

## The Good, the Bad, and the Fritz

By Robotech\_Master

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Heatwaves shimmered as the deep Dry Ocean baked under the hot Zharusian sun. The Hardpan, a thousand kilometers of packed earth and stone, showed no trace of footprints. There was just a little dust blown about as a sleek skimmer cycle with deer highlights touched down. A moment later, a lynx Integrate touched down next to it.

Fritz took a moment to stare out to the horizon, where the skyline was broken by an immense mesa rising out of the desert floor. *Bartertown*, he thought. *Wretched hive of scum, villainy, moss, moss. Funny, thought it'd be bigger.* He glanced across at the dark-haired, darkly-tanned woman on the deer-skimmer cycle. *What are we even doing here?* But of course he knew. Doing his job. The job he'd been given. Penance.

Some time back, Fritz had come across the old legend of the Wandering Jew. Ancient Christian folklore that some cat back in the early A.D. had pissed off Jesus, and Jesus had bitch-slapped him with immortality until He returned to Earth again. So he wandered the world like a prehistoric Bruce Banner, doomed not to be able to die until the Son of Man came back and told him he could. It had kind of tickled Fritz, at the time—the depiction of a Jesus who was the polar opposite of the meek, mild, turn-the-other-cheek deity modern Christians espoused. Just another example of how those wacky humans didn't know what they believed.

Somehow it seemed a little less funny now. As far as Fritz knew, he was functionally immortal himself. He was gonna be paying off his own sins for a long time—maybe the rest of his life. Though to be fair, he'd done a little more to deserve it than piss off the Son of God.

Looking back on it all, Fritz didn't know whether he regretted it, on the whole. He'd done a lot of stupid shit. Killed a lot of people he maybe hadn't had to. *Guess I shoulda listened to you more, Jiminy.*

His built-in conscience didn't reply. *Figures. Even too nice a guy to rub it in.*

Anyway, Fritz knew he deserved far worse than what he'd gotten—and if he was honest with himself, more often than not he was sort of *relieved* at not being responsible for everyone and everything Integrate-related anymore. But that didn't make him feel any easier about being here, in no small part because his “parole officer” Dr. Avilia Patil, who was also the closest thing he had to a mother, was there with him. She sort of had to be—the Marshals wouldn't trust him by himself, and he didn't blame them—but he really didn't like to think about the kind of place he was taking her into.

*:Your mother can take care of herself,:* Captain David Ryder offered through the hole in his mental prison. *:She did for thirty years. We still don't even know everything she did in that time.:*

*Yeah, yeah,* Fritz muttered in his mind. *Doesn't make me feel any better.*

Dr. Patil leaned forward against the console and gazed at Bartertown's imposing presence across the desert. “Well,” she said. “There it is.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Fritz said. “Ma, I still don't see why we're *here*. The Marshals should be handling this.”

“They already sent two pairs of their best, and they disappeared,” Dr. Patil said.

“People in this sort of place can smell lawmen a klick away. Which will be to our advantage, since we are obviously not.” She smiled. “Who would ever expect to find *me* in a place such as this?”

“*I’ve* never been to this dump,” Fritz said. “Had bigger fish to fry than what a bunch of mea—a bunch of humans and RIDEs did to each other.”

“That could have been a mistake, Fritz,” Dr. Patil said. “You well know Integrates can move into any human settlement.”

Fritz had to admit—to himself—that she had a point, but outwardly he shrugged. “I had to send the Snatchers a couple of times, but what did I care what happened in an outlaw nadaville like this? It’s not like they were exactly a part of society either. Long’s the Inties didn’t blow for the coasts we were copacetic.” He shook his head. “Look, Ma, you sure you wanna do this alone? Maybe we should give Dad and Doc Clemens a ring, have ‘em meet us.”

Dr. Patil shook her head. “A deer and a lynx in company could pass as a coincidence, but add a rat and it becomes far too suspicious. Let us now don our disguises.” She Fused up, the skimmer cycle folding up delicately into a deer Fuser form around her. Instead of her usual red deer markings, she wore a more commonplace white-tailed deer look. “Since the name ‘Rohit’ would be too much of a giveaway, call me...‘Sara.’”

“Short for ‘Saraswati,’ huh? I guess I’ll be ‘Felix’ again. If there’s anywhere I’m gonna need a ‘bag of tricks’ it’s here.” Fritz sighed resignedly, and grew by half a meter as he projected a hardlight disguise of a lynx Fuser. “All right, Ma, let’s go play beakel. But promise me you’re *not* gonna de-Fuse at all while we’re here?”

“I am not planning on it,” Dr. Patil said calmly. “And speaking of your ‘bag of tricks,’ I have released all your fetters save the one that keeps you within ten klicks of me. You are now fully armed. Now let us be on our way.”

Fritz ran a quick system check, and found it agreed with her. He now had access to the full range of his Integrate power, including the arm cannon that outpowered full-sized starship weapons. They wouldn’t trust him with *that* anywhere near the coastal settlements. But they probably didn’t care if he outright *leveled* an outlaw burg like this.

For some reason, that made Fritz angry. He fought it down. *The mission. Focus on the mission*, he told himself. *And after that, you can have a mission burrito.* “All right, Ma,” he said aloud. “Let’s go ride into town.”

Gaining entry to the town wasn’t difficult. Outlaw towns like this didn’t usually try to keep bad people out; they did business with them. If you could even get to a place like Bartertown, you were assumed to be able to take care of yourself. “Not the most prepossessing settlement,” Dr. Patil observed, looking around at the cluster of stone buildings huddled within the caldera’s rock walls.

Fritz spat in the dirt. “People who live in a burg like this don’t much care how it looks. They just want a safe rock to crawl under. I know that from experience.”

“Yes, this rather is like one of your Enclaves, isn’t it?” Dr. Patil mused. “Just for human outlaws instead of Integrates.”

“Hey, don’t compare us to...these,” Fritz said. “We were hiding for our own good, not so we could screw over everyone else the way these jerks are. You’d never see any Inties into RIDE slavery.” *Though between assholes like Appa and Artemis, I guess we could give them a run for their money in other ways*, Fritz admitted to himself.

“A fair point, I suppose,” Dr. Patil admitted. “Though you were the one who made the comparison.”

“Yeah, well...” Fritz shrugged. “Let’s just go find our contact. What was the name of the place again?”

“Let me see...ah yes. ‘Aunt Aeri’s Absolutely Awesome Amenities and Adult Allure.’”

Fritz rolled his eyes. “Oh gee, how could I have forgotten a name like *that*?”

It only took a few minutes to find the place. It was a cheerful little shop front, almost out of place in the outlaw town, with several mannequins in the window wearing a variety of dresses. “A dress shop, here?” Dr. Patil wondered.

“And whistleburg,” Fritz said, yawning.

“Pardon?” Dr. Patil said.

“House of Ill Repute, Ma,” Fritz said. “And dress shop, too. Floor wax and dessert topping.” Fritz idly wondered if he could manage to slip away from Dr. Patil for an hour or two. There were a *lot* of brothels in this town, and a cat had his needs. *Nah, later for that.*

“Ah, yes. That does make more sense,” Dr. Patil said, pushing the door open. A little bell on it tinkled, and the girl behind the counter looked up as they entered. The store was empty of people other than her and the woman she was ringing up. “Be with you in a moment!”

Dr. Patil and Fritz looked around. The room had several racks of clothing, and clothes fabbers spaced around the walls. It was neat and well-kept, and the prices even seemed reasonable. *Huh*, Fritz thought. *Not bad for an outlaw town.* He wasn’t really sure what he’d expected, when you got right down to it. He’d most stayed away from human burgs, and especially the nothing little ones like this.

“Thanks for coming in! Please come back and see us!” the counter girl said as the customer picked up her shopping bags and left. The door tinkled again as it closed. The girl came out from behind the counter and approached them. She seemed to be in her early to mid teens, with curly black hair, floppy dog ears, and poofy-cut poodle tail. The pink poodle skirt she wore completed the ensemble. Her name badge read “Geena.”

“Hello, how can I help you?”

“Charley Steinbeck sent us,” Dr. Patil said.

The girl’s eyes widened. “Ohhh! Just a moment!” She ran to the front door, locked it, and turned the “Open” sign around to “Closed.” “Come with me, we’ll talk in the back.” She led the way around the counter and up a hall to a small room with a cheap fabbed table and folding chairs in human and RIDE sizes. A pony-sized black poodle RIDE padded in from the other end of the hall and sat on her haunches next to Geena.

:*Hey there*,: Fritz sent.

The poodle turned up her nose. *:I know who you are. If you do anything to hurt Geena...:*

:*Hey, hey, chill, we’re here to help!*: Fritz said.

:*See that you do*,: the poodle growled.

Dr. Patil carefully chose a RIDE-sized chair and took a seat. Fritz followed suit. Geena pulled up a human chair across from them. “So, I’m Geena Bernadette. Who’re you?”

“I am Sara, and this is Felix,” Dr. Patil said. “You’re the one who called the

Marshals?”

Geena nodded. “I am. And they already came, a couple of weeks ago, but I haven’t heard from them since. I’d been getting worried.”

“No one else has heard from them either,” Dr. Patil said. “The Marshals are concerned. But rather than send in more Marshals and escalate the situation, they called us.”

