

Family Lynx

By Robotech_Master and Jon Buck

October 24, 157 AL

The sun beat down mercilessly on desert terrain—not the heart of the Dry, but not somewhere humans could survive for long unprotected either. The area was littered with the remains of huge machinery, including an immense digging machine like a crane that ended in a saw-like rotary digging head. The decrepit old equipment wasn't rusting—there wasn't enough water vapor in the air for that, and the idea of rain falling here was laughable—but Fritz got the feeling it would have if it could. It wasn't exactly functional either way—what rust couldn't do, the ever-present qubitite dust had.

The machinery dated back over forty years, to the first big Q rush to hit the planet. For the first little while after sarium batteries had been invented, ten years before RIDEs were, the stuff had been crazy valuable enough that it had been at least theoretically possible to mine enough of it to make a profit even if it meant losing expensive hardware like this to Q contamination.

Fritz didn't know if this particular venture had recouped its costs, and didn't care enough to look it up. But a dozen or so years later, once RIDEs had been available to do what the decrepit equipment couldn't, the mines had been reopened on the backs of individual miners' labor. The old stuff had been abandoned in place, because it would have cost more than it was worth to

salvage it.

And that was why he was here—he, and the two other lynx Integrates with him. They treaded lightly amid the remains of the old equipment, and the occasional newer cast-off RIDE part that hadn't been deemed worth taking when the mine finally played out in the early 130s.

“It would have been right over here,” Fritz muttered. “X marks the spot...” He nodded to a decimeter-thick metal door lying on the ground with an “X” carved into the top. “Yeah, that’s it. Groovy. Chloe, Reggie, you cats help me out here.”

“On it, Da,” the male lynx said. He and his sister spaced themselves equidistantly around the plate with their father. They put their palms forward, generating a lifter field, and with a swift motion flung the plate away. It soared for several meters through the air, slamming into the side of an old tractor with a clang.

Underneath it was a shaft, filled completely with rocks and other rubble. Chloe peered down into it. “Now what?”

Fritz grinned. “Now we do some of what ol’ Appa might call earthbending.” He waved a hand, and the rocks started floating up. After a moment, the others joined him. “And I’ll call Ma, tell her to bring the ship in. This shouldn’t take too long.”

October 26, 157 AL

“Well, this is certainly an honor,” the balding, slightly pudgy man said, looking up from behind his desk.

“Doctors Patil and Clemens, I can’t say I ever expected to meet you in person.”

The office was furnished in the understated way that only those completely comfortable in their wealth could manage. The most impressive thing about it was the glass backdrop behind the desk, through which the Neo Francisco skyline was visible. The view didn't get much better than an office at the top of the two-kilometer-tall Translaurasia Tower, Dr. Clemens had to admit.

"The pleasure is ours, I assure you," Dr. Clemens said, holding a seat for Dr. Patil before sitting down himself. "I've always liked Neo Francisco. Good to be here again."

"So, ah, what can I do for you?" the man behind the desk asked.

"I will get right to the point, Mr. Halstead," Dr. Patil said, brushing an errant strand of her graying hair out of her face. "You are a collector, and one of the things you collect are RI cores." She smiled faintly. "Which is how I knew you would not pass up the chance to meet us in person."

Halstead blinked. "I don't exactly advertise that collection. Who told you about it?"

"That doesn't really matter," Dr. Clemens said. "What does is that we would like to discuss taking it off your hands."

Halstead raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think I would want to give up my collection?"

"Mr. Halstead, the RIDE liberation movement has not reached quite this far yet, but it will," Dr. Patil said calmly. "And when it does, you will be *forced* to give up your collection. Given that we know about it, you can rest assured that others do as well."

"Every one of those cores represents a mind just like

yours or mine,” Dr. Clemens said. “And they deserve a chance to live just as much as you and I do.”

Halstead stiffened. “Don’t preach at me! I kept these cores safe! I rescued them when they would have been thrown out! And I take *good* care of them.” He shrugged. “I’d put ‘em all back in shells if I could, but even I don’t have that kind of money.”

Clemens privately doubted that, as cheap as shells were these days, but kept his silence.

“No one is faulting you for that, Mr. Halstead,” Dr. Patil reassured him. “And I am sure the RIDEs themselves will be grateful to you, when they are awake again. But we *do* have the resources to embody them once more, and we would like the chance to do that.”

“It’s like this,” Dr. Clemens said. “You can do it now, voluntarily, and be a forward-thinking and respected hero of the RIDE rights movement. Very good publicity. Or you can wait until they’re dragged out of you and end up looking like a jerk.”

“Well, I don’t know—” Halstead began.

Just then, the viewscreen on the wall across from the desk lit up with the visage of a lynx Integrate in a jaunty black beret. “Hey, Mom, Dad!” he said. “What’s the haps up there? It’s dullsville down here in the stable. If you want, I could slide up there, say what-ho to the cube...”

Dr. Patil smiled. “I do not believe that will be necessary. We hope to be there shortly.”

“Okay, I dig. Comm if ya need me, and see ya soon.” The screen blinked out.

Halstead stared. “Was that—”

“Fritz? Oh, yes, the one and only. We’re his probation

officers, so to speak, so he often accompanies us on these little expeditions. We left him in the skimmer, because we didn't want you to think we were trying to *intimidate* you. But he does get a little impatient." Dr. Clemens smiled. "By the way, you should probably install a more recent DINsec on your office network."

"He has a personal interest in your collection as well," Dr. Patil said, trading glances with Dr. Clemens and matching his smile. "You have a few of his...old friends, and he would rather like to renew the acquaintance."

Halstead swallowed and went a shade paler. "Um. Well. Given the circumstances, I don't see any reason why we can't come to some sort of arrangement. As you say, good publicity and all that."

Dr. Patil's smile broadened. "See, Roderick? I told you he was a reasonable man."

Dr. Clemens grinned. "So you did, Avilia. So you did."

October 27, 157 AL

"All right, that's the last of them." Rhianna and Kaylee wiped grease off their Fused handpaws with a rag and watched in satisfaction as the border collie RIDE they'd just finished fixing converted to skimmer mode and dashed away. "Another satisfying day's work, no?"

"You said it, partner," Kaylee said happily. "Cheers bar time?"

"I wonder if you might spare a few moments for your dear old parents first?" Dr. Patil said, walking into the garage, hand in hand with Dr. Clemens. Rohit the deer and Rattigan in his full-size Gondwanan DE shell trotted along

behind them.

“Of course!” Kaylee said. She came forward to hug her mother and father, careful not to squeeze too hard. “What are you doing here?”

“We were in the area, and wanted to come by and see you,” Dr. Patil said.

“And I wanted some of that great ice cream they serve in the park, so, y’know, win-win,” Rattigan said happily.

“Wait, aren’t you working with you-know-who this month?” Rhianna said.

“You can *say* his damned name,” Kaylee grumbled. “I’m not gonna fall apart or fly into a rage just from hearing ‘Fritz,’ y’know.”

