

Immigrant Song

By Robotech_Master, with Jon Buck

January 27, 158 A.L.

The first thing she was aware of was...music. A driving drum and guitar beat, and someone's nasal voice singing wordlessly. Then there were lyrics.

*We come from the land of the ice and snow
From the midnight sun, where the hot springs flow
The hammer of the gods
We'll drive our ships to new lands
To fight the horde, and sing and cry
Valhalla, I am coming!*

*On we sweep with threshing oar
Our only goal will be the western shore*

It was a strange sound to wake to, but something about the music seemed to sink into her bones. And if nothing else, it was hard to *want* to sleep with all that racket going on.

Clara opened her eyes. She seemed to be lying on her back, in a comfortable bed, with heavy blankets. Her arms were out from under the blankets, and an IV drip was taped to her right one. Turning her head, she saw she shared the room with three other beds, each with a person in it with their own IV drip. To her left was Tom, whose brown hair contrasted with his tiger ears and nose. To her right, Tim (*nee* Tina), with darker brown hair and radar-dish-like serval ears. To his right, Kim (*nee* Kip), blonde with fox ears, and a mountainous shape in the blanket on her chest.

Clara rubbed her eyes and sat up, as the singer went on about green fields and gore and overlords and stuff. "Wha...?"

"You're awake!" At the foot of Clara's bed, a huge wolf poked her head up. Clara recalled she owed the wolf ears on her own head to this being. *Lubyanka...*

Memories were starting to come back. Memories of being a man named Clark Mitchell, back in Springfield, Missouri, on Earth, before this mysterious she-wolf appeared and abruptly Fused him, turning *him*

irrevocably into a *her*. *Irrevocably for three years, anyway. Which I've probably still got all of ahead of me...*

There had been the time spent at the F3 furry convention, meeting a mysterious Integrate named Harriet, the rescue of the other three RIDEs who had claimed (and changed) his friends...the mad flight to Kansas City, and then being packed cryogenically into a storage crate to escape from Earth.

“When you wake up, you’ll be on Zharus,” Harriet had promised.

Well, she was awake. “Did...did it work? Are we...?” Now that she could focus better, she could see that the other RIDEs were also waiting at the feet of their partners’ beds. Hobbes the tiger, Quentin the serval, and Madeira the foxy fox...all waiting anxiously and watching over her friends, who were also all beginning to stir.

*So now you’d better stop and rebuild all your ruins
For peace and trust can win the day despite of all your losing*

“Uh...wha?” Tom said from the bed next to her, as the song faded with more nasal vocalizing.

“This is your wake-up call,” Lubyanka said. “Immigrant Song” seemed appropriate...since you are, now, immigrants. Welcome to Zharus, everybody.”

“Nnngh...” Tim murmured. “Five more minutes, Mom...”

Kim yawned. “Ugh...feels like I’ve slept for a *year*.”

“Well, guess fuckin’ what?” This new voice came from the door at the end of the room, and all four of the humans glanced up to see a yellow-orange, black-rosetted jaguar poking his head into the room. “You sorta kinda fuckin’ did. Anywho, wakie wakie an’ smell the fuckin’ durian!” The jaguar sneezed. “Fuckin’ durian,” he grumbled.

“Who the what now?” Clara said.

“Everyone, this is Julius, one of our benefactors,” Lubyanka said. “We’re in his home right now.”

“Well, his and mine.” The somewhat heavysset man who walked in next to the jaguar appeared of that indeterminate age that bespoke anti-agathic nanite treatments, but was at least in his fifties. He was clean-

shaven, with brown eyes, dark hair streaked in a couple of places with grey, and jaguar ears and tail matching the RIDE next to him. His hands were in the pockets of a grey serge business suit. “Hey, everyone, and good morning. I’m Joe Steader. Welcome to my world.”

The jaguar sneezed. “World of fucking *durian*.”

Joe chuckled. “Well, no, they *came* from the world of durian. This is the world that didn’t *have* any durian, until my cousin—or, at least, the Integrate who is apparently partly my cousin—sent them, and it, my way.”

“And the sooner it fucking doesn’t have any fucking durian *again*, the fucking better.”

Clara rubbed her eyes, trying to make out what was going on.

“Durian? What? Who?”

“Come on down to breakfast. I’ll explain the whole thing.”

When they pushed back the blankets, Clara noticed they were all still wearing the clothes they’d been frozen in, and they seemed none the worse for wear, so that at least saved some time on getting dressed. They followed Joe and Julius through the door, and into a hallway that led to a set of stairs down, with a polished walnut banister.