“We’re sort of...freelance troubleshooters,” Fritz supplied. “For when even an undercover Marshal would be too obvious.” The poodle looked at him and sneezed, but didn’t say anything.

“I see,” Geena said hesitantly. “Well, you did have the code phrase I gave them...”

“So what’s going on, sister?” Fritz asked. “What’s bad enough that you’d call the Marshals in to somewhere they usually wouldn’t touch with a five meter pole?”

“It’s not about any of the usual stuff,” Geena said. “I mean, I don’t like it, a lot of us don’t, but we know they’d rather have it where they can pretend to turn a blind eye than have it go somewhere else they can’t see it. We hope now that the whole Fritz thing is over they can maybe come in and clean it up later, but this isn’t about that...”

Fritz shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “So get to the point already?” he prompted.

“Oh...right. Sorry,” Geena said, ears drooping a little. “The point is...girls have been disappearing. Including some of ours. And we haven’t been able to find out where they’ve been going. We just know they haven’t been seen leaving town.”

“They have not simply been...sneaking away?” Dr. Patil asked. “It seems hard to imagine that it could not be done if one was careful enough.”

“If it was just maybe one or two of them, I’d believe that,” Geena said. “And that is what they thought it was at first. Girls have been disappearing off and on for a while now, and they thought they were just slipping out of town somehow. But...a couple dozen in just a couple weeks?”

“That does seem less likely,” Dr. Patil admitted.

“What about the slave markets?” Fritz asked. “They couldn’t have been pressganged and sold by someone looking to make a quota?”

Geena shook her head again. “No. The authorities keep a close eye on those markets—it’s how they can be sure they’re getting their full cut of the take. If they’d been sold, someone would have noticed.”

“I see,” Dr. Patil mused. “It appears we have a mystery on our hands. Is there anything the missing girls have in common? Such as who they worked for?”

“I’m not even sure I know who all of them were,” Geena said. “I only know about the ones who used to be regular customers and then stopped coming. A lot of them came from Miss Kitty’s, but then she’s one of the biggest places in town anyway so that might not mean anything.”

“Miss Kitty’s?” Dr. Patil asked.

“Miss Pretty Kitty Politti’s Nitty Gritty Hit-Me City,” Geena said. “The big mansionplex in the northwest corner of town.”

“What is it with this place and names?” Fritz muttered.

“We shall begin our investigation there,” Dr. Patil said. “It seems as likely a place to start as anywhere else.”

Fritz looked at Geena. *Gotta say, a perky kid like this is the last thing I’d expect in an outlaw burg. Wonder what her story is.* “So, kid,” he said aloud. “What’s a sweet

thing like you doing in a place like this? You don't look like an outlaw."

Geena shrugged. "A lot of us aren't. You ever seen an outlaw try to run a business? It doesn't work. Most of the shopkeepers here are just ordinary people who can't afford to go anywhere else. Like me."

"How'd you end up here?" Fritz asked.

"Well, first my Mom killed my Dad," Geena said.

Dr. Patil blinked. "Your mother...killed your father?"

"He wasn't much of a father," Geena said. "At least, from what I heard. He raped Mom, she killed him afterward. Didn't think she'd get a fair trial, so she ran and ended up here. Didn't realize she was pregnant 'til later."

"But surely that would count as self-defense..." Dr. Patil said.

"It was in Cape Nord," Geena said. "Even if she'd gotten off, they would have made her crossride for it. And y'know, when you just killed someone, you're not thinking about things too clearly, I guess." She shrugged again. "I never knew her; she was an innocent bystander in the wrong spot in a shootout when I was just a few months old. Aunt Aeri took me in and raised me after that. She's been training me to help her run the shop."

An awkward silence fell. To fill it, Fritz said the first thing that popped into his head. "Do you, uh, work both sides of the business?"

:*Smooth, Fritz*,: Captain Ryder smirked. The poodle glared at Fritz.

Dr. Patil swatted him. "Felix! What sort of thing is that to ask?"

"Hey, I was just curious," Fritz said defensively.

Geena blushed faintly. "No, I'm not old enough for that yet. Aunt Aeri says I should be at least 18. And she says as good as I am at the business side, I don't have to if I don't want to."

"Good for you," Fritz said. "So I guess we should go get started poking around, right M—Sara?"

"That is why we are here," Dr. Patil agreed.

"Comm me if Fifi and I can do anything to help," Geena said. "Some of those missing girls are my friends."

"We will do that," Dr. Patil said. "But for now, you should stay here and stay safe. We would feel bad if something happened to you, too."

"All right..." Geena said. She led the way back to the main room and unlocked the door. "Let me know if you find anything."

Dr. Patil nodded. "We will." They left the shop, the door bell tinkling behind them.

As they walked up the street, Dr. Patil asked, "So, what do you think?"

"Nice kid," Fritz said. "Pity she's stuck in a dump like this." To his own surprise, he realized he actually meant it. Which was kind of funny, when he thought about it. He couldn't remember the last time he'd given a rat's ass about any random human he'd just met.

"This 'dump' is the only home she has ever known," Dr. Patil pointed out. "If we can be even a slight civilizing influence on it, that will be all to the good. But what did you think of the problem?"

Fritz shrugged. "Who knows? Could be anything going on. So let's blow to this shitty kitty city place and scope the scene."

"As you say," Dr. Patil agreed. The deer RIDE lifted a few centimeters off the

ground and moved up the street. Fritz quickly followed.

As they approached the Hit-Me City's imposing edifice, Dr. Patil slowed. "Felix..." she murmured. "I am detecting Integrate spoor."

"Dandruff, you mean?" Fritz asked. "Yeah, figures. Somewhere this big has Intie influence written all over it."

"It does, literally," Dr. Patil said. "It gets stronger the closer we get. Traces of a few different ones, but one in particular is very strong."

"I suddenly think I wanna meet this 'Miss Pretty Kitty Politti' character," Fritz muttered. *I shoulda been paying more attention to places like this*, he thought. *Letting someone build their own little Enclave without supervision always was a big mistake.* He snorted inwardly. *Not like it matters now. Rogue Enclaves aren't your problem anymore, Fritz ol' boy.*

They passed through a yard full of slightly-chipped ersatz-Grecian statuary and walked up the steps, passing between two imposing bouncers sporting matching Heavy Assault lion RIDEs. They stood statue-still, but kept a watchful eye on everyone who entered. Inside was a casino that looked like something right out of the 19th century: felt-lined card and roulette tables, mechanical slot machine replicas lining the walls. The room was about half full—mostly with patrons at the tables, but a number of vixen Fusers sporting impressive cleavages moved among and occasionally draped themselves over the customers.

Dr. Patil pursed her lips disapprovingly. *:I did not create RIDEs for you to be used this way,:* she sent to Fritz over encrypted comm.

*:I know, Ma,:* Fritz replied, patting her on the shoulder. *:I don't think any of 'em would blame you for it. We are what we are.:* He couldn't say he was exactly happy about it either. He could sense the humans lying quiescent within each of the vixens, kept in slumber by the fetters that gave them their jobs. None of the RIDEs was exactly pleased to be where they were, but none of them wanted to screw up and get shut down, either. *Maybe I can do a little something something about that later*, Fritz mused, then put the thought aside for now.

"Yes, well," Dr. Patil said aloud. "Let us see about finding the woman in charge."

"That way looks promising." Fritz nodded toward an ornate door at the back of the room, flanked by two more Heavy Assault guards—a matched pair of jaguars this time.

"I see." Dr. Patil nodded, then headed that direction with Fritz at her heels. As they approached, the two guards moved to block the way to the door. "We need to speak with your boss," Dr. Patil told them.

"Nobody gets in without an invitation," the jaguar on the right said. "And if you had one, we'd know."

"Could you ask if she will see us?" Dr. Patil suggested. "We have a...business proposition for her."

"Leave your comm codes and your pitch with the cash office," the other jaguar said. "If she's interested, she'll call you."

Fritz stepped up. "Hey, you squares," he said conversationally. Then he waved his hand. "We're not the droids you're looking for."

The jaguars moved aside, and one of them unlatched the door. "Oh...then go right in."

"No DINsec?" Dr. Patil mused over the comm.

“If their boss is an Intie, why would she give it to ‘em?” Fritz replied. “I don’t guess they get many others ‘round here, so she’d probably worry more about them standing up to her than someone else.”

“But why are their humans not overriding...” Dr. Patil began, then paused. “...oh.”

Fritz shrugged. “RIDE slavery for the win.” It actually did surprise him a little that even the guards kept their humans asleep. After all, it was throwing away half the benefit of a RIDE/human partnership. *But if the boss is an Intie, she can control the RIDEs but not the humans. So she keeps the humans knocked out. Figures.*

“I really am beginning to hate this town,” Dr. Patil murmured.

Fritz stepped forward to push the door open, and led the way through it. It swung shut behind them. The office was richly appointed, with genuine leather seats, a mahogany desk with a number of hardlight displays floating over it, and reproductions of famous art lining the walls. Behind the desk, a white Siamese cat Fuser looked up, and frowned. She waved a hand and banished the displays. “Who are you? How on Zharus did you get past my guards?”

“Oh, you know. Slipped ‘em a twenty,” Fritz said, sliding into one of the seats. “So, you must be Miss Kitty.”