“What about seeing him?” Fritz asked, strolling into the garage behind the two humans and their RIDEs. He raised a hand and waved. “Hey.”

Kaylee’s ears flattened, hackles up. She growled. “Why is *he* here, Ma? He’s not even *allowed* into the politics under the terms of his ‘probation.’”

“We received a special dispensation for just this once,” Dr. Patil said, maintaining and projecting the same calm she always had. “Fritz has something to...show you.”

“I can see this relationship is something we’re all gonna have to work at,” Fritz said. He jerked his head toward the garage door. “C’mon. It’s on the flatbed out front.” He walked back out and around the corner out of view.

“Up to you, Kay,” Rhianna said.

“He *has* done some great work for the Marshals lately,” Dr. Clemens pointed out. “Did you get Avilia’s letter about it?”

Kaylee grimaced. “Uh...I didn’t, uh, read it.”

Dr. Patil raised an eyebrow. “You scolded me for staying out of touch for thirty years, then did not read my letter when I *did* write you?”

“Guilty as charged,” Kaylee said.

“I’m just as bad with my own parents,” Rhianna added. “Now that they’re here on Zharus, we don’t chat as much as I thought we would.”

“Since I am here now, I will sum up,” Dr. Patil said. “Fritz and I have been *quite* busy with the Marshals. It’s been a learning process for us both.”

“I always thought the Marshals were nothing but a bunch of pudknockers, but they’re hep,” Fritz said, poking his head back around the corner. “Got a real cool sense of style and some *crazy* custom gear. I think they got my old gun arm to study after Quinoa cut it off...”

Dr. Patil coughed. “Indeed. Kaylee, I do not fool myself into thinking Fritz will get back into your good graces easily. He has a great many crimes to atone for.”

“But you’re gonna lay a mommy guilt trip on me about it anyway,” Kaylee said. “Ain’t you.” She sighed. “All right, *fine*. The sooner we see whatever it is he wants, the sooner I can get him out of my fur.” She stalked past Dr. Patil and Dr. Clemens, and out the door of the garage.

:You okay, pard?: Rhi asked.

:No, I ain’t okay! I still want to blow him into little pieces,: Kaylee replied hotly.

:But apart from that, Mrs. Lincoln?: Rhianna sent wryly.

:If Mom and Dad are here, and Gramps, there’s something big going on,: Kaylee said. *:Gonna see how*

things go.:

A big flatbed skimmer was waiting by the curb, with a tarp covering the back. As they came around to the back, Fritz reached up to the tarp. “She doesn’t look great, I’ll give ya, but it’s not as bad as it could be.” He whisked the tarp off of a battered old LNX(f)-LMA-002D shell. A couple of the limbs were detached, lying on the bed next to the body, but the chassis and head were clearly intact.

“Looks like crush damage,” Rhianna said. “Still some Q-dust...raw? Obviously wasn’t in Fuse when she was trapped. Seen this a hundred times.”

Fritz nodded. “Yeah. I’d tell you what happened, but Kay’s pissed off enough already right now. Anyway, say hi to our little girl Mandy. Well, not like she can hear you right now, but...”

Rhianna climbed up onto the flatbed and examined the head. “Core area looks undamaged...but there’s enough dust contam to jam the cover release mechanism. We’re going to need to prep the Clean Room. If she’s been buried as long as I think, the interface jacket could have some decay.”

“Not to distract the Great Minds, but I got somethin’ else for ya, too.” Fritz pulled out a padded ring case, then went down on one knee to offer it to Kaylee. “Will you—”

“Don’t get funny ideas, poindexter,” Kaylee snarled. “Not in any mood for a joke right now. Still...you found Mandy...” She reached out and took the case from Fritz’s hand and opened it carefully. She caught her breath. Nestled within it was a qubitite RI core, in pristine condition.

“Say hi to Benny,” Fritz said, getting back to his feet.

“Though he can’t hear you right now either, natch.”

Rhianna startled. “Looks like we have use for those whole LNX 002s we found in the Shed, Kay.”

“It looks like we do,” Kaylee said dazedly, carefully closing the case and stowing it safely in one of her inner compartments. “Let’s get her in the garage.”

“You’ll need some help carrying her in,” Fritz said.

That snapped Kaylee out of her shock enough to spit. “Not from the likes of *you*.”

Fritz shrugged. “*I* wasn’t offering.” He put two fingers in his mouth and gave a piercing whistle. “Reggie! Chloe! Get your stubby tails down here and help your mother.”

The two lynx Integrates dropped from the sky, touching down lightly to either side of Fritz. “Hello, mother,” Chloe said shyly.

Reggie was more forward. He was dressed in a hardlight saffron robe like a Buddhist monk that fluttered dramatically when he moved. “Mum, when are you gonna Integrate so you can be a *real* person?”

Fritz smacked the back of Reggie’s head in the best *NCIS* Agent Gibbs fashion. “Don’t you give your mother lip! We *talked* about this!” He glanced to Kaylee. “Sorry about that jive. You know how it is with kids...first they don’t listen, then they listen too well.”

“Ow! Sorry, Da,” Reggie said.

“Rhi and me ain’t gonna Integrate until we’re good and ready, Reggie,” Kaylee said. “We’re not too keen on the idea just yet.” She stared back and forth at the two of them. “But look at *you*! C’mere, both of you, give your Mom a hug.”

“...mom!” Chloe said happily, putting an arm around

her. “When Dad gave me my memories...I missed you so much!”

Reggie’s hardlight lenses turned red with embarrassment, but he embraced her anyway. “Love you too, Mum. Da only gave me my old memories a week ago. I can’t believe I was actually a kitten.”

“I *offered* them months ago,” Fritz said. “Took him that long to decide he wanted ‘em, the murgatroyd.” He shook his head.

“Sure puts a whole new spin on being an Intie,” Reggie said. “You should try it!”

“You heard what she said, Reg,” Chloe reproved, rolling her eyes. “Brothers. Where’s everyone else? Anny, Katie, the rest? They *really* ought to be here.”

“Damn right, Chloe!” Kaylee said. She sent a instant-comm to Liam, Anny, Katie, and Keiko. *:Kids...I need you at the Garage as fast as you can get here.:*

:Something wrong, Mom?: Keiko asked.

:At once yes...and very much no,: Kaylee replied.

:Your brothers and sisters are here. All of them. And your Pa.:

:What’s going on?: Liam asked. Then the news clicked for him. *:Reggie and Benny are there?:*

:And your other two sisters,: Kaylee reminded him.

:Sweet! Grrrandma asked me to be in town today, now I know why!: Katie said. *:I’ll comm Aunt Kandi and Uncle Franz, too. We’ll be rrrrright overrrr!:*

Anny chimed in. *:I’m in a business meetin’ with Aggie right now, but I can get out of it...:*

:Liam, where are you?: Kaylee asked. *:Your ZPS is off.:*

:Not coming, Ma,: Liam sent. *:If you think I want the entire family to be able to laugh at me and my little kiddie-kart shell...:*

:I have enough 002 parts here to get you back in a Gondwanan shell you're comfy with.: Kaylee cajoled. *:I'll throw in some Donizetti TR-8 sport lifters if you want.:*

:Refurbs or still in the box?: Liam asked.