The dining room downstairs had a decent-sized table that looked to seat about eight, though it was just set with six places at the moment. “Thought you’d like to serve yourselves; the food fabber’s in here.” Joe led the way to the kitchen, where a box about the size of a largish microwave oven awaited. “I’ve also got some durian fruit, if you’d like to try it.”

“No!” Julius said. “Fuckin’ no. They are *not* fuckin’ stinking up this fuckin’ house again.”

“I just thought it seemed appropriate...”

“You eat that shit in the back yard, *not* in here where my it can offend my fuckin’ delicate nose.”

“But Julius, you can turn your nose *off*...”

“Why the fuck I gotta do that? *I* don’t eat fuckin’ durian fruit.”

The fabber was a good deal smaller than a unit this capable would have been on Earth, and its menu was extensive. Clara ordered up some fried eggs, rare steak, and hash browns, and was surprised by how well they came out. The others put in their own orders, one by one, and brought their

food back out to the table. There was still an empty place. “Who’s that for?” Tom asked.

“My niece might be joining us,” Joe said. “If she gets in from Camelot in time. She’s been out liaising. We’re kind of busy these days, for reasons that don’t have anything to do with you. Might go into that later.”

“So this really is Zharus?” Tim said. “Doesn’t seem all that different from Earth...”

“Look out there.” Quentin nodded to one of the windows along one wall of the room. “See the sky?”

Tim blinked. “Kind of, but what’s that kind of shimmering thing in the way?”

“That’s a hardlight climate dome,” Tom said. “We must be in Uplift. I was here last time I was on Zharus.” He grinned. “Wow. I can’t believe it! We’re *really here!*”

“So, we made it, then,” Clara said, peering out the window. “How long were we asleep?”

“Little over a year,” Joe said. “The trip is shorter for live passengers, but cargo isn’t usually in a hurry.”

“Your name is Steader. Like Harold Steader—Harriet-slash-Cheetara?” Clara asked.

“Yep. Please, just call me Joe—though if you hear me talked about in public, you’ll probably hear ‘Crazy’ tacked on to the front, because that’s sort of my reputation. And again, this is my q-bro, Julius.”

“Crazy Joe Steader?” Tim said. “Sounds like a used skimmer salesman.”

“It fuckin’ does, don’t it?” Julius said. “Come on down to Kee-*RAZY* Joe Steader’s, where you’ll find the best fuckin’ deals! ‘Cuz he’s *crazy!*”

Tom blinked. “Wow, really? She sent us to you? Crazy Joe? I read a lot about you while I was here the last time. Never thought I’d get to meet you. You actually came to Earth a few decades back, dug up a whole bunch of old media, and licensed it and took it back home with you.” He chuckled. “And ever since then, every furry who’s visited here has downloaded and brought back bunches of old movies and artwork and stuff and shared them on the furry forums. Disney’s *Robin Hood*, *Talespin*, *Zootopia*, *The Secret of NIMH*, *Cats Don’t Dance*, and so on. Kind of ironic, we have to come all

the way to Zharus to buy our own ancient popular culture back.”

“I *did* give Earth’s government copies of everything I dug up, *and* I’ve sent them copies of everything I’ve ever unlocked since then,” Joe said.

“That was one of the terms of the licensing arrangement. If you want to blame someone for not making it public, blame them.”

“Oh, I *do*, I *do*,” Tom said. “Didn’t mean to sound like I was blaming you for it. It’s just ironic, is all.”

Joe nodded. “Anyway, you’re back again, and this time it looks like it’s for the long haul. I’m sorry to hear about that, by the way. It can’t be easy losing your home like that.”

“It’s been a bit of a shock,” Clara admitted. “My home, my family...not to mention my *gender*.” She rolled her eyes. “But I guess we’ll get by.”

“Especially since you got fuckin’ dropped right in the lap of one a’ the richest fuckers on Zharus,” Julius said. “She didn’t exactly kick you out on the street.”

“Go on and eat up,” Joe said. “And tell me about yourselves. Your partners already told me about how you met.”

“How they *kidnapped* us, you mean,” Kim grumbled. “*And* gave most of us different body parts.”

“Hey, don’t blame *them* for that,” Tim said. “That was on *me*. Well, except for in Clara’s case, there.”

“I have already apologized,” Lubyanka said. “But I would do it again, if I had to. The end *did* justify the means.”

“It’s okay, Luby, I’m *mostly* over that by now.” Clara sighed. “At least if it *had* to happen, I got a free trip to Zharus out of it.”

“Yeah,” Tim said. “Really, I’d have given up a lot more than this to get to come here.”