Miss Kitty frowned. “It is so hard to find good help these days.” Then her eyes narrowed. “There is more to you than you appear.”

“Well, that just makes two of us, doesn’t it?” Fritz said cheerfully, leaning back to put his feet up on the desk and lacing his handpaws behind his head. “Pretty nice digs ya got here, sister. Be a pity for anything to happen to them.”

Miss Kitty blinked. “That voice...I know you.”

“Really? I never heard a’ you, but I get that a lot.” Fritz felt the tingle against his skin of a DIN probe. He held up a hand. “Hey, nix on the heavy scanning. I only pet on second dates.”

The cat’s jaw dropped, but she quickly recovered her aplomb. “Well well. I can’t say I ever expected to have the nefarious *Fritz* in my parlor.” She nodded to the deer. “I suppose that would make you Dr. Patil and Rohit.”

Dr. Patil bowed. “As you say.”

*Whoops, looks like we’ve been rumbled.* Fritz let his disguise drop. “In the flesh-and-metal, toots. Like I said, really nice place. If I’d known about this hep swingsville, I mighta come by sooner.”

“Which is why I took special care that you not find out,” Kitty said acidly. “Not that you’re exactly a name to inspire terror anymore.”

“Careful there, pussy-cat,” Fritz said, nettled. “I may be on a leash, but out here it’s more than long enough to let me walk all over you. This place ain’t a patch on the LCs’ dome, and look what happened to that.” He waved his right arm in a casual gesture.

Kitty stiffened. “Fair enough. What do you want?”

“We are looking into a matter concerning a number of missing girls,” Dr. Patil said. “We would be grateful if you would help us shed some light on this mystery.”

“Missing girls? Don’t tell me, that Geena girl called *you* in, too.” Kitty sighed. “I wish she’d just mind her own business. Yes, a few of our girls have gone missing here and there. It happens sometimes. They just break their fetters and skedaddle. Easy come, easy go.”

“Don’t give me that claptrap, dig?” Fritz said. “Place like this, you use hardware

fetters. You can't break those so easy."

"Only on the new girls," Kitty said. "Once they've been here a while and got used to it, we lighten 'em up. Those things are expensive, so we have to keep reusing 'em as newer girls come in."

"How can you do that to people?" Dr. Patil asked. "They may 'just' be RIDES and humans to you, but they are thinking beings. By what right do you keep them prisoner and force them to do terrible things?"

Kitty flinched. "Look...Dr. Patil," she said. "It's not that I don't respect you, but you don't know how it is out here. We do what we have to do to get by. The girls, maybe they don't like what they have to do at first, but at least I keep 'em healthy and safe."

"Excepting the ones that, y'know, disappear," Fritz put in. "You really think they're 'escaping'? All of them?"

Miss Kitty shrugged. "Where else could they have gone?"

*:She is hiding something,:* Dr. Patil opined.

*:Natch. Someone like that has to know everything that goes on in her corner of the burg. But we're not gonna make her spill by jawing at her.:* Fritz shrugged. "You don't mind if we have a look around your far-out little beatsville and see what we turn up for ourselves, natch?"

The Siamese Integrate smiled. "Could I stop you if I did? Here..." She slid a pair of plastic squares across the desk. "There's a thousand *mu* each for the tables. Do try to lose it all before you leave, hmm?"

Fritz scooped up the tokens. "Thanks, sister, you're a peach." He nodded to Dr. Patil, reaffixing his disguise. "C'mon, Ma."

As they left the office, Dr. Patil sent, *:Was that wise, giving our identities away so soon?:*

Fritz shrugged. *:Disguise went out the window when another Intie was on the scene. No hardlight zoot suit's gonna keep my own kind from grokking me. So I figured I'd play for intimidation instead. You get scared, you make mistakes.:* He patted the nearest jaguar on the shoulder as they passed. *:Besides, I dropped one of those stealth spy-balls the Marshals gave us in the office on the way out. If she gets on the horn, we'll know about it.:*

Dr. Patil sent a raised-eyebrow emoticon. *:I see. Anything yet?:*

*:Zilch. She'll be cagey until we're no longer on the premises,:* Fritz predicted.

*:What worries me is, she knew about Geena,:* Ryder put in.

*Yeah,* Fritz agreed. He relayed the concern to Dr. Patil, who couldn't hear Ryder. *:The kid must have been nosing around even before she squawked for the Marshals.:*

*:That is not good,:* Dr. Patil said. *:They might decide she is too much trouble. She might disappear next!:*

Fritz nodded. *:No joke.:*

Dr. Patil glanced around the room distastefully. *:We should go and make sure she is safe.:*

*:Comm her, tell her to hang tight in her pad, not go out for anyone,:* Fritz said. *:But we need to play it cool for now. Letting 'em think we're rattled would be a big mistake.:* He handed one of the chips to the deer Fuser, then sauntered over to the cash counter to have the other one broken up. Then he looked around for a likely table. *:Got an idea. Hit the ladies', cloak up, and slip back out when the next gal leaves. Get back to Awesome Aeri's Alliterative...ah, whatever, and check on the girl.:*

Dr. Patil nodded. *:But what about you?:*  
*:I'm gonna poke around a bit, talk to the locals.:* He eyed a Texas Hold 'Em table thoughtfully. *:And see if this cool cat can take the kitty.:*

Fritz breathed a sigh of relief as Dr. Patil signaled him she'd left the premises. He loved her—maybe more than he loved anyone else in the world—but he never really felt free to be *himself* when she was around.

*:Welcome to the club,:* Captain Ryder snorted. *:Everyone keeps a tight rein on themselves around their parents. I sure did. Wonder if my Mom is even still alive...:*

Fritz rolled his eyes. *:Can it, Jiminy. You can guilt-trip me all you want later. Right now we got a job to do.:*

But Fritz guessed he had a point. Maybe when the “yourself” you were used to being was a half-psycho despotic tyrant, it was good to have someone around who could make you be someone else for a while.

Ryder couldn't resist putting in, *:Glad someone can. I sure as hell never could. OK, OK, shutting up now.:*

The casino was divided up into RIDE and human tables, though “naked” humans were permitted to sit in on RIDE tables if they wanted. Fritz guessed that was fair. RIDEs had all the biometric crap they could pull for reading tells, but it was harder to read against another RIDE. And if some human wanted to play at that kind of handicap, well, it was their money to lose.

Fritz settled into a chair at a poker table of the appropriate stakes, anted up, and picked up his cards. “Hope you cats will go easy on me,” he said. “I've never played this game before and...aw, screw it, I can't cherry tree. I'm really pretty good at this.”

The player across from him, a grizzled-looking marmoset with a bandolier, snorted. “Who you think you are, Fritz or something?”

Fritz shrugged. “Well, I *could* be. Coulda got away from the Marshals and be on the run, hiding out, looking for ways to rebuild my power base...”

“*Ja*, tell us anosser vun,” the she-wolf to Fritz's right said in a thick Sturmhaven accent. “Damned groupies. What did zat vun effer do to deserff copycats?”

“Let's just play here?” said the red squirrel on Fritz's left. “C'mon, are you in or not?”

“I'm in.” Fritz tossed some chips to the center of the table. “Deal 'em.” He chuckled inwardly. *He* didn't understand why he had groupies himself, and most of them weren't the kind of person he'd want to hang around with anyway, but he had to admit they came in handy sometimes.

Fritz played a couple of hands, getting a read for the other players. The thing about RIDEs playing poker was they had the same sorts of tells as humans, if you knew what to look for. Even obvious ones that didn't take sensors or DIN hacking to pick up. Twitchy ears, blinky eyes, and so on. RIDEs *could* lock those down if they thought of it—but then, humans could train themselves not to give any tells if *they* worked at it, too.

Just for his own amusement, Fritz played without attempting to hack any of the other players, though he could tell that only the she-wolf had DINsec installed. *Must not have penetrated far out into the badlands yet*, Fritz mused. To his surprise, he found he was actually enjoying himself. You just couldn't get a good game of poker when you were the boss-cat and everyone thought you might melt them down with your arm cannon if they dared to win.

*:And the fact you probably would have melted them down with your arm cannon if they won didn't have anything to do with it?* Ryder prodded.:

*:C'mon, you know me better than that by now,*: Fritz said. *:I'd probably just have skinned 'em for a new rug. That cannon really takes it out of me.*: Despite his light tone, Fritz sighed inwardly. Some days it almost felt like looking into the memories of another person. He'd boarded the crazy train and not gotten off for thirty years, and it had run an awful lot of people down.

Then Fritz felt a presence behind his right shoulder. "Well, hello there, handsome! Haven't seen *you* around," a bubbly female voice said.

Fritz glanced up and grinned at the curvaceous vixen. "Haven't been around, babe. But you know, I'm starting to be glad I am. Gimme a kiss for luck?"

"Sure thing!" The fox leaned in to kiss him on the cheek ruff, but Fritz turned his head at the last moment to meet her muzzle to muzzle. She squealed in not entirely unpleasant surprise.

Fritz grinned at her. "Now I *know* I'm gonna get lucky. Stick around and keep on being my good luck?"

"Hey, that's my job!"

Fritz glanced at the cards on the table. Nothing much showing, and just trash in his hand. He considered the other players, raised, waited for the next card to hit the river, and raised again.