:Boxed,: Kaylee said. Her son had been very jealous of Katie's Ahnuld super-DE since they'd met.

:Be right there!: Liam said.

:Ouch. That's going to hit your bank account,: Rhianna said. *:You're going to spoil that one, Kay.:*

:Today, it's worth the price,: Kaylee replied.

Anny and Keiko signaled they were on the way as well, sending such a burst of positive feelings with the data packets that it nearly bowled Kaylee and Rhianna over. They didn't need words.

One more call to make. Kaylee sent the comm code.

"Hey, Anny?"

Annette Hewer picked up on the second ring. "Kaylee! What's up? Was just makin' tea."

"The most amazing thing just happened! Fritz showed up..."

"That's purty...amazin', all right," Anny said, in a tone that suggested "amazing" might not have been the adjective she would have chosen. "The more so that you ac'sh'ly sound pleased t'see him."

"Well...he brought all four of my missing kittens along with him."

There was silence on the line for a good twenty seconds. "...alive?" Anny finally asked.

“Yes! Well...two Integrated, and two needin’ new shells, but their cores seem to be fine. I’ve already called the rest of the family. Thought you might want to come down, too.”

“Wow,” Anny said. “I mean...wow. I’m really happy fer yeh. But, I ain’t gonna come as long as that murderer is there. You hear? Leila’d chew him up and spit him out like an ol’ catnip mouse.”

“That’s fair. I’m still kinda iffy about it myself,” Kaylee admitted. “I’ll let ya know when he leaves.”

“We’ll wait fer yer call,” Anny replied and broke the connection.

“So I guess we should get our sister into your shop,” Chloe said. “This is a *very* nice Garage, Ma.”

“Don’t forget Rhianna, my partner,” Kaylee said. “I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for her, you know.”

“We’re eternally grateful for the human’s skill,” Reggie said with a hint of sarcasm. He spoke with an English Upper Crust accent, unlike his more rustic siblings. He and Chloe stood to either side of the flatbed, using their lifter field to take Mandy off the truck. “I understand you were in quite poor condition when Rhianna put you back together.”

“I put the whole process on the RIDE Restoration Boards when I was working on her, if you want to have a look,” Rhianna said. “Couldn’t have done it properly without Shelley and Terry, though.”

“Well, there you go,” Fritz said. “Now you got the whole set. Job’s done, so I’ll just am-scray...”

Kaylee looked at him and sighed. “You’re still an asshole,” she said. “And I still hate your guts for what you

did to Frank, and me, and so many others. But...you might as well stay long enough to meet the others, and then you. You've earned that much."

Fritz nodded, not cracking wise for a change. "I'll take that. Now you go on, get our kids all fixed up. I'll just wait out here." He leaned against a shadowed corner of the wall and hummed to himself. "I used to rule the world...seas would rise when I gave the word..."

Kaylee shook her head, and followed Chloe and Reggie into the garage.

The Clean Room was its own maintenance bay with a constantly operating sterile field and positive pressure inside to keep any dust out. Chloe and Reggie put their sleeping sister into the cradle while Rhianna put on Kaylee's special pak for delicate work. It looked less Mad Scientist and more Doctor than her other equipment. "I see you've gotten as much dust out of her as you could with those lifters of yours," Kaylee observed.

"Thought we'd make your job a little easier," Reggie said smugly.

"Pass me a three-eighths gripley, will you Reg?" Kaylee asked. The tool floated towards her from its chest. "Thanks, son."

"Don't mention it," Reggie replied.

Unfortunately Mandy's core access plate was so contaminated with qubitite dust the mechanism was completely fused. The 002-series shell still had its wartime armor plating also, which made cutting through it to get to the core even more problematic. There was a high risk of damaging Mandy.

“Sticky wicket, wot?” Reggie said, going more heavily into the haughty. “Allow Chloe and myself. I believe we can pop open the access plate between us.”

“Please, do,” Kaylee said, backing away from the metallic lynx head.

“Okay, Chloe. Fine lifters on three,” Reggie said. They both raised their hands near the head, palms out. “One, two...three.”

The skull armor plate only flexed a little before it snapped off, releasing a puff of blue dust that was quickly siphoned away by the room’s anti-contamination systems. The inside was caked with the stuff which needed to be cleared before the retaining armature could be removed, and then one more layer to expose the RI core itself. With Reggie’s help the dust was quickly removed, exposing Mandy’s core. “You could have done that yourself, Mum, if...”

“Not gonna, son. We actually *do* have a couple of Inties who help out ‘round here most days, and I won’t deny they’re damned good. But not for us yet,” Kaylee said, not looking up while Rhianna examined the old-style cylindrical core unit.

“I’ve seen worse,” Rhianna said. “Looks like everything went into stasis correctly. The interface contacts retracted, so they’ll be clean. These mil-spec core armor jackets are pract’ly Ragnarok proof. She could’ve been down that hole centuries without any decay. Just needs a cycle in the core cleaning unit. Might as well put Benny through while we’re at it, though he looks pretty pristine already. I’ll stay here and babysit everything. Kaylee? You want some personal time with the family?”

Kaylee de-Fused. The lynx headbutted her partner and purred. “Damn straight. Even if ‘the family’ *does* include Fritz right now.”

“You can pick your friends, but you can’t pick your family,” Rhianna said. “He’s still their father no matter how much of an asshole he’s been.” She chuckled a little in spite of herself. “The mantra of the divorcee.”

“I *did* read that letter just now, in a few spare microseconds of fast-time,” Kaylee said. She sighed. “Sounds like it’s about a completely different person than the Fritz we know and hate.”

“Dad is mentally ill,” Chloe said. “Certifiably sociopathic with a touch of paranoia and psychopathy. That so-called ‘hero’ template kept him from questioning the morality of his own actions. When he first Integrated he didn’t even have Captain Ryder to temper him as his conscience. The poor man was stuck in that mental metal box.”

“He still has that damned hero complex, doesn’t he?” Kaylee mused. “He’s just...sublimating it in Marshals work now. Anyone crazy enough to dive down a dragon’s throat...”

Rhianna blinked. “What?”

“Fill you in later.” Kaylee shook her head. “Well, I guess better that than...the kind of thing he did way back when.”

“He made a few mistakes, so what?” Reggie said. “He built a strong and healthy Integrate society before he went all...well, never mind.”

“Why don’t we go out to the Dreamchaser hangar to wait for your brother and sisters?” Kaylee suggested,

deflecting the topic at hand.

“I’ll babysit the cleaning process and make sure Mandy’s ready when the Drive Extenders are,” Rhianna said. “I’ve got the idle employees making sure they’re all green and ready to receive. You go have fun catching up.”

