

Head Over Heels

By Robotech_Master, with JonBuck

Uplift
Horne Street Apartments
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Clara stepped in the door of her apartment and stood aside for the grey wolf Lubyanka to follow her in before shutting it. “Whew...long day, eh?”

“It has had its compensations.” Lubyanka padded into the next room to settle into the RIDE charger.

“Good to be home. For some value of home.” Clara headed to the kitchenette. She’d picked up a mini-fab for the room just so she didn’t have to go down to the end of the hall when she felt like a snack, and it was just as good for making a light supper. As she carried it to “Lerhamn,” the small flat-pack kitchen table she’d fabbed a few days before, she thought back on the events of the last couple of weeks.

The arrival had been about as whirlwind as it could have been, but once they’d gotten settled, things had sort of fallen into place. The afternoon after they’d awoken and gotten their apartments, Joe Steader had contacted them with all with a job offer: a position as assistant archivists. It was effectively a paid internship, providing them with enough to live on until and unless they found something better, but more importantly it came with unlimited free access to the vast Steader Archives, and the sort of time to explore them in depth that most tourists just didn’t have.

They’d taken it for a sinecure at first, and perhaps it had been meant that way, but after just a little time browsing the cyber-stacks, they came to realize that there was a lot more *stuff* there than they’d ever seen, and they might be able to do something useful with it. Tom hit on the idea of curating a package of media specifically for furry fan tourists, so they wouldn’t have to spend so much of their short Zharus trips searching the stacks themselves, and the others had enthusiastically thrown themselves into the project.

So, there was that. It had actually been pretty fun, poking through the stacks with various furry-related keywords and turning up obscure gems they’d never heard of. A search on “Hello Kitty” led to Sanrio, which in turn led to *Aggretsuko*, an aggressively cute animated series about a red panda salarywoman in Japan who liked to sing death metal karaoke. It seemed like they spent half their time searching and half their time watching, but Joe had said that was fine; research took time, after all.

Joe, Julius, and Quinoa had disappeared the day after they’d woken up—apparently Clara and friends’ arrival had been just before they had to head out to Wednesday to take care of some sort of family business. Joe had been cagey about exactly what, but said he’d be back in a couple of months and would be looking forward to seeing what they’d turned up. So, yay them, turned loose on the galaxy’s biggest retro media library with no keepers and nothing but time on their hands.

That part of it had been fine. But one thing Clara hadn’t really expected was how hard it was working in close proximity to Tom. Now that she knew it was “all right” to fall for him, according to Quinoa, she couldn’t help noticing how handsome he actually *was*. It wasn’t anything she’d really been concerned about when she’d been Clark—he hadn’t been jealous of Tom’s ruggedly good looks or anything. But there was no denying he *did* have them. Even the tiger nose, which really should have looked kind of silly, somehow just added to the gestalt with him.

But the thing was, she just couldn’t bring herself to *do* anything about it. She’d

considered more than once asking him to have dinner with her, but when it came time to step up and open her mouth...*nothing*. She was just too self-conscious. The funny thing was, there were also times when it looked like *Tom* wanted to step up and ask her something, but he always found some excuse to break it off at the last second.

Just a regular pair of idiots we are, Clara sighed inwardly as she nibbled on a roast beef sandwich. *Oh well. Guess we'll work it out somehow, sooner or later.*

On the other hand, for some, it was an easier transition.

Kim and Tim had actually *gotten engaged*, not two days after they'd arrived. Just a few days later, they had "moved in together" simply by requesting that the wall separating their apartments be removed. It turned out that there was almost nothing simpler; the way the building had been put together, it was just a matter of opening a slot in the outer wall and just sliding the wall between the apartments out like a big postcard. (Presumably they'd shove it in a warehouse somewhere, against the next time it might be needed.) Kim had even made a few pointed comments to Clara that something similar would be possible for her and Tom, wink wink nudge nudge say no more.