"Ugh, too rich for my blood," the marmoset said, tossing down his cards.

The squirrel glanced at his own again, then followed suit. "You must be nuts!"

The wolf growled. "You von't fool me zat easy!" She met Fritz's raise, then raised again.

Fritz chuckled. "All in." He pushed the rest of his remaining funds to the center of the table.

The wolf blinked, looked at the pot, and stared at Fritz again. "You *must* be bluffink!"

Fritz grinned at her. "Am I? Make up your mind."

The wolf growled under her breath, then shook her head. "Not zrowink *gut* money after bad." She tossed her cards down.

Fritz grinned and raked the pot in. "No wonder we won the war," he said, tossing his cards down face up.

The wolf growled, lunging to her feet. "Why you—!"

Fritz raised a hand. "Hey, hey, chill out, just joking." He grinned. "You know what? I don't even need this cash, and it's time for me to fall out anyway. You can have the whole pot. Except for this." He plucked a 100 *mu* piece out and turned to hand it to the fox. "For my luck."

The fox blinked. "Oooh, for me? Thanks!"

Fritz pushed his chair back. "Thanks for the game. You cats are tops. I think I'm gonna go try my luck somewhere else." He grinned at the fox. "What do you think, luck?"

"I think you can just lead the way and I'll follow wherever you go!" the fox gushed.

"Far out!" Fritz said. He waved to the others at the table, including the wolf who was still standing up and growling. "Ciao!" Then he calmly turned his back and walked away, with his arm around the fox's shoulder.

“You know, you probably just made an enemy,” the fox said quietly as they left.

Fritz laughed out loud. “I just *made an enemy!* Oh no, whatever will I do?” He felt the foxgirl stiffen under his arm, and hastened to add, “Oh no, no, I’m not laughing at *you*, I’m laughing at *me*. I dig your jive, don’t go ape.”

The fox blinked. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Hey, what is your name, anyway? You got one, right toots?”

“Marion,” the fox said.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Marion. Call me Felix. Or call me Ishmael, call me whatever, just don’t call me late to dinner.”

Marion giggled. “Nice to meet you, mister not-late-to-dinner.”

“Is there somewhere in this joint where a couple crazy cats can get away from prying peepers?” Fritz asked.

“Oh sure! I’ll show you!” Marion said. She took his hand and led the way up the stairs to the balcony surrounding the room. There were private rooms adjoining it, and she picked one and led the way inside.

“Groovy pad,” Fritz said. “I dig it.” The room wasn’t lavishly decorated by the standards of a civilization like Nextus, but it had its comforts—a colorful little rug, plush queen-sized bed with satin sheets, a couple of faded prints on the wall.

Marion sat down on the edge of the bed. “So here we are, privacy...”

Fritz sat down next to her. “Copacetic.” Then he reached out and hacked her core, bypassing the tamper-protection on her fetters as if it wasn’t even there. *No DINsec here either. I’ll just bet Miss Kitty’s gonna change that after today.* He put her into passive mode so smoothly she didn’t even notice, then casually flicked the owner of the fetters over from Miss Kitty to himself.

:Fritz....: Ryder said.

:*Chill out, ya cube. I’m not gonna hurt her. But I need her to stay undercover here for a while, and no one to suspect. Anyway, this is faster than asking questions.*: He slipped into the memory storage area of her core. :*Now let’s see what we’ve got here....*:

Marion was a bog-standard BBV model, made in a specialty factory in Califia. She didn’t have any memory of how she ended up in Bartertown—her next memory after her first boot was of waking up in Miss Kitty’s. Probably sold “off the truck” to one of the organized crime interests headquartered here with tendrils elsewhere.

One of those tendrils had swept up Ruthie Sharp, a gal from Burnside who had taken out a loan from Big Sal Seaford to cover some gambling debts, then defaulted. She’d tried to run, but the mafia had caught up with her and “repossessed” her. Now she slept most of the time, and spent a few hours awake every month wondering why she kept getting furrrier and furrrier.

Marion felt bad about that, in a distant sort of way, but she liked her job and the human was a useful tool to do it with. There was also the fact that someone had applied a docility template to her core to make her more tractable, so she couldn’t have *strong* feelings about anything unless someone directly told her to.

Fritz felt a stab of white-hot rage. *This is almost as bad as what that bitch Artemis was doing! I should just..just...* He felt the tingle in his arm that signified a charge was building in his cannon.

:Fritz!: Ryder cut in urgently.

Fritz shook his head. “Shit! Right.” He forced himself to relax, let the charge

dissipate. *You're not the bosscat anymore*, he told himself. *Can't go around burning places to the ground and trust your Snatchers and jacks to clean up the mess. Shoulda poked into this place years ago, coulda done it then.* He sighed. *:Man, it sucks being good sometimes. Right. Well, let's see what I can do.:*

He opened an encrypted port in Marion's firewall, so he could connect remotely and eavesdrop or run her directly. *:I promise, I'm gonna strip all the fetters after this is over,:* Fritz told Ryder. *:Right now, I need her eyes on the inside, and if she started acting different all of a sudden people would notice.:*

*:Would Dr. Patil approve?:* Ryder asked pointedly.

*:Ma doesn't gotta know,:* Fritz said. He glanced back into Marion's memory again, this time looking for any knowledge of the missing girls. There wasn't much. She had known a few of them, spoken to them. They always seemed to disappear overnight, during the charge cycle when all the RIDEs were in passive mode, so nobody had seen or heard anything.

*:So it's an inside job?:* Ryder wondered.

*:Seems likely,:* Fritz said. *:I knew that shitty Kitty was hiding something. I oughtta go down there and peel the truth outta her...:*

*:Fritz...:*

*:Yeah, yeah, I know. Good guy stuff, right.:* Fritz sighed, then snapped his fingers.

Marion blinked and woke up. "Sorry, I guess I zoned out there for a moment."

"That's okay," Fritz said. "It happens. So what do you say we find out if it's true what they say about cats and dogs?"

"If I look like a *dog* to you, you need your eyes checked!" Marion teased.

Fritz put an arm around her and pulled her close. "Then show me what a fox you really are."

Marion snuggled up against him. "Gladly!"

*:Is this really what you should be doing?:* Captain Ryder prodded. *:Just a few minutes ago you were white-hot mad about what's been done to her, and now you're taking advantage of it?:*

*:Yeah, yeah, I'm a bad person,:* Fritz replied. *:But they've probably got the room bugged, so we gotta act natural.:*

*:And that's your only reason,:* Ryder said.

*:All right, no it's not,:* Fritz grumbled. *:She's enjoying it too, and you know how long it's been since I got laid, man? I told ya, I'm gonna take care of her. Now would you please can the lip?:*

Ryder lapsed into an uncomfortable silence, and Fritz sighed inwardly. Really, it wasn't as if he wasn't doing something she didn't *want* him to, regardless of whether her wanting him to was imposed behavior. God only knew, he'd done enough crap to people who *didn't* want him to, back in the day. But oh well. Next to all the people he'd already killed, something like *this* was tantamount to double parking, in his book.

It was about an hour later, as they lay in bed snuggled up to each other, that Fritz got a comm call from Dr. Patil. *:Awwwwkward!:* Captain Ryder said cheerfully.

*:Hush, you. Yeah, Ma?:*

*:Rohit and I are with Geena and Fifi,:* Dr. Patil reported. *:They are safe and well at the moment. What have you found out?:*

*:The disappearances may be an inside job—at least as far as Miss Kitty Litter’s concerned. They always happen at night, when the RIDEs are powered down and locked up,:* Fritz replied. *:I’ve corralled more peepers to keep an eye on stuff here. I’ll be joining you soon as I can—:* he glanced at the sleeping fox, whose arms were still wrapped around him *:-get free.:*

*:We will see you soon,:* Dr. Patil sent, then signed off.

Fritz opened his link into Marion and moved her arms to let him slip out. *Good, that works.* He kept her asleep while he carefully got up, checked his hardlight disguise to make sure everything was still in place, and moved quietly out the door.

*:You realize, if it is an inside job, and they are keeping an eye on you, they might “disappear” her next, right?:* Ryder said.

*:Kind of counting on it,:* Fritz said. *:That’s why I hacked her. If it happens, I should be able to follow her to wherever they’re keeping ‘em.:*

Ryder was silent for a moment. *:I hope you’re as good as you think you are.:*

*:Yeah, me too, Jiminy,:* Fritz said. *:Me too.:*

When he got back to Aunt Aeri’s, he found an unpleasant surprise waiting. They had him come around back into the living area, and when he got inside he found his mother had de-Fused from Rohit and was sitting across the kitchen table from Geena, talking amiably over cups of tea while Fifi eyed Dr. Patil with the same look of adulation she got from any RIDE meeting her for the first time.

“Aw, geez, Ma,” Fritz groaned, facepalming. “I thought we talked about this.”

Dr. Patil shrugged. “It seemed impolite not to tell her, especially since we had already told Miss Kitty.”

Geena looked at him. “Is it true? You’re really—?”

Fritz sighed and dropped his own disguise. “Yeah, yeah. The one and only Fritz, the big bad boss-cat, tyrant of Gondwana, is in your kitchen.” He pulled up another seat at the table, ignoring Fifi’s growling at him.

Geena regarded him seriously. “You really shouldn’t have done all those things, you know.”