Kim sighed. “I...guess you’re right. If you’d asked me, before, whether I’d swap sexes to get to come here...I’d probably have said yes. That was before actually *doing* it and *knowing what it’s like*, of course. And I’d have been an idiot to do it. But...after hearing all the stuff Tom had said about it, if someone actually had approached me and offered a free trip as a *quid pro quo*...dammit, I’d *absolutely* have said yes.”

“I’ve said *I* was sorry, too,” Madeira said. “For the change, and for the...things my BBV programming made it do to your body.”

“I know, Maddy.” Kim sighed. “And I don’t blame *you* for it either, I guess. You can only do what you were made to do. Wouldn’t mind getting it *tweaked* a little, though.” She placed an arm below her breasts and lifted them, with a sigh. “Really, these things are *totally* pneumatic.”

“I know someone who might be able to help you with that,” Joe said. “We can drop by their place later, if you like.”

“I think I *would* like,” Kim said. “I would like that very much.”

“But we’re getting kind of sidetracked,” Tom said. “Joe asked us to tell him about ourselves. We might as well, I guess.”

“We’re a bunch of furry weirdos from Missouri,” Kim said.

“Tom and I worked in home theater tech support for a call center in Springfield,” Clara said. “Back when my name was Clark. And Kim was Tom’s brother Kip, Tim was his girlfriend, Tina. This was before we... changed pronouns and stuff.”

“We’re used to pronouns getting messy around here. Go on.” Joe motioned for her to continue.

“I guess it *really* started when I posted some kind of fetishy fiction pseudonymously to some FVL mesh sites—that’s Furry Virtual Life...” Clara said.

“We kind of have our own subsection of VL,” Kim said. “We’re just *that* weird.”

Clara nodded. “Anyway, that fiction ended up drawing Luby’s attention to me when she was looking for an ‘in’ to the furry community as a hiding place...”

During the telling, a reddish furry-feathery girl slipped in, and slid into the empty place at the table. The sphinx smiled and waved at the others, but stayed quiet and nodded to Clara to continue, clearly not wanting to interrupt.

“...and then we went to sleep and woke up here,” Clara finally finished. “By the way, thanks for your hospitality, Mr. Steader. We honestly had no idea where we were going to wake up when we went under.”

“Oh, not at all,” Joe said. “Even if I didn’t have a familial obligation to help someone Harold sent along, I have an eternal fascination with Earth, and a weakness for an interesting conundrum. By the way, this is my niece,

Quinoa Steader. If you happen to read any local news from the last year or so, you'll see her in it all over the place. I'm very proud of all the things she accomplished."

Quinoa rolled her eyes. "I don't see it that way. I was enough of an idiot early on that I *had* to do all that stuff just to be able to live with myself again. I'm still not happy that all the media fixates on the *good* stuff I did, without paying enough attention to the stuff I had to redeem myself for."

"I keep telling you that you should publish an autobiography to set the record straight," Joe said. "If you don't want to write it yourself, I'm sure you could find a ghostwriter."

Lubyanka cocked her head. "I've just been catching up with the two years' worth of Zharus news I missed from being sold, shipped, and returning. And...I don't understand. At all." Her voice took on a plaintive tone. "What...what *happened*? Suddenly people are all *concerned* about us RIDEs, when they only ever thought of us as uppity equipment before? Now we have *rights*? We no longer have to *belong* to people? I feel as though I am living in...what is the metaphor from the ancient media you Steaders republished...*Bizarro World*. I don't *understand*. Please, *please* help me to understand?"

"Wait, what?" Quentin said. "We have rights now? Us? Rights?"

"What would *I* do with rights?" Madeira wondered. "I make use of my *partner's* rights. She's the one who's supposed to decide what we do, and who we do it with."

Kim blinked. "Wait, what? *I'm* supposed to be the boss of *you*?"

Madeira peered at her. "Of course you are. I'm just a RIDE. I'm supposed to *augment* you. Give you the ability to do the things you couldn't do alone."

"I guess I can't argue that you *augmented* me all right." Kim glared down at her chest. "But if I'm supposed to be your boss, why can't I tell you to reduce *these* and have you actually do it?"

"Because they're supposed to *help* you do the things I'm meant to help you do," Madeira said helplessly. "To the other people I'm supposed to help you do them to."

"Someone, at some RIDE factory somewhere, has *so much* to answer for," Hobbes intoned darkly.

“It’s the evolutionary imperative gone wrong, is what it is,” Joe Steader supplied. “At least, that’s my uneducated guess, based on having had a lot of time to think about it. See, back in the caveman days, anyone having that much body fat on them would be a sign they had some trick to getting more food than their share. Which means that, in turn, any man seeing someone with that much body fat would think, ‘Hey, I gotta stick my thing in *that*, because if they’re that good at getting extra food, they could get it for our *kids*, too.’” He cocked his head, in thought. “Well...saying ‘think’ might be giving the brain too much credit. Their *genetic imperative* would think that. So maybe their brain wouldn’t have anything to do with it.” Joe shrugged. “And so the genetic imperative survives in the form of men wanting women with big boobs, even if the boobs are obviously silicone or otherwise not an *actual* indicator of how well the woman could provide for their kids.”