It was the weirdest thing, but after the awkwardness of getting used to their new parts was out of the way, the gender-swap seemed to have brought Kim and Tim even closer together—and it wasn't just the fact of the engagement. They were always seated next to each other, and there was a lot of touching going on. Kim had even floated the idea of having a baby. It seemed just a little premature to Clara's way of thinking—they didn't even know for sure what their long-term situation was going to *be* yet—but Tim seemed to be at least okay with the idea. Well, whatever.

Of course, they hadn't been able to spend *all* their time settling into the new job. After they'd been around for a couple of days, the System Security Agency had flown agents over to spend three days quizzing them about their background, how they'd gotten there, what they might or might not have seen, and so on. They took copies of the RIDEs' memories, promising to review them under the new evidentiary protocols that involved another RIDE or Integrate curating the relevant portions of them, deleting the rest, and then deleting their own memories of *seeing* the rest. After pumping them all dry, they'd left with a "don't call us, we'll call you" by way of farewell. So, yeah, *that* had happened.

Clara sighed and recycled her dishes, then headed in to shower. She'd stayed late after work, so tomorrow was going to come sooner than she wanted even given a 30-hour day. "Crashing out now!" she called to the next room. "See ya tomorrow!"

"Pleasant dreams!" Lubyanka called back.

"What does *God* want with a starship?"

Tom groaned, leaning back in the crook of a curled-up tiger, and threw a piece of popcorn at the media wall on which William Shatner and his bad toupee were currently pontificating. "Gee, I dunno, Kirk, maybe he's going into missionary work."

Tom kept his apartment sparsely furnished. He found he didn't need much beyond the basic necessities, and it was nice and comfortable lying on a rug against a comfy tiger as he watched vids or whatever. He didn't even have a bed, because he enjoyed sleeping Fused as long as Hobbes didn't mind. Really, all that *stuff* was just a distraction and made it harder to keep the apartment clean. The truly important stuff was all digital.

He'd been enjoying the last couple of weeks quite a lot, apart from the exhaustive interrogation. He'd enjoyed dipping his toe in the Steader Archive as a tourist, but now he had the chance to dive right in and he couldn't be happier.

Well, except...what was the deal with Clara? It was like he and she were always trying to talk to each other, but they kept forgetting what they'd wanted to say. In the end, they'd concentrated on work, which was just as well.

The thing was...Clara *was* pretty hot. He'd first noticed that when she'd shown up at F3 changed, and Lubyanka had slid her helmet off revealing her face. She'd still looked like Clark, somewhat, but the features were softened enough to be cute, and the wolf ears had been a nice accent. And various little mannerisms that Tom hadn't even noticed before from the male Clark were suddenly endearing on the female Clara.

And his mind just kept returning to those kisses...

Ugh...maybe I need a cold shower. As the credits rolled, Tom yawned. "I guess this is enough movie-watching for one night."

"Ready for bed?" Hobbes asked.

"Sure am, ol' pal." He stood and held out his arms, then closed his eyes as Hobbes Fused over him. "G'night."

Hobbes purred, the rumble sending Tom off to dreamland. "Sleep well."

Clara opened her eyes to find herself in a clearing in the middle of what looked like an old growth forest. She was wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and comfortable shoes, and from the position of the sun in the sky it seemed to be mid-afternoon. This was odd, given that the last thing she remembered was going to bed, and she didn't *usually* dream lucidly.

She looked around. She seemed to be alone in the clearing. "Luby? Are you there?"

There was no answer.

"Huh." Clara looked around and started walking. There seemed to be a trail at one end of the clearing. "Wonder where I am...and how I got here."

It wasn't unpleasant weather for hiking, at least. The temperature was cool, and it wasn't too humid. It felt like a crisp late summer/early fall day, and the woods could easily have been the Mark Twain National Forest from Missouri where she'd grown up. The trail wound through the trees, to one clearing and then another, then down a hill. Clara remembered hearing somewhere that there were usually creeks at the bottoms of hills, and this seemed to be no exception. She came around a corner to see a creek about a dozen yards wide—and someone else standing on the bank. Someone with a tail, and tiger ears...