“I know. *Believe* me, I know.” Fritz shook his head. “But seems like the Marshals thought I was the only one big and bad enough to be able to huff and puff and blow your little problem down here. So here we are.”

“I still can’t believe Miss Kitty is an Integrate,” Geena said. “I mean, it kinda makes sense and all, ‘specially since no one’s ever seen her out of her ‘RIDE,’ but still.”

“It’s kinda my fault, I guess,” Fritz admitted. “Not every Intie wanted to toe my line, and they liked to run off and find somewhere else to hide. And if it didn’t look like they were gonna screw up our secret-keeping, I let ‘em. I really shoulda kept closer track.”

“Apart from what she does to her ‘girls,’ she’s not been a bad citizen,” Geena said. “As far as I know anyway.”

“Yeah. And other than *that*, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?” Fritz muttered.

Geena blinked. “Huh?”

Fritz shook his head. “Never mind, kid. Look, Miss Kitty knows about you. If she’s tied in with whoever’s ‘disappearing’ people, then they might come after you too. We gotta get you outta this burg.”

Geena shook her head. “Nuh-uh. Then who’d run the business? Aunt Aeri’s

getting on in years. I'm pretty much all she's got."

"And she's not going anywhere with *you*," Fifi growled.

"Okay, fine. Fine. I guess we're all staying right here until something happens, then," Fritz grumbled. "Anybody got a deck of cards?"

An hour or so later, Fritz took Dr. Patil aside. "Just got a ping from the spyball. She's comming someone. Can't tell what it is, 'cuz she's encrypting it, and Intie encryption isn't so easy for even other Inties to break."

"Do you suppose she is communicating with another Integrate?" Dr. Patil asked. "Remember, Kitty's was not the only trace I picked up. There were others."

"Oh, great," Fritz muttered, facepalming. "If there's *more* of us involved, that would just be *all* we need. You made sure Fifi's got DINsec, right?"

"I put it in as soon as I explained who I was," Dr. Patil said. She smiled faintly. "I must admit, as much as I wish they would not worship me so much, sometimes it is useful being me. There are not many people who *any* RIDE would trust to install new hardware into them at their first meeting."

"Yeah. My own rep has sort of the opposite kind of usefulness," Fritz said.

"Anyway, I can't localize the transmission source, or make out what's being said, but from the complexity of the signal, yeah, it's probably another Intie. Joy and rapture."

"You said you had found another intelligence source?" Dr. Patil asked.

"Yeah," Fritz said. "I'm tapped into one of the BBV RIDEs there—one of the gals who've been disappearing a lot. Keeping an eye on her now, and we'll see what happens late tonight after they're all supposed to shut down for charging."

Dr. Patil nodded. "Let me know if anything changes."

Fritz nodded. "Yeah, sure. I'm just gonna go hang outside right now." He glanced sidelong at Fifi. "I know when I'm not wanted."

"I understand." Dr. Patil patted his shoulder. "Do not go too far."

Fritz slipped outside, then kicked in his lifters to hop up to the roof of the building. Like most of the buildings in this town, it was a blocky, stone construction, not more than a couple stories tall but extending a good distance back from the street. The roof was flat—no need for a slant where it never rained—and covered in tiles made from the same stone as everything else. Fritz lay on his back and started up at the open sky. He could just barely make out the shimmer of the hardlight environment shield that kept the temperature down to liveable, and the faint flicker of the aurora centralis that blanketed much of the dry was a long-familiar sight.

The hardlight shield would hardly be an obstacle if he wanted to leave. He could be supersonic in a matter of seconds. But the fetter tethering him to Dr. Patil was only the least of the reasons it wasn't really an option. Apart from the tracking device embedded in his DIN, Fritz knew of at least six implanted in various parts of his body, and there were probably twice as many more that he didn't know about. For all he knew, the Marshals probably had a spy satellite tasked solely to keep track of him at all times. Fritz amused himself by grinning and waving manically up at the sky for a minute or so, concluding by flipping the bird with both hands. *Heh. Flipping a "bird" the bird. Fritz, man, you are such a card.*

But as frustrating as it was to be on a leash, he had to admit it was better than being back in the cell. *Maybe if this job turns out OK I can get 'em to let me stay out here. Just plunk me down in the desert, a thousand clicks from anyone, and watch me.*

*Better than squaresville iron.* Not that he could complain either way. Even jail was better than permanent shutdown. And he knew what he deserved.

Fritz aborted the depressing line of thought by pulling up his feed from Marion, watching through her eyes as she went about her usual business at the casino. She schmoozed the gamblers with a deft touch. Templated or not, she was really good at what she did. It was aggravating as hell that she was forced into it this way, though. Especially given the greater freedoms that were coming to RIDEs in the civilized parts of the world. *We gotta do something about this.*

*:I hear that,:* Captain Ryder said. *:But first things first. If we can stop them from disappearing, then's the time to see about the other stuff.:*

*:Yeah,:* Fritz said. He lay back on the roof, staring up into the sky. He tried to remember if he'd ever heard about any Integrates going off the reservation and heading this way. If there had been, couldn't have been anyone important. He'd had to send the Snatchers a few times, but they'd always come back with their quarry. It was just small fry like Miss Kitty who'd gone under his radar, and how much trouble could they cause way out here?

Well, obviously not enough trouble to bring Integrates to the attention of the outside world. But if RIDEgirls were disappearing now...Fritz frowned. Assuming that Integrates were responsible, what could they be *doing* with them? Apart from selling them at some other outlaw town, which seemed like a lot of trouble for little benefit.

Of course, there were plenty of things Integrates could be doing with cold RIDEs and warm bodies—especially when they were mostly BBV RIDEs. Making their own little private Intie harem was only the most innocent and harmless of the possibilities. Fritz *hoped* that was what they were doing. He didn't like to think about some of the other things that might be happening—especially if it meant they might happen to Geena, or for that matter Marion.

"I'm gonna nap while I monitor so I can be fresh for tonight," Fritz commed to Dr. Patil. "Wake me if anything happens."

"I will, my son," Dr. Patil replied. "Let me know if you find out anything."

It was the same old dream. The one where all the people he'd ever killed came past him in an endless parade. He remembered every one of them, of course, with photographic clarity: His own brother, Frank. Other war casualties, both from Nextus and Sturmhaven. Loose Cannons. Other Integrates who wouldn't toe the line. (Oddly enough, Artemis from Olympos wasn't one of them, though for all he knew she *should* have been. Was his subconscious trying to tell him something?) Finally, Marc Flores and his RIDE Cernos. Then they started over again.

They never said anything to him. It might have been easier if they had, at least that would have been something to argue with. But they just looked at him with varying degrees of sadness, anger, or contempt.

Fritz could have woken up, of course, or could have forced himself to have another dream. Lucid dreaming was well within the purview of most Integrates. And maybe he'd do that when he got tired of this. But he felt like he deserved it—for now, at least—so he inflicted it on himself instead. Besides, it gave him something to do while he watched Marion do her work.

At last, she reached the end of her shift and returned to her charging station upstairs. Fritz slipped her an override so she didn't go into passive shutdown as usual

but kept her eyes open and senses sharp as she started to charge back up.

Fritz banished his nightmare and woke up, sitting up on the shop roof and running a quick internal systems check. He dithered over whether to get closer to Miss Kitty's or wait here for something to happen.

The decision became academic when the door to the charging room opened and three figures came through. Though Marion's optics would ordinarily have picked up every detail even in the low light, they had the kind of outline fuzzing associated with Integrates playing silly buggers with unprotected sensors.

"Aw, crap," Fritz muttered. "*Three* of them? Really?" He sent a quick warning ping to Rohit, then launched into the air. If he was fast, he might be able to get there in time to—

One of the figures reached out to Marion. The sensory feed disappeared in a wave of static, but not before he felt echoes of the same familiar nausea that had ended his and Jiminy's existence as separate individuals. "Crap, crap, *crap!*" Fritz swore under his breath. "I didn't think they'd do it so soon."

"Where do you zink *you're* goink in such a hurry?"

Fritz pulled up short as a familiar lupine RIDE suddenly blocked his way. It was the Sturmie wolf he'd humiliated at the gaming table earlier. *Oh, great, Fritz. That was real smooth of you.* "Sorry, toots, I don't have time to play with you right now."

"*Make* time," the wolf growled, cracking her knuckles. "Ve haff unfinished business, you and I."

Fritz rolled his eyes. Time was wasting, and he needed to end this *fast*. "Look, kid, you *really* don't wanna mess with me." He let his hardlight disguise drop. "So, yeah. I *am* Fritz. The Bosscat, Hero of the Nextus-Sturmhaven War, Scourge of the Dry Ocean, yatta yatta, moss moss. And I *really* don't have time right now to deal with some dildo who's blown her jets over a silly—"

"It is you!" the wolf growled. "My homeland and I still owe you a thing or three." She powered up her weapons.

"Hey, whoa, kiddo, you know who you're dealing with here?" Fritz said.

"If you vere beaten vunce by un-Integrated RIDEs, you can be again!" A plasma blast sizzled through the air where Fritz had been only a moment before.