Katie, Anny, and Keiko arrived from different directions at different times. Their skimmer forms were just as variable. Anny was still in her original chassis, so her skimmer-bike was the same blocky military type as the three bodies awaiting their new cores. The “crazy RIDE lady” Keiko had spent the past decade with had reinstalled her core in a larger frame that turned into a sleek Japanese kei car from the early twenty first century.

Katie arrived from skyward in jet form, dropping out of the air to land on all four feet just outside the hangar door, barely stirring any dust. “Hi everrrryone! Did I miss anything?”

“I see she still purrs her r’s,” Chloe said. “Always thought that was a glitch in her vocoder processor. I’ll bet I could fix it...”

“I don’t need fixing,” Katie said firmly. “It’s parrrt of who I am.”

“Well don’t come to me when it finally gets all the way stuck and you can’t say anything but ‘rrrrrrrrrrrrr,’” Chloe smirked. “Or, no, *do* come to me so I can point and laugh.”

Katie rolled her eyes, then looked at Chloe and Reggie. “Wait...you’rrre both Inties?”

“Apparently we’re the only lucky ones,” Reggie said.

“I see it didn’t mellow *you* out any, Reggie,” Katie said. “You always werrrrre a bit of a jerrrk. Just like Liam.

What is it with the boys in ourrrr family?"

"Guess they must get it from their Dad," Fritz said. He was leaning back against the wall behind the rest, out of the way.

"Oh, *you'rrre* here," Katie fumed. Her silver Marshals badge flashed. "I'm keeping my eye on you."

"Wouldn't have it any other way, kiddo," Fritz said. "Did you happen to read my report? Would be nice if *someone* in the family had."

"I rrrread it," Katie said. "What you did in Barterrrrtown was...unexpected. And brrrave. Therrrrre, I said it."

Fritz smirked. "Well, you're welcome."

"Hey! Outta the way, you mooks! I'm walkin' here!"

All heads turned to the source of the voice...a tiny little naturally-sized lynx, with the markings and voice of...

"Liam?" Reggie stared. "I say, old boy, did someone wash you on 'hot' by mistake?"

"Oh, ha ha, *very* funny coming from a guy who's stuck walking upright all the time," Liam said. "At least *I'm* still in the shape nature made me!"

"Nature *didn't* make you," Reggie shot back. "You've got a plate on your bum that says 'Made in Laurasia.'"

"Yeah, well...your mama!" Liam said.

"She's *your* mama too, nitwit," Reggie replied.

"Brothers," Keiko said, equally calling them to order and an exasperated epithet. "I think now, of all times, isn't the time to argue. The whole family is here. Or will be, once Anny gets here."

"I think it's a great time for them to argue," Chloe said. "It's funny as hell. Hey, sis."

“Chloe-eeee!” Keiko squealed happily. She bounded up to her and licked the Integrate’s nose, then headbutted her affectionately. “Mom said...Mandy’s here, too?”

“And Benny,” Chloe said. “In the sense that their cores are here, at least. I don’t know how long it will take to re-embody them.”

“Won’t be long,” Kaylee said. “Their shells should be ready by the time Mandy and Benny’s cores are cleaned. Liam, well...”

“Don’t forget my TR-8s, Ma,” Liam said.

“Then that means...we’ll be a whole family again,” Keiko said.

“For some value of ‘whole,’ anyway,” Fritz put in. “Hey, kids, glad to see ya.”

“*You!*” Anny said upon arrival, converting back to Walker mode. “Mom said you were here, but...I didn’t want ta believe it.”

“That’s a little harsh,” Fritz said. “But that’s okay. I forgive you.”

“It’s thanks to him that we’re even here,” Reggie said. “He fetched us from the Enclaves, and retrieved Mandy and Benny too.”

“He’s being modest,” Chloe added. “He’s been part of all of our lives, unseen, for decades. He’s why Reggie and me are still alive. He never let on why he was so nice to us until a few months ago. Hell, Reggie and me didn’t even know we were actually related.”

“Da is why I’m an Integrate,” Reggie said. When everyone stared at him and Fritz, Reggie gestured negation. “Not *directly*, mind. Look, I’ll tell you about it later. We can fast-time it.”

“Just *how* did Mandy end up down an old mine shaft at an abandoned Nuevo San company site?” Katie asked. “I spent about fifteen yearrrs as a minerrr, myself. I know the dangerrrs. But still.”

“Plenty of time to fill in the gaps, kids,” Fritz said. “Once everyone is booted, we’ll have a regular warp speed jam session, shoot the breeze. Ma and Pa have Mandy and Benny’s memories ready for ‘em.”

“Guess I should mosey on in there and get into something more comfortable,” Liam said nonchalantly.

“I should think so,” Reggie said. “I keep wanting to take you home as a pet.”

“You’ll like it, Liam. It’s a spare 002-series, just like your first. They don’t make those anymore,” Kaylee reassured. “You’ll feel right at home.”

Liam glanced at Katie, undisguised envy in his eyes. “Right at home. Yeah. Well, it’ll be better than *this*, anyway. Just remember those TR-8s.”

“You always did have to bribe him with something, Mum,” Reggie said. “He’d never eat the rabbits you brought home for dinner in Nature Range. You had to go hunt some poor bird, special.”

“Sue me, Reg. My best friend in there was a rabbit. It’s the principle of the thing,” Liam said haughtily. He trotted past them into the garage, tail in the air.

Katie frowned, watching him go. “You bought him some TR-8s? That’s only two steps below my prrototypes.”

“They’ll work with that chassis,” Kaylee said. “The mounts are compatible.”

Katie shook her head. “He’s been jealous of me everrrr

since we found him again. The lifters will satisfy him for a while, but he wants the whole package. My new shell is always going to be a bone of contention, isn't it?"

"If he's really that jealous he'll join the Marshals and go into your Lithium division," Kaylee said. "Those techies are always tinkering."

"That's what I'm afraid of. That, or something worse." Katie shook her head. "He's got it in his head that this was my reward for being a 'herro.' It worries me what he might do to try to be one himself. I don't know about you, but I've got some bad associations around RRRRRIDES who want to be herros." She glanced at Fritz.

"Liam would've been a good match for Rhi's former brother Ivy, that is, if she hadn't met Cira first," Kaylee mused. "They're a lot alike."

"I'll talk to him," Fritz said. Everyone looked at him. "What? It can't *hurt* anything, right?" He blinked, staring at nothing for a moment. "Okay, Jiminy, okay. Sheesh. I won't step in on this one."

"Your conscience?" Kaylee said. "That's Ryder, huh? I never thought he was like that. Anny 'n me thought he was just a poser."

"I guess getting locked up in a little metal box for months changes someone," Fritz said, shuddering in spite of himself. "We're working on making that hole in my head bigger so's he can get some fresh air, even. I'm not too hot on that jazz, but it's the right thing to do."

"There's the comm signal from Rhianna," Kaylee said. "Mandy and Benny's cores are ready and the chassis are prepped. Let's wake up the kids from their long sleep."