"Uh...hello?" Clara said.

Tom turned, blinking, ears cocking forward. It seemed he'd been skimming stones—he was still holding one in his hand. "Clara? What're you doing in my dream?"

Clara stared at him. "Your dream? What are *you* doing in *my* dream?"

Tom dropped the rock. "Uh...that's a *very* good question. Hobbes?" He waited for a response. "Hobbes?" he called again, louder. "Well, that's weird."

"What's weird? Why *are* we dreaming the same dream?" Clara asked.

"Well...this isn't *actually* a dream—I think," Tom said. "It feels like when I Fuse-sleep with Hobbes, and he links his VR environment into my REM sleep. It's kind of fun to play around in VR while my body dozes."

“But *I* wasn’t Fused when I went to bed,” Clara said.

Tom chuckled. “How much you wanna bet you are *now*?”

“Luby?” Clara called. “*Lubyanka*?!”

Tom grinned. “I don’t think they’re going to answer us.”

Clara turned on him. “Why’s that? And what’s so doggone *funny* about this?”

When I get my hands on her, there’s gonna be a brand new wolfskin rug in my living room.

Tom laughed. “I think...this is an intervention.”

“A *what*?”

“Unless I miss my guess, I think our RIDEs have gotten tired of all the unresolved sexual tension, and have stuck us in here to try to force us to work it out.”

Clara blinked. “What sexual tension? I haven’t noticed any sexual tension.”

“I think that’s because we’ve both been swimming in it.” Tom shook his head.

“Both of us too darned scared to say anything about it to each other.” He waved a hand at the scenery. “So here we are, where we don’t have any choice *but* to talk to each other.”

Clara thought about that. It *was* true, she’d had a hard time figuring out what to say when Tom was around...but she didn’t seem to have that problem now. “I guess that’s something. So how do we get out?”

Tom shrugged. “If nothing else, I guess we’ll wake up in a few hours. Our meat minds can’t really do fast-time the way RIDEs do. Until then, I guess...we have plenty of time to talk.”

Clara pursed her lips. “That’s nice and all, but I’m not so sure I like getting yanked around like this. Maybe I’ll just go explore the other way.” She turned around and started to return up the pathway...when she heard a low growling ahead of her, and four large grey wolves stepped out of the shadows, teeth bared in a snarl.

Clara blinked. “Lubyanka? Is that you? *Luby*?”

The wolves slowly advanced, still snarling.

Tom put an arm on Clara’s shoulder. “Uh...I think maybe we better go the *other* way.”

Clara shook Tom’s arm off. “Lubyanka, I’ve had just about enough of this. Stop this craziness *right now*.” There was no response—just four growling wolves inching closer. She glanced at Tom. “Lubyanka wouldn’t *hurt* me...would she?”

“Uh...well, the thing is, I’ve been doing some research into RIDEs, and...” Tom swallowed. “There’s this thing they do...among themselves...called Nature Range, where they actually simulate hunting and killing, and being hunted and killed by, each other.”

Clara blinked. “They *what*?”

“So, uh, these wolves might *just* be willing to kill you,” Tom said. “You’d, um, respawn again afterward...probably...but it’d still hurt.”

Then a pair of tigers paced out of the shadows, behind the wolves...also growling, and looking meaningfully at the pair of them.

“Oh, great, so *Hobbes* must be in on this, too,” Clara grumbled. “We are so gonna have words about this...”

Tom took Clara’s hand. “I think that maybe running the hell away would *probably* be the better part of valor right now.” He tugged her toward the creek.

“But...we’d respawn, right?” Clara said.

“Do you *really* want to find out? C’mon!”

Tom glanced over his shoulder as he pulled Clara along to the creek bank. Fortunately (or by design), there was a series of stones in the shallow water perfectly placed to use as stepping stones to get across the creek. The trail continued on the other side of it.

The wolves and tigers approached the creek, and lowered their muzzles to drink. But then they looked up and across at them, and one wolf dipped its paw in the water.