“Well, thanks,” Kim said. “That makes me feel so much better. I think.”

“I always thought of it as a chest-butt,” Tim deadpanned. “And that’s from having *had one*, you know.”

“As I said, I know someone who might be able to help with that,” Joe said. “We’ll take you to see them a little later.”

“And yeah. You got fuckin’ rights now. Ain’t it a bitch an’ a half?” Julius said. “You think *you* got it bad, try being me. You been away two years, I woke up last year after sleeping for fuckin’ *thirty*. Fuckin’ *nothing* makes sense.”

“That would have been...since the war years,” Lubyanka said. “Being Sturmhaven ex-military myself, I should count myself lucky you didn’t shoot me on sight.”

“Oh, he had time to adjust,” Joe said. “And we’ve even got some good friends in Sturmhaven now. Things change, and time marches on.”

“For some of us, anyway,” Julius agreed.

“Another big change you’ll notice is we Integrates have gone public now,” Quinoa said. “If Harriet came back, she’d probably be even *more* surprised at all the changes.”

“It’s a brave new world,” Joe said.

“That has such people in it,” Kim said. “Shakespeare, don’t you know.”

“So you guys really flew in from Earth,” Quinoa said. “We’re certainly glad to have you.”

“And we’re glad to be back,” Hobbes said. “Especially since they were in the process of trying to take me apart to see what made me tick. When I heard about how close they got to slicing into my core...brrrrr.”

“I can’t say I’m *completely* thrilled to be here, under the circumstances.” Clara sighed. “But I guess it beats working day in and day out at a dead-end job. And getting to see this place is kind of a dream come true in any case.”

“So what do we do now? Go register at the Earth embassy or something?” Tim asked. “Won’t they just be *thrilled*?”

“I dunno,” Tom said. “Even leaving aside the crossriding, when word gets back we were involved in freeing and smuggling back four RIDEs, it could get our families in trouble back home.”

Joe nodded. “Yeah. Don’t worry about that. I think we can come up with new identities for you. Maybe even jobs, if you want them. We’ll look into that later.”

“I suppose now that we’re here, you won’t want anything more to do with us,” Lubyanka said diffidently. “The ones who kidnapped and crossed you.”

Clara smiled. “Funny, I was just going to say that I thought now that you have legal rights, *you* wouldn’t want anything more to do with *us*. Frankly, I’m okay with continuing the partnership as long as you feel like it.”

Tom nodded “Same here.”

“Me too,” Tim said.

Kim glared down at her chest. “I’d really like to have something done about these...but other than that, you’re pretty cool.”

“It sounds reasonable to stay together for the time being, at least until you’re all settled in,” Hobbes said. “We can re-evaluate in a few days.”

“No problem here,” Quentin agreed.

“I guess we can see how it goes,” Madeira added.

“Great!” Joe said. “Anyway, once you guys are done with breakfast,

we'll take you into town and show you some of the sights. Don't worry about money—I've passed your RIDEs a 'welcome to Zharus' stipend that should cover you for a few days. Least I could do in the circumstances."

"I guess that'll cover hotel rooms, too?" Clara asked. "I just realized we don't exactly have anywhere to stay right now."

"You're welcome to the guest room here for as long as you like, but we can certainly help you locate lodgings."

Tom shrugged. "It's not as if we have a whole lot of stuff to move. I'm good wherever, really."

"I'll put it on the fuckin' 'to-do' list," Julius promised.

Joe Steader's Uplift mansion was located in a small satellite dome just northwest of Uplift proper. A tunnel connected it to the main dome, a big hardlight bubble stuck at the edge of a baking desert. They all rode their RIDE bikes through the connecting tunnel, with Quinoa seated behind Joe on Julius.

Clara stared all around in rapt fascination, and she noticed the others doing the same. Even Tom, who'd been here before, was doing a little rubbernecking of his own. "Over there's the Brubeck Campus where the RIDE museum is. We'll stop by there a little later," Joe said. "And here's one of the new RIDE creches that opened last year—oh right, you wouldn't know about those either."

"RIDE *what* now?" Quentin asked.

Julius sent a "smirk" emoticon. "Boy, are *you* in fer a fuckin' shock."

"And there's Bifrost Park, where they have the best ice cream in the galaxy," Tom said. "I've been looking forward to that."

"Where we going right now?" Tim asked.