“And Liam gets big again,” Katie said. “Oy...once Benny’s awake...”

“You three will be *intolerable*,” Keiko said, sticking her tongue out at her brothers.

“Hey, it was five-against-three, girls,” Reggie said. “I must admit Mr. Paragon made up for the lack of... *refinement*, let’s say, of Liam and myself. But we’ve all grown up a bit, haven’t we? Some more than others.”

“Some have had morrrre time than otherrrs,” Katie said. “Let’s go.”

The three maintenance cradles were set up in the largest repair bay the garage had, each with plenty of space around it to let the mechanics move between them. The three DE shells were arranged in identical positions, in a prone position with head between paws, RI core compartment open and empty. Rhianna, Dr. Patil, and Dr. Clemens stood in front of them, as did a maintenance cart with two cores sitting in padded receptacles. Liam sat on his haunches next to one of the cradles, waiting.

One by one, the rest of the family filed in. Fritz leaned against the wall next to the doorway, while everyone else went further into the room. “*Sugoi!* Those shells look good!” Keiko said. “They almost make me jealous. I still remember my old ought-two.”

“Are you putting hardlight in Benny and Mandy’s shells?” Aggy asked.

“I have the units all ready for installation if they want them,” Rhianna said. “We can do them both in half an hour.”

“C’mon, Aunt Rhianna, I want *out* of this itty bitty

kitty,” Liam said, rubbing against her leg like a hungry kitten. “Me first.”

“Aww, but you’re so *cute* that way!” Chloe said. “You can haz cheezburger?”

To everyone’s surprise, Liam actually *laughed*. “Okay, okay. You got me. I love that old meme. Maybe I’ll get some rental thumbs and *really* have myself a cheezburger.”

“You’ve developed a sense of humor, at least,” Reggie said. “Albeit a rather primitive one.”

“All right, then,” Rhianna said. “Shut down and open up.”

Liam’s hardlight winked out and his optics dimmed, then the compartment on top of his head flipped open. Rhianna carefully reached in and plucked out the core in its housing, then transferred it to the shell in the cradle. She tapped a couple of spots on the cradle’s touchscreen, then nodded. “Power-on self-test looks good...closing up.”

The shell’s three layers of mil-spec core protection clicked into place, optics coming to life with a dim yellow glow. Liam’s hardlight pelt flickered on all at once, covering the metal. He yawned and stretched, then had a look at everyone present. “What are *you* mooks looking at?”

“Language,” Kaylee reproved.

“Let’s get Benjamin and Mandy awakened,” Dr. Clemens said. “The frames already have their excised memories in on-board storage. They should automatically interleave them in the boot-up defragmentation.”

“Uh...you guys forgetting something?” Liam said. “Open this contraption and let me down, why don’cha?”

Rhianna hit a pedal at the base of the cradle, releasing the latches. “There you go, nephew.”

Liam hopped down. “Ahhh, that’s better.” He cocked his head to peer back at his body. “Now *that’s* the me I remember! Hello, you handsome devil!”

Rhianna smiled, then plugged in Mandy and Benny’s cores into their respective frames. “Standard long-term cold boot sequence with the ‘Rip Van Winkle’ history catch-up package we’ve put together. What do you think, Doctors?”

“I concur,” Dr. Patil said. “Roderick?”

“Green across the board, my deer-eared dear,” the rat-tagged man said. “I remember doing this with Kaylee’s double-zero-one frame during initial systems testing. She put up with a *lot* of cold boot sequences.”

“And then you got that space heater, and everything was better,” Kaylee said.

“If you think *your* testing was bad, Kay...” Fritz said.

“Hey, I got both of you kids beat!” Rattigan added. “I booted ten clicks every day, in the snow, uphill both ways!”

“Parrrents,” Katie purred.

“Well, what are we waiting for? I want to tweak Ben’s nose about...well...anything I can think of,” Liam said.

“I have a pounce-and-tussle waiting for Mandy,” Keiko said, wiggling her behind. “She always loved that.”

“Boot sequence started...” Rhianna reported. “Give it about a minute for the post-boot defrag and history updater...”

“Well what’s all this, then?”

All heads turned as two more lynx RIDEs padded into

the room. “Looks like we made it just in time,” Kandace said.

“Wouldn’t do to miss the party,” Franz agreed. He glanced around, and his gaze settled on Fritz. “They’ll just let anyone in these days, won’t they?”

Fritz opened his mouth to reply, shook his head, then closed it. Instead, he just shrugged.

“We’re curious if you know where *our* three kittens are,” Franz said. “We’ll have to have a personal chat later about that. We don’t want to stain this happy occasion with argument, after all.”

“I’ve made it my *personal* mission to track down all of ‘em, Franz,” Fritz said. “And I mean all of the kids, not just yours. Don’t blow your jets.”

“Sorry we’re so late,” Kandace said with more aplomb. “We were out at the Marshals base when Katie commed us to relay the news. Sub just made it in.”

“Better late than never, huh Aunt Kandi?” Chloe said. Kaylee looked over at the two cradles and purred. “Yes. *Much* better late than never.”

Benny’s optics came on first, along with a melodic tone that the boot was complete and successful. Mandy wasn’t far behind. Both metallic lynxes broadcasted sideband identification queries to everyone in the room. Several seconds of data exchange followed at a speed no human could possibly follow.

“I’m not getting out of this cradle until Rhianna installs a hardlight pelt in me,” Mandy declared. She looked at Keiko, then at her three other sisters in turn. “I can’t give my sisters a proper pounce and grooming without it.”

Chloe elbowed Reggie. “You owe me fifty *mu*.”

“Benny?” Kaylee said.

“Benjamin, please, mother,” he said. “Or Ben, if you must. But not ‘Benny’. I’m not a kitten anymore.”

“Sure thing, Ben. Do you want the hardlight treatment, or to stretch your lifters first?” Kaylee said.

“*Only* if I can pay Miss Stonegate for the service rendered out of the account I understand I’m supposed to have. Please, I insist,” Benjamin said.

“That’s our Ben,” Fritz said, grinning. Kaylee shot him a look at the “our,” but didn’t say anything. “If he’d been *human* during the War he would’ve come away with a half dozen decorations for bravery.”

“I received my father’s hero complex without the psychopathy,” Ben said. “No offense, father.”

“Hey, I’m glad one of us turned out right. You’re copacetic, Ben,” Fritz said with more than a little pride.

“You sure assimilated those memories right quick, son,” Kaylee said, giving Fritz a smug look.

“Payment received,” Rhianna reported. She nodded at Kaylee, who Fused up again. “Thank you, Ben. We’ll have the install done in record time, with a little help. Doctors, if you would assist with surgery, I’d be honored.”

Rohit and Rattigan Fused with their partners. “Only too happy to,” Dr. Patil said. She nodded toward the RIDEs in the cradles. “Give us all a few minutes to prepare, you two, and we will begin.”