Clara swallowed. "Are they going to...come after us, you think?"

Tom shrugged. "How should I know? But maybe it'd be safest if we stuck together."

"I hardly think two of us will be any more of a threat to them than one of us."

"Yeah, but...they only showed up when you started to walk away. Maybe they just want us to stay together."

"And by 'they' you mean...Lubyanka and Hobbes?" Clara said.

Tom shrugged. "It's as good a theory as any."

Clara rolled her eyes. "*Wolfskin. Rug.* So help me..."

Tom held his peace, but privately he was more than a little amused. If nothing else, it *was* at least an effective way of forcing them to spend enough time together to get over their awkwardness. *I'm going to have to thank those two when we get out of this. And maybe she will, too.*

"Come on, maybe if we put some distance between us and them it'll make it harder for them to find us. Or something." He led the way up the trail, which wound between more trees and headed up an embankment.

"But...they'll be able to smell us, won't they?"

"We're in our RIDEs' VR, so they're the ones who set the rules," Tom said. "But I *think* they'll probably be satisfied if we stick together."

One of the wolves padded into the water, and another started hopping from stone to stone. One of the tigers dipped his paw in the creek, then licked it thoughtfully.

"Yeah, well, let's not hang around to find out." Clara brushed past Tom, heading up the trail. Tom shook his head bemusedly and followed her.

After a ways, the embankment steepened. Tom frowned, looking up at it. "I think we're going to have to climb."

"Well, that's good, right?" Clara said. "I mean, wolves don't climb. So maybe we'll be safe."

Unless they just create more wolves at the top. "Uh, yeah, maybe. So, you want to go first, or me?"

"I'll do it." Clara placed her foot on an outcropping of stone, reached for another, and started to climb.

Tom stood there for a moment, watching her form with more than academic interest. Then he shook his head, grinning, and clambered up after her.

The embankment went up about fifty feet, then flattened out. At the top, she reached down to give him a hand up, and they flopped down, breathing hard.

Below them, the four wolves trotted up to the base of the embankment, and a couple of them put their paws on one of the rocky outcrops. Then they stared up at the two of them as if to say "Later for you," then turned and loped off.

"Well, that was certainly...ominous," Tom said. "But I guess we're safe for the

moment. Thanks for the hand.”

“No problem.” Clara sighed, and leaned back against a tree, breathing hard. “Whew...that took it out of me. *How* did that take it out of me if this is just VR?”

“It’s the full neural connection,” Tom said. “Lets them *simulate* it taking it out of you.” He sat back against the tree across from her. “They do the same thing in some VL rulesets back on Earth.”

“Ah. I wouldn’t know, I was never in it that much.”

For just a moment, they were content to lie there and catch their breath. Then Clara noticed where Tom’s eyes were looking. “Hey! Eyes up here, bud.”

“Sorry—sorry.” Tom raised his hands. “I just...you...I...” He swallowed. “First off, I want to say I’m sorry, about what I said back on Earth.”

Clara blinked. “Who the what now? What you said?”

“When I said you weren’t a very good kisser. I was just...I dunno, trying to distance myself, I guess. The truth is, you were a *great* kisser, and I was just a little weirded out over it. Still am, I guess.”

Clara sniffed. “Not that that’s keeping you from enjoying the view.”

“I know! I know, that’s what’s weird. And I think it’s probably weird for you, too, as I’m pretty sure I’ve also caught you sneaking peeks.”

“No way!” Clara insisted hotly. But even as she did so, she knew she was protesting too much. There was just no denying that *something* in her found him just as attractive as he apparently found her. Times like this was when she envied Kim and Tim and the ease they’d adapted to their new bodies and lives.

“Anyway...I guess what I’m trying to say is...I *am* attracted to you, darn it. And I like you. Already did like you, even before, just never liked you in...well, *that* way. But...I guess I do now, and...if you *do* feel the same way, well...I wouldn’t have any problem with that.” His face flushed, and he looked down.