"Want you to meet some friends of mine. Oh, here we are." They pulled into the parking lot of a building that looked more than a little like someone had dumped out a box of giant LEGO bricks and then stuck them together where they fell. There was a central permanent building, and a whole bunch of temporary habs connected to it and each other. A number of them had open garage doors. Joe and Julius led the way toward a garage door in the central building.

Just inside the door, a tiger Fuser looked up from a frame she and a

female cougar Integrate were tinkering with. “Ye gods, it’s an invasion!”

“Hey there, Linda-and-Linda. Had some new friends I wanted to introduce to Rhianna and Shelley, if they’re not too busy.”

“Rhianna and Kaylee are working on a shell restoration for a Van Winkle the Marshals brought in last week, over in Bay Six. Shelley and Uncia are in the old garage lab, monitoring bandwidth for, you know. I’ll have Tilly set you up in one of the spare garages and go fetch them.” Linda giggled. “There sure are a lot of you! Are you going into business as a tour guide now? Should Rufia be worried about competition?”

Joe chuckled. “Not quite. But I think your bosses will find their story *very* interesting.”

A few minutes later, the cougar Integrate led them around the back of the building and into an empty garage. One of the larger of the prefab building modules, it was more than large enough to fit a half-dozen RIDEs and assorted humans. “I’ll go tell them you’re in here,” she said, before slipping back out again.

“What’s all this about?” Tom wondered. “Are we here for a RIDE tuneup or something?”

“Something like that,” Joe said. “These two are some of the smartest people on the planet, and your RIDEs *have* just spent a year keeping you alive in a metal box between the stars.”

“They fuckin’ rezzed *me*, from a cracked core,” Julius said. “They’re that fuckin’ good.”

“They straightened *me* out, from a severe case of delayed-onset adolescent addlepateness,” Quinoa said. “They really *are* that good.”

“And anyway, they’re on good terms with a lot of the most powerful folks in several local governments, so they might have a few good ideas on who else oughtta know about all this that I’ve missed.” Joe chuckled. “Of course, they’re also crazy busy, and they’re not the sort to drop what they’re doing right away just because a billionaire’s shown up on their doorstep. That’s one of the things I like about them. Hopefully they’ll be here soon.”

The floor of the garage was covered in thousands of carefully-arranged parts, most of which had a red tag on them. A large eagle perched

just out of the way, watching intently as a lynx Fuser went over the components one last time. “Are you sure there’s nothing you can do to save it?” the eagle asked in an androgynous voice.

“I’m afraid most of your frame is irreparable. A combination of battle damage and exposure. Which is a shame, since Nextus eagles were rare even during the War. This frame is a classic. And if *I* can’t fix it…”

“Tell me about it. You know they wouldn’t even let me Fuse with my pilot because he’d have ended up a bird?”

“The HPE-001 units were like that, yes. They didn’t work out the tags until the aught-three series.”

“Didn’t stop the Sturmies. Anyway, what are my options?”

“The good parts will fetch decent prices on the market. Should get you into a decent eagle frame by Kamen or Rainier. Then they can give you a custom harpy eagle skin.”

Rhianna heard a chime in her implant and saw the cougaress entering. “What’s up, Chantilly?”

“Joe Steader and Jules are here with some new friends. I think they could use one of your specials.”

“Okay,” Rhianna said. Chantilly nodded to her, then headed out the other side of the bay toward the lab where Rochelle and Uncia were working.

:Just tapped into the cameras an’ seen the group. Gonna be another one of those days, Rhi.: Kaylee said.

:When isn’t it ‘one of those days’ these days, Kay?: Rhianna said. She sent some catalogs to their Van Winkle customer. “Frey, look these shells over and ping Kaylee once you’ve settled on one. The NextusMil Van Winkle stipend was pretty generous, especially with the bonus that triggers when your original shell can’t be saved, so you can probably afford anything short of a high-end luxury model. I’m sure we can find you something you like and get you out of that loaner Laurie by tomorrow.”

“Will do, Miss Stonegate. Many thanks,” the bird mecha said. He tilted his head back, going into his inner world.

Rhianna sighed, looking back at the arrangement of parts on the floor. An exploded eagle. *What a terrible waste. Oh well, you can’t save ‘em all.* She rubbed her hands on a grease rag and headed back the way

Chantilly had come.

Joe looked up as the door slid open and the lynx Fuser wandered in, followed a moment later by a snow leopard Fuser. “Rhianna, Kaylee, Rochelle, Uncia, thanks for coming.”

“Okay, Joe. Spill. I have to admit that we’re a little short on time these days. Who’re your friends?” Rhianna said.