"All right, fine! You want a fight, you got it!" Fritz began to charge his arm cannon—then stopped. The problem was, that gun was lethal far more often than it wasn't, especially against a RIDE who hadn't been upgraded to a fare-thee-well by Rhianna and Rochelle—and Fritz didn't want *any* further deaths on his conscience. For that matter, even his monomolecular blade wouldn't do too much good to the human inside the RIDE if he started lopping off parts with it. *Oh, hell. Looks like we do this the hard way, then.*

As he dodged the wolf's attacks, Fritz probed half-heartedly at the DINsec lock on her systems. He'd hoped she might have one of the early versions that yielded with just a little effort, but no such luck—she had a more recent model, not so far behind the one on Rohit herself. It would take at least several minutes to crack, and Fritz just didn't have that long. Despite his irritation, Fritz couldn't help feeling a little pride in Rhianna's work. *Have to admit, Kay found herself one hell of a partner.*

Not that this helped him any now. For perhaps the first time in his life, Fritz regretted suffering from a shortage of non-lethal weapons—for about three seconds until he remembered he had other options. He threw up a conical hardlight shield in

front of him, then drove it forward at a good fraction of the speed of sound. A momentary sense of whimsy led him to yell, “Hadouken!” at the same time. RIDE or not, the wolf was taken by surprise at the speed of the attack—especially since Fritz followed up by slamming his shoulder into her sternum a split second behind the shield.

Fritz rode her body down to the ground, locking a hand around her throat. “I *really* don’t have time for this. So you’ve got two options. You give me root right damn now—or you’re gonna learn more about Integration first-hand. Since that’s the only other easy way I have to put you out of commission long enough to—ah, very good, thank you.”

Dropping into fast-time, Fritz put the wolf into passive for a few seconds while he examined her memories. Her name was Accalia, and she had been one of the Sturmhaven crossrider indoctrinators, like Alpha Camp’s Sonja. No surprise from the thickness of that accent.

Her human was one Marisha Narimanova—her last charge in the Sturmhaven army before she’d broken her fetters and escaped. They’d been together long enough for Marisha to lose the desire to escape. She had convinced herself it was her destiny to belong to Accalia, and was happy that way. *That one’s got a lotta time on a head shrinker’s flat in her future*, Fritz thought. But he had bigger fish to fry right now than rescuing meat from mech.

Fritz considered his options. He had total control over Accalia’s core right now. He could imprint upon her a willingness to obey his every order. He could even make her think she was in love with him. For a few nanoseconds, he actually considered it, then shook his head. It was too much like what Artemis had done to her followers.

Instead, he put a simple non-aggression fetter on her to prevent her from attacking him. As an afterthought, he toned down her accent to something more natural-sounding. Then he woke her up in fast-time VR. She glowered at him.

“Now, listen up,” Fritz said. “You call yourself a Woman of Sturmhaven, right?”

Accalia drew herself up haughtily. “*I am* a Woman of Sturmhaven!” she insisted proudly.

“So what’re you doing hanging out in a joint like this?” Fritz said. “You seen what Miss Kitty does to her fox dames?”

Accalia’s ears drooped a little. “It is being one of the last places I would not be forced to give up my Marishka. I am not liking that part of it so much either.”

Fritz smirked. “Well here’s your chance to do something about it. Turn up the stereo and get with it. Some Integrates are kidnapping and force-Integrating the girls around here. That’s why I’m here—it’s gotta stop, and I’m gonna be the one to stop it.”

Accalia stared at him. “You’re serious.”

“As a heart attack,” Fritz confirmed. “They just got one at Miss Kitty’s, and I was on my way there when *you* showed up. Now you got a choice. You can either help me, or you can get outta my way. What’s it gonna be, sister?”

“No Woman of Sturmhaven would stand by and let such an atrocity continue,” Accalia vowed. “I will help you.” Her eyes narrowed. “But this still does not make up for what you did to my people.”

“After what your people did to you, you still stand up for them?” Fritz said.

Accalia shrugged. “My country, right or wrong.”

“Whatever.” *Bitch was just fine with ignoring the forced prostitution*, Fritz thought darkly. *Guess you have to draw the line somewhere*. “Anyway, time’s wasting.

C'mon." He dropped back to the real world and took off toward Miss Kitty's, not waiting to see if Accalia was following.

He landed on a second-floor balcony near Marion's charging room. A swift slash from his knife severed the lock, and a thought silenced the non-DINsec-equipped alarm system. He dashed inside to the charger slot where Marion had been, but she was already gone. A few silvery nanite puddles dotted the floor, leading out into the hall. "Shit!" Fritz hissed.

He reached down to a pouch he wore on his belt. Mindful of his innate blindness to it, Dr. Patil had whipped up a hand-held scanner unit for him that could detect "Integrate dandruff." It was probably not entirely coincidental that it resembled a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* tricorder. Fritz flipped it open and punched buttons. The screen lit up with a trail superimposed over the floor, leading toward the hallway. As Accalia touched down behind him, Fritz jerked his head toward the door. "Come on."

Fritz followed the trail down the hall toward the back stairs down to the first floor. He couldn't help noticing that none of the big bruiser kitties were anywhere to be seen. He would have expected them to be walking patrol along the halls. Had they been told to be elsewhere so they wouldn't see the mysterious visitors?

The trail led around the outskirts of the building, avoiding the main floor that was still busy with late-hours gamblers and the late BBV shift, toward a rear entrance to Miss Kitty's office. The entrance was not unguarded, but instead of one of the bruiser cats he expected, he met a slim but well-endowed foxgirl. But she couldn't be mistaken for a BBV RIDE for more than a second, because her body was too small to support a human inside.

The fox stepped forward, a pair of fire swords materializing in her hands. "You're not getting past—"

"Hadouken!" The force cone threw the fox Integrate back into the office door, and the office door through the wall onto the office floor. Before she could jump back to her feet, Accalia was on top of her, razor-sharp claws at her throat. The flame swords flickered out, and the fox's eyes rolled back in her head as she shut herself down. There was no one else in the office.

"An Integrated BBV fights *for* them?" Accalia said. "This makes little sense."

Fritz snorted. "As little sense as your 'Marishka' not wanting to break free anymore?" He shook his head. "C'mon, the trail leads to the back wall." Fritz turned to the bookcase at the back of the office and knocked it down with a low-powered cannon blast. Amid the scraps of burning wood and paper, there was a stone stairway leading down.

"Ugh," Accalia said. "I am not liking the looks of this."

"Yeah," Fritz said. "Funny how the best intentions often take us places we really don't wanna go, innit?" He led the way down the stairs, into the darkness.

The stairs went down for dozens of meters. The regularity and smoothness of them suggested they'd been excavated with the mining nanites that were used to dig for Q in stony rather than sandy ground. They'd probably been dug in a matter of hours or days—a far cry from the time it would have taken to hew out a secret passage like this in bygone eras.

At the bottom, the passage widened out into a natural cave, probably a relic from the days when the Dry had been the bottom of an ancient sea. The "dandruff" trail still showed up strong in the scanner. Fritz followed it on foot, mindful that use of lifters

might be noticed.

Up ahead, the cave turned a bend. Fritz's sensitive lynx ears perked. "Hsst, quiet, I hear something." He crept up and peered around the corner. "...oh *shit*."

Around the corner, the cave widened out again into a huge natural chamber, the bulk of which was occupied by the biggest dragon Integrate Fritz had ever seen—and he'd seen more than a few dragons in his time. A gleaming gold in color, its massive girth practically filled the cave from wall to wall. *Aw, crap. They never made RIDEs in that size. There are just a few ways a dragon gets that big...and what with all those missing girls...*

As he watched, Fritz saw a lump move down the dragon's throat, and felt a chill as his guess was confirmed. *Oh Jesus fuck. I hate being right all the time.*

There were a few smaller figures in front of the dragon, Fritz noticed. More fox Integrates—and a smaller white Siamese cat. "...that concludes our business," Miss Kitty was saying.

The dragon smiled down at her, teeth showing. "Why yes," he said in a deep, mellifluous voice. "I do believe it does. I am afraid, my dear, you have grown sloppy. The brat from the clothing store should never have been able to trace these disappearances to you. Now I have to clean up your mess."

Miss Kitty stiffened. "*You're* the one who's been taking more and more girls! No one could hide that many disappearances!"

"I believe *I* could have," the dragon said. "And I think your 'Hit-Me City' would run more efficiently with me at the helm regardless. The *rest* of the town certainly does."

The Siamese Integrate shrank back. "What?! But—we had a deal—"

"All good deals come to an end," the dragon purred. "I have heard it said many times you are a woman of impeccable taste. I think it's time I found out whether that is true."

Miss Kitty tried to pull away, but the fox Integrates held her arms. The dragon's head swooped down, hiding her from view. A moment later, another lump moved down the dragon's throat.

"*Bozhe moi!*" Accalia whispered. "Did he just...?"

"Yes," Fritz murmured, pulling her back around the corner. "It's...something some Inties can do. A...*perversion* of Integrate shapeshifting talent." He shook his head. "Evan, Gigi, you've got a *hell* of a lot to answer for."

"I don't understand," Accalia said. "How does shapeshifting lead to...*that*?"

"Some 'shifters can absorb matter to bulk up for bigger forms. A few of those... discovered it didn't *have* to be non-living matter." He bared his teeth. "See, this kind of crap is why I always took a hard line against Inties trying to 'improve' themselves. You never know where those 'improvements' are going to lead."