Clara swallowed. There it was, right out in the open like that. Funny how putting it that way just made it all sound so...well, *simple*. As if there was nothing more to it than two people being attracted to one another, without any awkward baggage from their previous lives to get over. *But then, if you listen to Quinoa, it is exactly that simple. I wish I was better at listening to Quinoa.*

“Well...” she tried. “...I guess I don’t have any *problems* with you, uh, liking me like that. And maybe I, uh, kinda feel the same way, a teeny little bit. Uh...”

A wolf howled in the distance. Clara swallowed. “Uh...is it just me, or did that sound come from...upstream, I guess?”

Tom got to his feet. “They might have found somewhere else to cross the creek, with a less steep slope. Maybe we better get moving.”

“They’re not *really* going to...I mean...are they?” Clara asked.

“I’d just as soon not find out,” Tom said. “Come on.”

Tom led the way up the trail—mainly so he could face away from Clara until his face got a bit less red, he hoped. The kind of confessions he’d just made weren’t the sort of thing he said easily. *That’s the whole, problem, really. Probably why we’re here in the first place.* But at least she hadn’t outright rejected him, so that was something.

The hill sloped gently upward, toward what looked like a mountain ahead. It looked like the forest was thinning out, and the forest loam was fading to something more gravelly. “How much farther are we going to have to go, anyway?” Clara asked.

“Who knows? We just need to keep ahead of the wolves.”

“You’ve never been in here before? I thought you spent time in Hobbes’s VR?”

“Hobbes is from Africa. You know, jungles and savanna and stuff. This is wolf country.” The forest ended, and the ground ahead was limestone chert gravel. About a half-mile away, the ground rose in chalky limestone cliffs, with more forest vegetation on top. “Take it easy here. Unsteady footing.”

“Ugh. Maybe we should look for another path?”

The wolf howls sounded again, closer this time. Tom shook his head. “I don’t think we’ve got that kind of time.”

They carefully started picking their way across the gravel. Tom glanced behind him at Clara, who was trying to step carefully. They’d gotten about halfway across when Tom caught movement out of the corner of his eyes. “Uh-oh. Don’t look now, but I think we’ve got company.” He nodded toward the movement, where the pair of tigers had prowled out of the forest, in the opposite direction to the wolves’ howls. They seemed to be taking their time, picking their way carefully over the stony ground.

Clara rolled her eyes. “Oh, great. That’s all we—”

AROOOOO!!! The howls sounded again, closer than ever. Clara yelped and went down.

He was at her side before he knew it. “Clara! Are you all right?”

“Startled me...twisted my ankle.”

Tom helped Clara back to her feet, as the four wolves prowled into view from the other direction. “C’mon, it’s just a little farther to those cliffs...”

Clara tried putting her weight on her left ankle, and yelped. “I can’t walk on that...”

Tom moved around to her left side. “Lean on me, and come on...”

“I’m just going to slow you down. You’d better...leave me. Get to safety. Maybe I can throw rocks at ‘em or something.”

Tom shook his head. “I’m not gonna leave you. They’ll kill you!”

“Didn’t you just say I’d probably respawn? Maybe I’ll respawn without this sprained ankle.”

“I think we’ve got time. Look, they’re not having it much easier on this ground than we are. The more time you waste arguing, the less time we have to get out of here.”

Clara sighed, and leaned against Tom. Together they hobbled toward the cliffs, and Tom tried, he tried *very hard*, to ignore how nice it felt to have his arm around Clara and feel the warmth of her body next to his. They worked their way slowly across the broken ground, as Tom was aware of the approaching the wolves out of the corner of one eye, and the tigers out of the other.

As they reached the other edge, Clara pointed. “Look...I think there’s a cave there. Maybe we can block the entrance or build a fire or something.”

“I guess we’re not going much further like this anyway.” Tom made for the opening in the rock wall.

The passage went back about twenty feet, then around a bend. As they entered, they could see reflected firelight dancing on the wall.

“Hold up...my ankle doesn’t hurt anymore.” Clara put her weight on it experimentally. “All right...shall we see what’s there?”

