed an arpeggio, racking his brain for another one of those songs she'd learned from old furry movies. "Uh...let's see." He struck a chord. "Look for the bare necessities, the simple bare necessities. Forget about your worries and your strife..."

As he played, Tim relaxed, finding the sweet spot in his voice. He was halfway through "Everybody Wants to Be a Cat" before he realized that his little friend down below was relaxed, too. (Of course, *noticing* that made the friend start to wake up again, but a couple more verses put him right back to sleep.) *Well, how 'bout that. They say music hath charms to soothe the savage breast, but I guess it works for other genitals, too.*

Before he'd worked through more than about half his repertoire, he again noticed he was starting to draw a crowd--mostly kids this time. There weren't many tips, but the applause was even better as far as Tim was concerned. "Uh...thanks. Appreciate it."

Tim's voice was starting to get hoarse from all this unaccustomed exercise, so after another song he decided to call it a day for now, slinging the guitar and picking up his shopping bags again. "Well, I guess we might as well get on home and put these away."

“Sounds like a plan, dear,” Kim said. Tim blinked at her. “Just trying it out!” she added.

Tim chuckled, and let her lead the way back toward their apartment building. As they walked, he reflected on the strange but welcome turn the day had taken--*engaged! I'm engaged!*--all on account of a song. Then an idea occurred to him, and he pulled out his comm with his free hand and started searching guitar tab sites on the local mesh. *Net*, he reminded himself. *When on Zharus, should use their terms*. It didn't take him long to find what he needed. As they walked, he started memorizing the chords and singing, quietly, under his breath.

“Tried to make it, little by little. Tried to make it, bit by bit on my own...”

THE END