Joe inclined his head. “It’s the oddest thing, really. Last year, *you* got some frozen care packages from Earth. Apparently this year was my turn.”

“I thought the only care packages you were receiving were full of stinky-ass fruit,” Uncia piped up. “Stinky ass-fruit.”

“Don’t I fucking know it,” Julius said. “Socah’s lucky she’s not around these days.”

“It comes out the fruit baskets were decoys to clog up all the shipping manifests so the really *important* item could get through,” Quinoa said.

“These are Lubyanka, Hobbes, Quentin, and Madeira. And Clara, Tom, Tim, and Kim,” Joe said, pointing at each one in turn. “Everybody, these are Rhianna Stonegate, Kaylee, Rochelle Seaford, and Uncia.” There was a general chorus of pleased-to-meet-yous. “Please, tell them how you ended up on my front lawn.”

“Since you’re short on time, I’ll skip the dramatic retelling,” Lubyanka said. “We four RIDEs were somehow smuggled off Zharus, and shipped to Earth. I managed to wake up and escape, then freed the others and arranged for us to be shipped back here—with a little special help, but we can cover that later. Along the way, we...sort of press-ganged our partners here and brought them along with us in cryo-pods.”

“We could hardly leave them to the Earth government’s tender mercies after they helped us escape, after all,” Quentin put in.

“I can understand that. I’m from Earth, myself,” Rhianna said.

“We’re actually glad to be here,” Clara said. “For some value of ‘glad,’ anyway.”

“Smuggled by who?” Kaylee asked, ears perked. “You four can’t be the first RIDEs ever taken off planet, but the ‘who’ is kinda important here.”

“We rescued them from what seemed to be a government-slash-military research installation,” Clara said. “So, y’know, someone in the

Earth government.”

“It seemed like something I should bring to your attention. I imagine Zane and the others will want to know.”

“Yes. Yes it is,” Rhianna said. The lynx Fuser facepawed. “We’re going to have to drop a line to Pharos System Security. If it really was EarthGov, then they’ll want to know every detail you can remember.” She paused. “Well, that sounded a little more ominous than I intended. These guys aren’t like the spooks on Earth that gave me the third degree before *I* could leave.”

“I’m ex-Sturmhaven military. I know all about security investigations and debriefings,” Lubyanka said. “We will all be delighted to offer a full download of all relevant memories so they can pick through them themselves. Not that we have many. They kept us shut down most of the time. If they hadn’t forgotten to put me in proper passive lock, I would not have been able to escape at all.”

Joe shrugged. “Unfortunately, I don’t have much longer planetside before I have to ship out for Wednesday, so I was hoping I could leave the frantic running around and banging on doors and heads as necessary in your capable paws. And I thought you might also want to look them over and see if they needed any work done.”

“We’ll give them whatever maint they need,” Rhianna assured.

“Can I maybe get someone to see to *these*?” Kim asked plaintively, looking down at her chest.

“Wow,” Rochelle said. “That’s got to be one of the worst cases of BBV-fetter I’ve ever seen.”

Madeira sniffed. “Fetter? I’m not fettered. Luby cleared all that stuff out for me.”

Rochelle chuckled. “Well, not *quite*. Let me just guess. You *had* to give your partner the biggest gazongas that would fit into you, didn’t you? You couldn’t do anything less. It was like a compulsion. And you just feel *icky* if you even think about reducing them.”

“Of course. But that’s just how I’m made.”

“Well, yes and no. See, that’s *not* a natural condition of RIDEs of any kind. You’re just not supposed to *care* about that sort of flesh foolishness on a human. But you know who does care about that sort of thing? The

male clientele who make BBV RIDEs, and who often *buy* the BBV RIDEs. Soooo, they do this thing where they create a hidden *psychological* fetter that they stick in as deep as they can. Not exactly a *template*, but more sort of a compulsion. All pleasure RIDEs have it to an extent—or at least did, until RIDE rights came in and the manufacturers started getting sued by their products—but especially BBVs, because that’s the whole point of the line, or so the thinking went. Normal defettering stuff, even FreeRIDE, can’t get at something like that. But *I* can fix it, if you’ll let me.”

“*Let her! Let her!*” Kim said.

“Uh...” Tim said. Kim glared daggers at him, and he closed his mouth again.

Madeira blinked. “If that’s true...I don’t know. I don’t like the idea of anyone doing core surgery on me. But...if I did that to her because of a decision some *human* made *for* me...I like *that* even less.”

“I promise, we can disable it without affecting your persona or mentality in any other way. No rush, just think it over for a while.”

Kim sighed. “In the meantime, can you point me to a clinic where I can get these reduced? Or maybe there’s a lifter-supported bra I can buy? Because I just...can’t with these.”