Tom glanced behind them, at the furry forms peering into the cave entrance. “Well, we’re not getting back out that way. Come on.” He led the way around the bend in

the cave, and stopped. A moment later, he felt Clara come up beside him. “Well.”

Clara rolled her eyes. “I *think* we’ve been set up.”

The cave debarked into...a very cozy bedroom. A luxurious queen-sized bed sat across from the fire crackling merrily in a fireplace along one wall. A couple of overstuffed easy chairs sat in front of the fire.

“The honeymoon suite, no doubt.” Tom looked around. “Well, there’s not any other way out.”

Clara looked back, at where the firelight reflected in the eyes of wolves and tigers in the passage. They had settled down, watching them but making no further move to approach. “Hey, what a lucky break! I guess the wild animals are scared of the fire. Imagine that.”

She moved into the bedroom and sat down on the bed. As expected, it was extremely comfortable. Goose down, probably, or some reasonable facsimile thereof, with silk sheets on top. *I guess they spared no simulated expense.* She laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Tom asked, leaning down to peer at the fire.

“Oh, just the whole thing.” Clara waved a hand at the cave passage. “Them. This. It’s ridiculous. Like some kind of shaggy dog story, and this is the punchline.” She considered. “Shaggy *wolf* story. I’m supposed to just...hop into bed with you?”

Tom shrugged. “Don’t ask *me*. I’m not the one who set all this up.” He chuckled. “But you kind of have to admire their, ah, *straightforward* approach.”

“So, is that it, guys? You did all this just to get us into each others’ shorts?” Clara shook her head. “Cute, guys, but I’m not playing. We’ll decide on that in our *own* time. So why don’t you lot just bugger off, okay?”

The wolves and tigers didn’t seem notably impressed. In fact, they seemed to be curling up and dozing off...though doing so in such a way that they still completely blocked the cave passage out.

“At least this seems like a comfortable spot in which to wait out the sunrise,” Tom said, settling into one of the chairs.

“Yeah...” Clara said slowly. She glanced over at him. “So...uh...”

Tom glanced over at her. “Hmm?”

“I’m just curious why you’re not...y’know, saying anything suggestive. Like how it’d be a shame to waste this perfectly good bed and stuff.”

Tom blinked. “Why would I? I’m not some kind of a pick-up artist. If you ever want to do that, it should be *your* decision.”

“Oh.” Clara came over and sat down in the other easy chair. “Yeah. Sorry, I didn’t mean to suggest you were. It’s just...a weird situation, I guess.” And she wasn’t even sure whether or not she felt disappointed.

“It is.” Tom chuckled. “I remember when we were working together back in the cubes. You certainly weren’t the sort of person I’d ever have expected to be, well, *here* with.”

“Yeah.” Clara nodded. “But a whole *lot* of stuff we’d never have expected has happened lately.”

Tom nodded. “Boy, has it ever.”

“So what do you think about your...sister, and her boyfriend?” Clara asked. “Man, it still sounds so weird to say it like that. But the first thing *they* did on crossing was go back to their hotel room and get it on, and seems like they’ve hardly slowed down

since.”

“True. But they were in a relationship already.”

“Uh-huh.” Clara glanced over at him, and considered. The question that came to her didn’t exactly seem *safe*. But after the last couple of hours, she was starting to have a hard time remembering why it had been so hard to ask. “Tom? Would you *like* to be in a relationship?”

Tom gawked at her. “Would I...*what?*”

“Well, it just seems that we’ve both been spending so much time beating ourselves up over how we *could* be attracted to our ex-same-sex-best-friend, it’s kind of distracted us from the fact that...well, we *are*.” Clara smiled faintly. “And you seem like an all-around decent guy. You wouldn’t leave me behind even when you knew I’d *probably* be okay. And you didn’t try to force anything even when we ended up...well, in this *virtual love nest*.”

“Like I said, I’m just not the kind of guy who’d do that.” He considered. “But are you saying that...you *do* want to do that?”