Having disposed of their prisoner, the fox Integrates stepped forward. They pressed up against the dragon's hide and then...merged into it.

"What—?" Accalia said.

"Told you. Shapeshifters."

The dragon lifted his head and turned to look at something Fritz couldn't see. "Ah...and if it isn't the author of our little problem. And...a new friend?"

More foxgirl Integrates dragged in a bedraggled-looking feral poodle Integrate on a leash...followed by a familiar deer Fuser. Fritz stiffened. "Ma!" he yelped, starting

forward.

Accalia put a paw on his shoulder. “Wait!” she hissed. “Do not give up our surprise yet.”

Fritz growled. “All right...for now.” He began to charge his arm cannon.

“What have you done to us?” the poodle complained—in Geena’s voice. “This hurts our head...”

“You won’t have to worry about that for much longer, my dear,” the dragon said. “But why is this other one still...?”

“Because your Integration signal will not work on Rohit,” Dr. Patil said calmly, retracting the deer’s helmet-head to regard the dragon eye to eye. “I have engineered that vulnerability out of her. We should thank you for helping us to test it. Now that we know that it works, we can make it more broadly available.” She glanced at the poodle. “Not that we have anything else to thank you for.”

The dragon seemed almost taken aback for a moment. “Well, well. I never expected to have the renowned Dr. Patil in my parlor. Had I known who you were, I would not have even tried it.”

“You have the advantage of me,” Dr. Patil said. “Who are you?”

“Oh, I call myself Legion these days,” the dragon said.

“For you are many?” Dr. Patil said dryly.

“Oh, we are,” Legion said. “And becoming more every day.”

As if on cue, Fritz abruptly felt a tickling at his comm receiver, followed by a channel opening again. He felt a confused rush of emotions come through—claustrophobia, panic, disgust, horror. It was the link to Marion, he realized. It had gone down when she Integrated, since she didn’t have a DIN. *Why’s it back now?* he wondered. Then a moment later he got it. *Oh. Of course. He has a DIN.*

And Marion was effectively *plugged into* him, like a twencen computer into a router. And so were all the others, Fritz realized. He could sense the network topology through her. There were dozens and dozens of other nodes in it...and at the top of the pyramid, that damned golden dragon.

“Son of a *bitch*,” Fritz muttered. “He *was* making a damn harem after all. Just a *virtual* one.”

“What?” Accalia asked.

“He’s an ‘Integrate’ in more ways than one,” Fritz whispered. “He’s ‘Integrated’ everyone he’s ever et.” And that would explain the merging fox Integrates, too. They were more of his past meals. He used them as...*extensions* of himself. *I’ll just bet that’s how he runs this whole town*, Fritz thought. *He can be everywhere at once.*

But there was the inkling of an idea starting to niggle at the back of Fritz’s mind, if he could just bring it out into the open...

“So you are responsible for all the disappearances,” Dr. Patil said. “You...ate them, too?”

“Indeed,” Legion said. “The first time was an accident. My girlfriend and I were playing, and the play became a touch too...enthusiastic. But once I realized what I could do...I found a place where I could give my appetites free reign.” He looked off into the distance for a moment. “I have an entire world inside of me, and so many people to play with. And so much extra processing power...I never tire of it.” The dragon licked his lips with an immense tongue, and eyed the poodle hungrily. “And speaking of which...”

“No way in *hell*,” Fritz said, stepping out in the open and letting loose a powerful

blast from his arm cannon. It struck an invisible shield surrounding the dragon...and dissipated. Fritz stood there panting. “Damn, was afraid of that.”

Legion turned his immense wedge-shaped head to regard Fritz with amusement. “Ah, the ‘boss-cat.’ Was wondering when you’d show up.” He chuckled. “As you can see, I have more than enough sarium batteries to deflect your best efforts. Or at least, I can deflect them longer than you can keep them up. Regardless, I will deal with you soon enough. After my next snack...” He turned his head back toward Geena—and suddenly, the idea Fritz was trying to think of materialized.

“Wait, Legion. I’ll make you a deal,” Fritz said. “You leave them be...and you can have me.”

“No, Fritz!” Dr. Patil protested. “You can’t make that deal!”

“Yeah? Watch me,” Fritz said.

Legion snorted, clouds of steam emitting from his nostrils. “And why would I want *you*? You’re hardly as...appealing as my usual meals.”

Fritz shrugged. “Well, I know lots of secrets. And if you eat me, you’ll know them too. And that’s not even counting how the world would see the guy who ate Fritz. You’d be a hero.” Fritz privately suspected the world would be a little too horrified even so, but Legion probably wouldn’t see it that way.

“I would be, wouldn’t I?” Legion mused. “Very well. Approach.”

As Fritz began to walk forward, he opened a DINsec-encrypted comm channel to Rohit. *:I need you in fast time, as fast as Ma can take. Need your help coding something up, and need it damned fast.:*

A few seconds or hours later, Fritz stood before Legion, looking up at him with a sullen glare. He’d gotten the help he needed from Dr. Patil, and had then dropped out of the connection to go into a deeper fast-time than a pure organic mind could take to finish on his own. He was pretty sure it would work. The sims he’d had time to run had a 93% success rate. Not as high as he would have liked, but it would have to do.

“All right, so let’s get this over with,” Fritz said.

“Just one little thing,” Legion said. “Hold out your right arm”

Fritz blinked. “What? You can’t be serious!”

Legion smirked. “I see through your little game. You thought you could play ‘Agent K,’ didn’t you? Shoot me up from the inside? Well, we won’t be having that.”

“Fritz, no!” Dr. Patil protested.

“Don’t worry ‘bout me, Ma,” Fritz said. “I’ve got everything under control.” He grimaced and held out his arm. Legion bit down, and with a crunch the arm severed. “Ow! *Shit!*” Fritz swore. In actuality, he’d shut off the pain signals coming from his arm the moment he realized what was going to happen, but no need to show it. *One thing’s for sure, you ain’t no Zane. Asshole.*

Legion tossed back his head and swallowed. “And *now* we can proceed with the rest of you.” He opened wide, giving Fritz an excellent view of a toothy maw. Then the maw descended, blocking out the light. It closed over him, lifting him from the ground, and Fritz swiftly went from upright to horizontal to tilting forward as he slid down the slimy expanse of the dragon’s tongue.

The next minute or so would not rank among Fritz’s favorite memories. But after an eternity of getting squeezed and shoved, he ended up in a slimy little pocket of flesh,

where fiber-optic tendrils reached out from the wall to take him in a tight embrace. As he felt them burrowing beneath his skin, Fritz retreated behind an interior firewall, leaving his tempting little trojan out in the open. *Run TarBaby.exe...that's what you get for throwing me in that briar patch!*

The thing about a neural network controlled by a single hostile node was that it was a delicate balancing act. Whether Legion realized it or not, the only thing that kept him at the top of the mental construct he'd assembled was that he'd started out that way. He could only be king of the hill as long as nobody knocked him off balance...and the purpose of Fritz's virus was to put a hand in the small of his back and give him a great big shove.

*:Ahh, now I have you. The one and only Bosscat, now and forever a part of... wait. What is...what are you doing? This isn't what...this isn't...this...this...this...:*

Fritz smirked. *Gotcha.* From behind his firewall, he watched Legion's network begin to collapse. The links binding him to everyone else went down...and then the links binding everyone else together. Now Fritz heard their voices, too, calling out in confusion, panic, and fear. Without Legion's imposed structure, they didn't have any organization at all.

But then, as Fritz watched, they began to coalesce and rebuild their own order. It wasn't unlike the process new Integrates went through, finding a balance between their two minds, except in this case there were many more minds than just the two. The new structure actually looked a lot like the old, which made sense given that the minds would have been used to connecting to each other—except that this time Legion's wasn't in charge. The others kept shoving it off to the side by itself whenever it tried to latch on anywhere. The structure gradually flattened out to become more horizontal, given that there was no longer any need to try to keep anyone down.

As the whole structure settled into place, Fritz opened his eyes again. Everything was still dark...but then a moment later holes opened in the stomach walls all around him, letting in the light. The holes grew, and the remaining flesh shrank, until a moment later Fritz was lying on the ground, next to his own severed arm, in the middle of what could only qualify as a *crowd*.

There were literally dozens of Integrates taking up the space where the immense dragon had been. Most of them were female foxes in either (very-well-endowed) humanoid or feral form. But there were a few men and women of other species, including a duo who could only have been the Marshal team that had been dispatched weeks before.

Fritz reached down and scooped up his arm, shoving it back into place. "Thought you could 'disarm' me, pudnocker?"

Dr. Patil and Rohit shouldered their way through the crowd to reach him. "Fritz! Are you all right?"

Fritz grinned up at them. "Just fine, Ma. Nothing a few hours of R&R won't fix."

"We owe you a great debt of gratitude," a new voice said.

Fritz turned to look at the speaker. She was one of the BBVs, but her fur was colored metallic gold rather than red or silver. "Heya, golden girl," Fritz said. "No big deal. You're the new lama?"

"For the moment, by consensus," the fox said. "We're still settling how we'll be running things. But whatever way it is, it'll be democratically."

"Fascinating," Dr. Patil said. "You are still a group mind?"