“Just like old times in the RIDE R&D facility,” Dr. Clemens said, rubbing his rodentine handpaws together with anticipation. “I was a very hands-on sort of researcher.”

Liam sauntered over to the two newcomers. “So, Aunt Kandi, ya think there might be room in the Marshals for some new old lynxes? I think it sounds like fun, and Benny over there will probably think it sounds like *duty*.”

“You don’t *have* to become a Marshal just because we are, Liam,” Kandace said.

“Hey, I’m a war vet, too,” Liam pointed out. “Saw just as much action as my sibs. I think I went through three chassis upgrades in four months. I can take whatever the Marshals throw at me.”

“The Marshals do come off as an exemplary organization,” Ben mused. “Though there is also something to be said for the Pharos Rangers. And the local law enforcement agencies are also recruiting emancipated RIDES. Many possible career avenues to explore. It’s a new world, isn’t it?”

“That it is,” Reggie said. “And that’s not even getting into all the other opportunities. Of course, for some of them you’d need to Integrate first. Which *might* be a good idea to do soon...”

Fritz glared at him. “And what’s *that* supposed to mean, Reg?”

Reggie shrugged. “Never mind, forget I said anything.”

“Yes, I am a little curious, Reginald,” Benjamin said. “I admit I’m having a slight issue with understanding Integrates.”

“Fortunately you have a room full of experts,” Dr. Patil said.

“It all started when your dear old Dad went off his nut,” Kaylee grumbled. She glared at Fritz, daring him to

argue.

“It was all...what? Hoist on my own petard?” Fritz said. “If I hadn’t hacked Kay’s Fusers that one time to make a kitty out of that murgatroyd Hower...one thing led to another...boom! Ryder an’ me were allergic to the fresh Fusers they put in me.”

“We didn’t have time to test them properly before Command wanted to go public,” Dr. Clemens said. “That’s what you’d call a failure cascade. The Zharusian equivalent to the Space Shuttle Challenger blowing up.”

“So after the war I went all *Apocalypse Now*, and they didn’t have a Martin Sheen on hand,” Fritz said. “On the other hand, I didn’t gain two hundred pounds either.”

“They even gave him the codename ‘Kurtz’ at one point,” Kaylee said, snorting. “He’s a regular heart of darkness.”

“That was right about the same time Crazy Joe released *Hogan’s Heroes*. They got mixed up and started calling him ‘Klink’ instead, and finally had to drop code names altogether when he officially disappeared,” Dr. Clemens said.

“I know *nothink!*” Fritz said. “But...yeah. Anyway, you can google the rest.”

“Ready for the install, Doctors?” Rhianna asked. The hardlight emitter lenses had already been laid out on a service cart. Rhianna gave them one last visual check. “These are new high-efficiency units. Your batteries are older models, so these will give you comparable performance to modern sarium from a systems perspective.”

“Thoughtful,” Ben said. “Once I start earning my own

mu I'll do the pertinent upgrades to the rest of me."

"I've got those in me," Liam said. He licked his forepaw, then scratched behind one tufted ear with a hind leg. "They feel pretty damned good."

"Then what're we waiting for?" Mandy said. "Ready to shut down!"

"It will be nice to see everyone with a *proper* face in the real world," Ben said. His optics shifted sideways to look at his sister in the cradle next to him. "I may even be a good sport and take a pounce or two."

Kaylee and Rhianna turned to the cradles. "This should go pretty quick. They're designed to just drop in."

"Ratty and I will do the plating," Clemens said.

"We'll do the mounting," Rhianna added.

"Rohit and I will perform the final systems checks," Dr. Patil said.

"A reg'lar assembly line," Kaylee added.

"Then let's do it," Rhianna said.

"Before you begin," Ben said, "I want to say that I am honored to be upgraded by such luminaries as yourselves."

"Thanks, son, but we're just people," Dr. Clemens said. "We put our RIDEs on one leg at a time like anybody else."

"Or our humans," Rattigan contributed.

"No, truly—" Ben began before being nudged by Mandy's free forepaw. "What?"

"Just let it slide, Benny," Mandy said. "Stop being so bling-blanged formal. This is family." She shut down.

"It's Benjamin," her brother said, then shutting down himself.

"Lordy Lord Lordy. What am I going to *do* with you

kittens?” Kaylee said facetiously. “Go ahead and pop Ben’s head plating, Rod...”

Once Ben and Mandy were awakened again and out of their cradles, the family—except for Fritz, who remained where he was against the wall at the back of the room—all piled together in a frenzy of affectionate purring and grooming. As the biggest, Keiko was the object of a half dozen pounces by Mandy and even Ben joining in the fun. The sidebands were alive with memory bites they could examine in detail later.

Eventually everyone gathered around Dr. Patil and Clemens to hear how they came to be, a giant collection of gray-brown fur and tufted ears.

“Before Command made us take the Q-mainframe down again, we allowed all the parents and children to spend some subjective months together in Nature Range, officially to ensure the human neural overlays worked with your ‘natural’ lynx minds,” Dr. Patil said. “But mostly because we knew you needed to grow up, and learn to speak and think human-style.”

“It took us a while before we even figured out how to get you out of the mainframe safely,” Dr. Clemens added.

“Why wasn’t it ever followed up?” Rhianna wondered. “I would have thought that your Command would have been interested in experimenting with a whole new way of producing reticulated intelligences.”

“They feared that ‘naturally’ grown RIs would be more difficult to control,” Dr. Clemens said. “Even by then our established templating methods were almost as refined as they are now. It was deemed a better use of wartime

resources. The Sturmies had us on the ropes at that point and we were trying to get our RIDEs into the field as fast as they were.”

“Then after the War they simply buried the whole thing, like a bad dream,” Fritz said.

“Swallowed by Nextus bureaucracy, more like,” Rattigan said.

“I’m surprised it wasn’t ever rediscovered by accident,” Rhianna said.

“They made changes to the default Nature Range environment on a deep level to prevent more ‘accidents’ like the kittens here,” Clemens said. “And it is not as if many Q-core mainframes of the sort we used were ever made outside of top-secret military projects. They had to reverse the changes to make the creche mainframes they use now.”

Dr. Patil leaned against Rohit’s side while petting Liam, curled up next to her. “The technology was still very experimental, even when we created the first RI cores. I believe I went through about five cores that only retained rat-level intelligence before Ratty here stuck around for good.”

“Yeah, yeah. There were still days when I was ‘just’ a robo-rat, though,” Rattigan said.

“Neural map decoupling,” Clemens said. “Still happens to some RIs, even now.”

“We have Mother to thank for this,” Ben said. “If she hadn’t shared her memories at that Summit, the public would have remained in the dark and there would be decades behind where we are now in terms of civil rights. We are *alive*.”

“Number Five is alive!” Mandy quipped. “But, seriously. I have to see these creches everyone’s talking about. I also have to find a bling-blang job...yeesh. I don’t know how to feel about this yet. I mean, there’s an employment agency for *rental thumbs*?”