“I’m saying...well...maybe we *should* give it a try.” Clara smiled tentatively at Tom, and when he looked at her she became aware of funny feelings in the pit of her stomach, and...lower down. *Oh, is this what that feels like as a woman?* “Uh...I mean, if you want to...” she finished lamely.

“If you’re sure...” Tom said. “...then...well...I guess there’s nothing I want more.”

Clara’s smile broadened, as the feelings seemed to expand to fill her from head to toe. “Then...come here and let’s see if I’m really as good a kisser as you think.” She glanced over her shoulder at the bed. “And then...well, we’ll see what happens.”

*Something happens and I'm head over heels
I never find out till I'm head over heels
Something happens and I'm head over heels
Ah, don't take my heart, don't break my heart
Don't, don't, don't throw it away*

The music playing through her apartment speaker brought Clara slowly back to wakefulness. She opened her eyes to find herself lying in her own bed, the sheets disheveled as if she’d tossed and turned all night. *Or been Fused out of and back into my bed...?*

Had it all just been a dream, brought on by working too hard? But then, *could* you dream an experience you hadn’t ever had before? What had happened following all the kissing and caressing had been...different than anything she’d ever done, including the times she’d been on the male side. She felt...*fulfilled*, somehow. *If that’s how it feels in VR, how might it feel in the real?*

She yawned, stretched, and clambered to her feet. “Luby?”

The grey wolf poked her head in from the RIDE charging room. “Good morning, Clara. Did you have a pleasant rest?”

“Uh...you *could* say that. Did you...”

Lubyanka cocked her head, ears perked forward. “Did I what?”

“Uh...” Clara considered. *Did* she want to spoil how good she felt right now by potentially getting into an argument? “You know what? Never mind. Just...never mind.”

She pulled on some sweatpants and a blouse, then went out into the hall and

down to room 635. She lifted a hand to knock on the door, paused, then thought better of it. She was just turning to go back to her room when the door opened anyway and there Tom stood. He was fully-dressed in jeans and T-shirt, but then he probably had been when he Fused for bed the night before too. “Clara?”

“Tom.” Clara opened her mouth, then closed it again. Did she even want to ask? What if last night *had* just been a dream? Or worse, what if it *hadn't*? “I...uh...” She sighed.

But Tom smiled at her. “I know what you’re afraid to ask. So...yes. It *did* happen. At least, if you *also* dreamed about the forest, and the creek, and the wolves and tiger, and the cave, and me...”

Clara felt her face heat. “Then...we really did...”

And she saw Tom’s own face flush, too. “We...really did,” he said. “How do...how do you feel about that?”

How *did* she feel? Clara considered that for a moment. All the days of agonizing over whether what she felt was right, and what to do about it. Then the events of the night before...and the ending...

How *did* she feel, after the weeks of indecision and then that virtual assignation? Well, there was only one answer to that. “Let me demonstrate.” She put her arms around him and gave him a good, long, slow kiss. “Mmm.”

“Mmm,” Tom said in return as it ended, putting his own arms around her. “Uh...then where do we go from here?”

“Well, we’re probably *not* going to have the wall between our apartments removed yet, if that’s what you’re asking,” Clara said. “We can take our time and ease into things. But now that we’ve broken the ice, at least we know there *is* something to ease into.”

“I...don’t have any objections to that,” Tom said. “At all.”

“Good.” Clara smiled. “I’m going to look forward to finding out where this goes.” She paused. “Speaking of going places, how about we go out for breakfast? I hear Bea’s is running a special today.”

“Sounds good to me. Riding or walking?”

“It’s a lovely day out. We should just take our time about it. I’m sure our RIDEs have better things to do.” *Like congratulate themselves on how well their little scheme worked*, Clara thought darkly. *But...considering the outcome, I guess I really can’t complain*. She offered Tom her arm. “Shall we?”

Tom took it. “Sounds like a plan.” They walked down to the elevator arm in arm—while out of their apartment doors, a wolf and tiger watched with nearly identical distinctly smug expressions on their faces.

THE END