“Yes,” the fox said. “It seems that we are. We have just experimented with a...trial separation. It seems not to have gone well.” She nodded at the cave wall, where a gold-skinned humanoid dragon Integrate was curled up into a fetal position, whimpering.

“You cut him off?” Fritz said.

“Completely,” the fox said. “We want no part of that one anymore. The shock seems to have addled his wits. No great loss, if you ask me.”

“And yet you are still individuals?” Dr. Patil said.

“We’re not Borg or Cybermen, if that’s what you mean,” the fox said. “But we’re no longer separate, either. We’re all...part of each other. We feel what each other is thinking. There is no privacy among—”

“Aaah! Get out of my *head!*” It was Miss Kitty, holding her handpaws to her head. “Stop it! Stop *thinking* at me like that! I had every right! I *bought* you! I fixed you up, gave you thumbs, gave you jobs!”

“It seems some of us have an easier time of it than others,” the gold fox sighed. “Let’s see if we can fix this...” She reached out and placed a hand on Miss Kitty’s forehead. The Siamese Integrate stiffened, then relaxed.

“...oh,” she said a moment later. “I guess...I haven’t been a very good person, have I?”

The fox patted her on the shoulder. “We’ll work on that.” She turned back to Fritz. “My name is Oralie, by the way.” She turned, her ears perking up. “Oh...is that Geena?” She looked over at the feral poodle Integrate, sitting by herself and shaking. “I think we can help her.” She nodded to several of the other foxes, and they followed her over to surround the poodle. They leaned in, and their outlines blurred. A largish golden fox crouched where Geena had been for just a moment, then blurred back into individual figures—including a now-humanoid poodle girl.

Geena blinked. “I don’t know what you did, but...I...we...feel so much better now, thank you.” She looked down at herself. “What happened to us?”

“An asshole happened to you. But he’s out of the picture now,” Fritz said. “You okay, kid?” He glanced at Oralie. “You didn’t make her—”

“We didn’t link her to us, no. That’s not a decision we will *ever* force on anyone else,” Oralie said. “But we were able to fix most of the aftereffects from the clumsy Integration. We have *just a touch* of experience with that.”

“I do not understand this.” Accalia had approached in the aftermath. “If he was so many minds in one...how could you outsmart him so?”

“Having all those minds didn’t make him any smarter,” Fritz said. “Especially since he was the only one with a hotline to the body. He could think *faster*, but all the processing power in the world couldn’t make him think *thinkier*. Our brains just don’t work that way. Dumb at a million clicks an hour is still dumb.”

Geena looked down at herself, taking in the fur covering her body. She reached up to feel her new muzzle. Abruptly, the fur vanished and her muzzle dwindled, leaving her human in appearance again. Then they came back. “Oh...”

“Easy there, kid,” Fritz said. “Don’t play around too much with that. Shifting can be tricky.” He glanced at Oralie. “You *had* to make her a shifter?”

“Only in the basic forms,” the fox said. “It was the only way we knew to break her feral form lock. If she wants anything more, she’ll have to study like anybody else.”

“So she’s not gonna, like, turn herself into a clothes fabber or something?” Fritz said.

Geena blinked. "I could do that?"

"Baby steps, kid," Fritz said. "Yeesh. Shapeshifters. Uh, no offense."

Oralie smiled. "Believe me, I understand."

Another vixen made her way up. Although she was slimmed and shrunk, Fritz recognized Marion from her coloration. "Oh. Hey," he said. "Uh...sorry about this. I meant to *save* you. Instead, I got you Integrated and et. I feel like a real murgatroyd."

Marion cocked her head. "I won't say it was a pleasant experience...and I'm still coming to terms with this...fairly unpleasant human who's stuck inside my head. But on the other hand, I'm not still trapped in a dead-end slave job, and I've got dozens of people who care about me." She shrugged. "I'll deal with it, somehow."

"And speaking of 'dealing with it,'" Dr. Patil said. "You would be Marshals Duquesne and Templar?" She nodded to the Arabian mare and male coyote Integrates just behind Marion.

"Half of us would be," the mare sighed resignedly. "Part of me was Duquesne. I'm still not quite sure which part yet."

"I always knew there was a danger of getting Integrated on this job," the coyote said. "I just never expected to get Integrated and then eaten."

"*Dayum*. I'm not looking forward to writing *this* report," Duquesne said.

"On the bright side, at least we'll have plenty of help," Templar replied. "We... there's no chance you can just cut us loose, is there?" he asked Oralie.

The fox shook her head. "Not if what happened to 'Legion' is any guide."

"If you let me examine you, perhaps we could find a way," Dr. Patil suggested. "But it could take a long time."

"Looks like Bartertown just got a couple of town Marshals," Fritz said. "So what're you gonna do with the place? With Legion outta the picture, looks like you're the big boss now."

"We're...not sure," Oralie admitted. "It'll be easy enough to step into running things, since almost nobody dealt with Legion directly. But if we start closing down the worst brothels and auction houses, the slime will just run off somewhere else."

"Hey, not *all* brothels are bad, y'know," Geena pointed out. "We treat *our* people with respect."

"But we're already discussing it and sharing ideas with the rest of ourselves, in VR," Marshal Duquesne said.

"We'll have to talk to our—that is, the Marshals'—bosses," Templar said. "We'll be calling them anyway to take that one into custody." He nodded at the huddled Legion. "But we might be able to work out a way to ease into things, like AlphaWolf did for Alpha Camp."

"One way or another, we'll get it sorted," Oralie said. "But for now...excuse me a moment." She looked to the other parts of herself, and they all gathered up and merged into each other. A moment later, an immense golden fox crouched where the dragon once had. "There. The new 'us.'"

"Nice look," Fritz said. He glanced over at Geena, Dr. Patil, and Accalia. "Well, I guess we'll just be moseying on now. Don't take any wooden nickels."

"Thank you, Fritz," Oralie said, her voice deeper and more resonant with her immense size. She chuckled. "You know, not so long ago I would not have ever thought I could say those words and mean them. Non-ironically thanking the boss-cat for something."

Fritz shrugged, wincing only a little as he briefly forgot his healing arm. “Things change. Even people change, sometimes.” He added under his breath, “Hard as it is for the rest of the world to believe.”

“Well, take care of yourselves,” Oralia said.

“Thanks, toots. You take care of yourselves, too. C’mon.” He nodded to the others, and led the way back out the direction they’d been brought in. It was a larger exit than the way to Miss Kitty’s. “Well,” he said when they were out of hearing range, “that was sure...something.”

“How is your arm?” Dr. Patil asked.

Fritz held up his right hand, worked the fingers. “Still little painful just now, but it’ll be fine as frog hair in a few hours. At least I don’t have to grow it back...again. How did they get you gals, anyway?”

“They surrounded us, and blocked our communication,” Dr. Patil said. “There were a dozen of them. I had never expected so many.”

“We should see about getting some of that unjammable DINcom thing Kay’s pard came up with,” Fritz said. “When they can make it last more than five minutes at a time, anyway. Hey, are you all right, kid?”

“I...think so.” Geena was back in her human appearance. Her poodle ears drooped. “Fifi’s in here with me...and not really happy about it.”

Fritz patted her on the shoulder. “Yeah, I grok that. It sucks when you’re new sometimes. Double sucks when you get forced into it. I *always* hated that shit. Especially when I ended up doing it myself to clean up little messes.”

“You had plenty of reason to hate it, after what happened to you,” Dr. Patil said.

“I think I’m starting to get it figured out, though. Look!” Geena held up a finger. A needle rose up through her fingertip, and as she drew it out a thread was attached to it. “I’m my own sewing kit!”

Fritz facepawed. “Oralie, you’ve created a monster.”

“I am not being sure what to do now,” Accalia said. “That this place, which was my safe haven, turned out to have been run by such a monster as that ‘Legion.’ It feels like I have been living a lie.”

“A wise man once said, ‘All we have to do now is take these lies and make them true somehow,’” Fritz said.

:*That was George Michael,*: Captain Ryder supplied helpfully. :*He also said, “I want your sex.”*:

:*Can it, Jiminy.*: “So stick around. Things ought to get better.”

“I could use some more help at the shop,” Geena said. “Doing business things, I mean. Not the other stuff.”

“I might take you up on that,” Accalia said. “My poker winnings will not last forever.”

“Especially if you don’t get better at reading bluffs,” Fritz said, receiving an elbow in the gut for his trouble. “Oof! Hey, aren’t you supposed to be fettered against hitting me?”

Accalia smirked. “Elbows don’t count.”

All in all, Fritz guessed, it wasn’t too bad for a day’s work. Disappearances solved and stopped, new friends made, and a notorious hive of scum and villainy set on the road to cleaning up its act. He still felt bad about the forced Integrations he hadn’t been able to prevent, and knew he’d probably be beating himself up about them for some

time. But people were dealing, and it wouldn't be happening again. He supposed that was all you could really ask when you got right down to it.

*:Cleaning up the world, one hellhole at a time,:* Ryder sent cheerfully. *:Well, that's one hellhole down, anyway.:*

*:Yeah,:* Fritz thought. *:Now if we could just get people to stop making new ones, we might be getting somewhere.:*

The cave ended in a cunningly-concealed door, which let them out on the outskirts of town. "This way to Aunt Aeri's!" Geena said, skipping ahead. Fritz chuckled, and he and the others followed her out into the night.

**THE END**