“Thumbs ‘R Us, right up the street,” Kaylee said. “Their slogan is, ‘Don’t walk, thumb a RIDE!’” She rolled her eyes. “I think Zane must have suggested it. Only he could come up with a pun that bad. They come in...handy.”

“Have any of you ever...tried them?” Mandy asked.

“Already got some thumbs lined up,” Liam said.

“Gonna have me a cheezburger then some ice cream! Want to tag along, Mandy? We’ll try it together.”

The lighter-gray lynx headbutted her brother. “Sure, Liam! Happy to.” Her eyes flickered. “Hmm...yep! Found a college girl who wants a quiet place to study. Uplift was a lot smaller last time I was here.”

Keiko said, “I thought that, too. Then I realized it was just that I was bigger.”

“Glad to see you crazy kids are doing okay,” Fritz said. “You need your dear ol’ Dad for anything, you got my comm code.”

“You’re still welcome in Chakona, Dad,” Chloe said. “Feel free to crash at my place if you need to.”

“You’ll have to have room for five. I don’t go anywhere these days without the fuzz.” He nodded to Drs. Patil, Clemens, and their RIDES.

“Really? Well, we’ll be happy to have the Grands, too!” Chloe said excitedly.

“You live in *Chakona*? Yeesh,” Reggie said. “Bugger that.”

“What’s wrong with my home?” Chloe asked pointedly.

Reggie grimaced. “Never mind, never mind.”

Fritz facepalmed at his Integrate son’s attitude, then connected with his former mate. *:Kay, I need to talk to you for a moment before I split this scene. Privately,:* Fritz said. *:Virtual, real, your choice of place.:*

Kaylee growled. *:And what makes you think I’d want to be alone with you anywhere, virtual or real, for one nano?:*

:It’s about the kids,: Fritz said somberly.

Kaylee sighed. *:All right, fine. We’ll go to one of the other bays.:* She glanced back over her shoulder to where the rest of the kids and their aunt and uncle were all getting reacquainted, then padded through a door, leading the way through two more repair bays until she got to one where they wouldn’t be disturbed. “Now what is it.”

“It’s Reggie.” Fritz looked down at his feet. “All that gibe he’s spouting about Integrates *uber alles*? Yeah. Well, he’s...kinda fallen in with a bad crowd. Appa’s crowd. And they’re up to something. It’s a real bad scene.”

Kaylee blinked. “He’s *what*?”

“I blame myself, really,” Fritz said, pacing back and forth the width of the bay. “After those doofus Snatchers force-Integrated him—not my doing, I swear, and when I found out...well, I can tell you exactly which multiple sets of pelt carpets in the Coffeehouse were theirs—anyway, I needed to put him somewhere I could keep an eye on him but no one could use him against me if they knew who he was. And the Cave of Wonders was about the only place that fit. I didn’t know what a fruitcake Appa was back

then. If I had...”

“Well, shit,” Kaylee said. “This is a problem.”

“The Appalites are a really bad scene and *good* at hiding their tracks. The Marshals know they’re up to somethin, but...they’re good. They upgrade themselves all the time, so keep on keepin’ on with that security hardware.” Fritz shook his head. “I still have a line or two into their camp—that’s how I got to Reggie to ask him to come visit—but I can’t do much else with ‘em or I’ll lose ‘em. And after he leaves here he’s gonna go right back there.”

“How the hell did Appa ever get to be such a menace, anyway?” Kaylee fumed. “I thought you were the Big Bad Bosscat who stomped on and *skinned* any threat to your rule!”

“I was so distracted by dealing with that kookie cube Artemis I didn’t look closely enough at him until it was too late. Then he had his own power base, and...” Fritz shrugged. “Politics are the same the galaxy over, ya know? Water under the bridge. I made the problem, I’ll help the Marshals deal with it. Just thought you should know. Maybe you can knock some sense into Reggie. I sure as hell couldn’t.”

“Ah I don’t know if he’ll listen to me unless I’m one of you, and that ain’t happening,” Kaylee said. “I’ll think of something. There’s something else I wanted to ask.”

“Fire away.”

“Don’t tempt me. Where are the other first-gen RI kids?” Kaylee asked. “You kept track of ours, but what about them? They’re *your* fault, too, happy accident or not. What about Franz and Kandi’s kittens? What about

the other hundred-some?”

“They’re...around,” Fritz said nervously. “Mostly. Some died in the War, some are Inties, others are just... well....”

“You lost track of them, didn’t you?” Kaylee deadpanned.

“I shuffled a dozen of them I found over the years to Halstead’s collection, or a couple others I knew I could trust to keep ‘em out of circulation,” Fritz said. “Put another bunch of ‘em down holes or otherwise out of the way, so’s I could get to ‘em when I got to ‘em. Already passed most of those on to stripey-boy’s crew. The other hundred-and-change, I dunno. Right now tracking them and the parents down and putting things right is my bag. When the Marshals don’t have something that needs done PDQ, anyway.”

“How noble of you,” Kaylee said.

“It’s my mess. I’ll clean it up. At least it’s one of the ones I *can* clean up.” Fritz looked away. “Yeah, I know, you hate me, wish I was dead, moss, moss...trust me, you ain’t got nothin’ on what *I’m* feeling for me. I’m the one who *did* all that crap. And has to live with it, whether I was in my head at the time or not.” Fritz turned back to Kaylee, forcing himself to look her in the eye. “For what it’s worth...I’m sorry, babe. When you blew me off the last time...I just went out of my head. You hurt me, girl, and I wanted to hurt you worse. So I laid some tough toenails on you that I now know nobody should ever have to go through. I’d take it all back if I could. And Frank...*God*, Frank. What was I *thinking*? I think about him every day. How could I have done that? Doesn’t even feel like me. I

guess that's why I've been trying to make sure everyone else is okay now."

For the first time ever in Fritz's presence, Kaylee's expression softened a little. "This is really starting to screw with you, isn't it? All the things you did, from Frank and Ophelia Steader forwards? It's all coming home to roost."

"Ma and Pa and Jimi—I mean, Captain Ryder—think they may be making some progress on this whacko-psycho brain thing," Fritz said gruffly. "Can't make no promises, though." He took a deep breath. "*Damn* Nextus to hell for what they turned me into. Look, babe, this cat gotta scat. I'm in a mood for blowing something up, and I already got this place trashed once."

"You can just...go away then," Kaylee stammered. "But I guess I should say thank you...in some way."

"That look is thanks enough, Kay," Fritz said smugly. He started to fade away like the Cheshire Cat. "Ciao!" He winked out entirely, then the outer repair bay door opened and closed.

Kaylee stood there staring after him for a long time. He was really gone—her "Integrate dandruff" sensors confirmed that. After a while, she shook her head and padded back to the big bay where the family was gathered—at least for the moment. Along the way, she sent the comm to Anny Hewan she'd been waiting to send for hours, and got a quick acknowledgment. "Be there'n five."