“I *said* I was sorry,” Madeira grumbled.

“I know, Madeira. And I accept it. But my back is killing me.”

“I don’t suppose anyone has a spare A++ battery lying around?” Hobbes wondered. “I’m down by one. Earth idiots cut it open. Yes, I *know* I already have more than I need, but it just doesn’t feel good to have that piece-missing feeling.”

“You’re not a Donizetti. In fact, I’m a little stumped,” Rhianna said. “Hmm... I’m getting plenty of name brand mod-jeweller parts from your idents. Chassis might be a high-end Rainier RIDEs TIGR-500. Those are very solid and they sell them as a crate to bespoke customizers.”

“You’ve gotta be bespoke from some crazy rich bastard. Probably wanted to be Calvin, right? Pssh.” Kaylee rolled her eyes. “What’chr skimmer mode?”

“He did. For about three months. And yes...it is a little red flying saucer. I think we did the Spaceman Spiff thing *once* before he got bored of it.”

“Yeah. That’s Harold to a T,” Joe said. “Or *was* Harold. That boy messed up more RIDEs...you know, Signor Donizetti would never do business with him, and I gather a lot of the other bespoke brands stopped after his fourth or fifth...or twentieth...”

“That little fuck probably had someone put Hobbes together on the down-low after buying all the components,” Julius snarled. “Well, a’least we know he won’t be fuckin’ over any *more* fuckin’ RIDEs ever again.”

“Lordy Lord Lordy,” Kaylee said. “I’m so damned *sorry*, Hobbes. And I mean it.”

The tiger gave a paw a quick composure groom. “We did make peace, of sorts. The humans were just seconds away from dissecting my core before she stopped them and rescued me. So we called it even.”

“Her name is Harriet, now,” Clara supplied. “Or Harriet-Cheetara. She was the one who found where the others were being held and helped Luby and me rescue them.”

Rochelle blinked. “You were rescued by an...Integrate Harold Steader? On Earth, yet? As coincidences go, that one has to be good for some kind of prize.”

“I still don’t know what an Integrate was doing on Earth, but for our sakes I’m glad she was there,” Lubyanka said.

“We *do* seem to turn up in odd places these days,” Quinoa said. “Harold was...a handful. Worse than I was. There’s Steader Crazy and there’s *crazy* crazy.”

“But it seems there’s either not much of Harold left in the Integration, or else she really has changed,” Hobbes said. “I couldn’t even recognize her.”

“It takes a lot of us that way,” Quinoa said. She smiled, then looked at Quentin. “So, kitty, you’re the only one we haven’t heard from yet. What’s your story?”

“Ex-Nuevo San light military intelligence, fresh out like Luby here. Not really much else to tell,” the serval said. “I suppose you might find it ironic that I was one of the three of us who crossrode our partners, but the stigma against doing that is an entirely human thing, and I never saw why they made so much fuss about it.”

“It’s kind of my fault, really. Well, her and me it is,” Tim said,

nodding to Kim. “I went with Maddy at first, and Kip with Quentin, but I got such a mad-on about the gazongas she stuck *me* with, and Kip’s drooling over them, that when Kip asked me if I wanted to trade, I said hell yes. He wasn’t serious, but I kinda was.”

“I’ve learned my lesson,” Kim groaned. “*Really* I have.”

“And Luby...I guess the term is ‘bodyjacked’ me.” Clara sighed. “She needed an ‘in’ to the local furry community, and she *liked* me.”

“I said I was sorry!” Lubyanka echoed Madeira.

“You know, if you need help getting through it, I can recommend some crossrider therapists,” Rochelle said. “Really, you get right down to it, everyone in this *room* who’s crossed kinda didn’t do it entirely voluntarily.”

“*I said I was sorry!*” Uncia said. “This is getting silly.”

Rhianna put her handpaw on her forehead. “Okay, uh... then let’s move on. The humans are going to need a good lawyer to help work out your legal status here. Fortunately I know two—my parents. Here are their e-cards. They have a practice about three blocks from here down Bifrost Parkway. Stone & Gates Attorneys-at-Law. Can’t miss it. And you might find you have a few things in common.”

Joe smiled. “I was going to make some suggestions myself, but I can’t think of a better team than them, Rhianna.”

Tom blinked. “Wait, you’re related to *those* Stonegates? The ones who got deported for fighting the Virtual Life Separation Act? Wow! That was all over the news a few years ago. It was the highest-profile deportation since Aleka Petrovna—and them taking along their entire extended family made it even more newsworthy. Were you one of them?”

“I actually came over with a friend a few years before all that happened. And I didn’t even know about it until my parents, siblings, and grandmother showed up at the garage one morning with me in a rather... awkward position,” Rhianna explained. “It was quite a day.”