When she got back, she found everyone was still there. They'd broken up into several separate conversations, but they all looked up when she came back in. "Fritz had to go," Kaylee said. "But there's someone else who wants to see y'all." She glanced through the door to

the outside. “An’ there she is now.”

“Aunt Annette!” Anny-the-lynx shouted excitedly.
“Leila!”

“Hey, kids. Good ta see ya.” The lion-tagged woman walked in, followed by a lioness who took up most of the remaining available space in the hangar all by herself.

“Now *that* is an impressive shell!” Reggie said, in genuine awe.

“I make the best of it,” the white lioness said airily, sitting down to groom her forepaws. “Welcome to the pride.”

“She’s *almost* as big as Tamarrind,” Katie said with a little smirk. “Tammy’s one of our Marshals. Her skimmerrr forrrm is a big ol’ deuce trrransport trrrruck.”

“We’ve met. She has more junk in the trunk, but I’m more svelte on the veld,” Leila said.

“My Lei’s the best damned flier on Gondwana,” Hewer said.

“You two would be wonderful as an Intie! Think of the further upgrade potent—” Reggie said in his best used skimmer salesman voice. This earned him an interrupting smack on the back of his head from Chloe. “Bloody hell, sis!”

“Since Dad’s not here I thought I’d fill in. Quit trying to sell being an Intie like it’s some kind of infomercial, Reg,” Chloe said hotly. “Who do you think you are? The ShamWow guy? Ron Popeil? No, I don’t think you’re really any of that. You’re trying to sell that *stupid* Appalite cult like a goddamn Scientologist! I had enough of that crap with Dad’s old ‘Ascendants’, thank you. They’re *not* buying what you’re selling, and neither am I!”

“I know when I’m not wanted, then,” Reggie said darkly. “Cheerio, Mum. Perhaps we’ll meet again.”

“Reggie...” Kaylee started.

“Goodbye everyone,” Reggie said. He vanished, a puff of dust giving away his lift skywards.

Chloe facepalmed. “I’m sorry, Mom. I really am. It’s just...I couldn’t stand his constant condescension anymore. Hope I haven’t spoiled the rest of the day.”

“Your Pa warned me about his...political leanings,” Kaylee said. “I’m not happy, but I’m not surprised either.”

“As we feel,” Dr. Patil said. “We should catch up with Fritz. He’ll have to leave the polity shortly, even with us.”

Kaylee cheek-rubbed her mother’s torso, purring thunderously. “Take care, Ma, Pa, Ratty, Rohit.”

Ben stood up. “Well, I’m getting the feeling that we’re going to break into groups for a while. It’s been a splendid evening, but I hear the, ahem, *siren* song of the Commissariat calling. I’ve been imagining myself with a gendarme badge since I awoke with a pelt. It was most gratifying to see you again, Major Hewer.” He saluted her with a forepaw.

“I should be rrrrrreturrrrrning to Rrrrrrelena,” Katie said.

“An’ I should get back to Aggie,” Anny-the-cat said.

“Franz and I should head back to my pard, too,” Kandi said. “She’s kinda stuck out there at the Marshals base without me.”

“And Mandy and me got some thumbs to pick up,” Liam said.

“I want to spend some quality time with my new-found long-lost sister!” Keiko said, nodding to Chloe.

“Mandy, Ben, if you wish you can stay with me at the museum until you find a place of your own. I’ve sent you the details.”

“Thank you for the offer,” Ben said. “I believe I will avail myself of it if no other opportunity presents itself. We should all meet back here tomorrow. We do still have much catching up to do with each other.”

“Sounds good t’me!” Anny-the-cat said. “We can maybe bring our partners this time, those’v us who have ‘em.”

“That would be great! I’d like to meet ‘em!” Mandy said.

“We’ll see,” Katie said. “Anyway, see y’all later!”

“Take care, kids! Comm me if you need anything!” Kaylee said, waving a paw as they split up and went their separate ways.

“Well, that was sudden,” Rhianna said.

“They were always wandering off all different directions when they were kittens, too,” Kaylee said. “With *eight* of ‘em, I really had my paws full. I’m just glad Anny got to meet ‘em all, even for just a bit.”

“Ah’m sure they’ll be ‘round,” Anny said. “Ah ‘spect Ah’ll have the chance to get to know ‘em better. Exceptin’ that Reggie, per’aps. What got under his skin?”

Kaylee sighed. “He’s in deep with Appa’s Intie assimilation cult.”

“Well, sheeit,” Anny swore. “That ain’t good news a’tall. You realize, yer gonna hafta run a security scan ev’ry time you see him. If Appa knows who he is an’ that he’s visiting...”

“He didn’t try to hack our systems, I know that much,”

Rhianna said, petting Kaylee's big head. "But forewarned is forearmed. We'll stay on our toes." She glanced down at Kaylee. "Was that what Fritz wanted to talk to you about alone before he left?"

"Pretty much, yeah," Kaylee said.

Anny blinked. "You went off somewhere with that varmint by your lonesome?"

"Well, he *did* bring back the missing half v our litter today, so I figured I kinda owed him *something*," Kaylee said. She pawed at the floor self-consciously, a litter-tossing digging motion. "He's...changed. A little."

"Ah *still* want a piece of his sorry hide," Anny declared. "That ain't *never* gonna change."

"I still hate him for what he did," Kaylee said. "But... oh, I don't know. Things were easier when he wasn't trying so hard to be *nice*. Did you hear about what he did in Bartertown?"

"Ah have some friends in the Marshals who passed along some of the scuttlebutt," Anny replied. "Not sure I believe it, but my contacts in Bartertown are a lil' flummoxed right now. So ah don't think they're entirely untrue."

"Mom was there and saw it." Kaylee shook her head. "Rohit passed me some tidbits. Can't believe it. He *might* actually be getting better, after so many years."

"Yeh, well, one swallow doesn' make a summer," Anny said. Then she groaned and facepalmed. "Pun *not* intended. I swear, musta been hangin' round with Zane too long..."

"She's started punning unconsciously," Leila purred. "I'll have to train her out of that."

“It’s good that he’s making the effort, anyway,” Rhianna said. “We’ll have to see how that goes, long-term. Still, can’t deny he’s made a hell of a start. All four of the lost, found.”

“More than that, Rhi. I’ll tell you about it all tonight when you’re sleeping. All in all, it’s been a great day,” Kaylee said. “Thanks for coming, Anny.”

“A’course. Wouldn’t a missed it for anything. Come on, Lei.” Anny climbed into the belly of the lioness mecha, which then stood up on two legs. “Be seen’ you two!”

Kaylee Fused after the duo had lifted into the sky. *:I think it’s time to get back to the workshop,: she said. :I think DINcom alpha-11.1.2 is ready to come out of the fabber.:*

:Back to the grindstone, pard,: Rhianna said. She walked into her messy workshop under her home. The fabber in the corner stopped humming, then chimed completion. The finger-sized highly experimental Faster-Than-Light communications gear was dispensed on a platter. *:Maybe this time it’ll work for ten whole minutes before the signal cuts out.:*

THE END