“Awkward, she says,” Kaylee added.

“Well, they were the talk of the furry community, as I recall. A handful even briar-patched themselves out of solidarity, but most of us weren’t *that* crazy.” Tom shook his head. “Anyway, that someone was willing to stand up against such a bad law even at such a cost...well, it brought a lot of comfort to folks in a subculture barely managing to hang on

to ‘normality’ by its fingernails. I can’t imagine anyone we’d rather have representing us.”

“Given that we pretty blatantly hid four escaped RIDEs at a *furry convention*, I halfway suspect *we* just pried those fingernails loose,” Tim said. “Your parents may see a lot of work in a few months.”

“We can’t really pay for a lawyer. Or anything,” Clara said. “Can... we?”

“Don’t worry about expenses, Clara, or any of you,” Joe said.

“Given your situation I’m sure my parents will do it *pro bono* anyway,” Rhianna said.

“There’s a bodysculpt shop down that way, too,” Rochelle said. “If you like, I’ll let them know you’re coming and have them bill me for it.”

“And that would cost how much?” Kim asked.

“They’re like the corner cybernetics shops on Earth where you can get your eyes replaced or a new neural implant for a tenner,” Rhianna said.

“Reduction won’t cost twenty *mu*. But since you guys don’t really exist here yet—again, my parents will handle that—don’t worry. It’s on us. It if helps, just mentally swap what cybernetics and nano-bio-med costs on Earth for what you get here.”

“I’m *such* a hypocrite, but my limbic system will be sorry to see them go,” Tim said.

“Eh...maybe I’ll have Maddy blow them back up for the weekends sometime or something.” Kim shrugged. “Assuming she gets her fetter issues sorted out and we keep Fusing. I really kinda *like* her except for that one thing...”

Madeira sighed. “I guess I should have it done. Even if I find another partner, I don’t want to force such a change on anyone else against their will if there’s really an alternative.”

“It is always better to ask,” Rochelle agreed.

“Will it take long? If you can make it so that I *can* want to do it, then there’s no need for her to...” She swallowed. “It really is uncomfortable even thinking about it, but if it’s something I can do for her, I owe it to her.”

“Believe me, I *know* what that kind of compulsion feels like, Madeira,” Uncia said. “Trust me, though. Shelley’s the best.”

“Shouldn’t take too long. Though I’d recommend a full defrag-and-

optimize for all of you, as long as it must have been since your last one. That'll take an hour or so, on top of the time for the tune-up. So, say, they should be done by this evening."

"I guess I can wait that long," Kim said.

"So, uh, about my A++ battery...?" Hobbes said plaintively.

"Send me your full specs and I'll put in an order—ah, thanks," Rhianna said. "Joe gets the bill."

"As long as he's buying, could you please bring me back up at least to my basic military specs?" Lubyanka asked. "They stripped me down when they surplused me out. And probably Quentin, too."

"Whatever you need, all of you, I'll get. Don't worry," Joe said.

"What more can a cat ask for?" Quentin said.

"I'm a simple wolf, with simple needs," Lubyanka said.

Tom raised an eyebrow. "But you're from Sturmhaven. Aren't you supposed to be 'complex and mysterious'?"

"Simple, *relatively speaking*," Lubyanka added primly.

Rhianna glanced at him. "I'm getting the feeling you've been here before?"

"School trip, a few years back. Kept the tags all this time, was the envy of my friends." He grinned. "So, I guess all this RIDE maintenance will probably take some time. Maybe I could show everyone else around a little? I seem to remember there being some *very good ice cream* not far away."

Rhianna laughed. "Best place to treat newcomers in Uplift. Practically a city tradition now."

"I think even more than RIDEs, that was the thing I most wanted to come back here for," Tom said. He chuckled. "Especially given that I didn't even *have* to come back here to get a RIDE. Or for a RIDE to get me."

"While you're here, you should drop by *my partner's* RIDE museum," Rochelle added. "It wouldn't have been here last time you were around, and given you've all got RIDEs now it's a great way to learn more about their history." :*And make it convenient for Zane to meet them, too,*: she added silently to Rhianna. :*Given that they're going to rate at least a minor complication to fleet business.*:

:*Good thinking.*: "Well, if you're ready to begin, we've got some cradles right over there. Climb on, plug in, and I'll let the staff know we'll be

getting started.”

“*Thank* you,” Madeira said. “It’s been far too long. I’m really looking forward to my bearings and servos not rattling anymore.”

“I want batteries that hold a charge longer than five minutes,” Lubyanka said. “I don’t even need A++. I’m military-efficient; just straight As would be delightful.”

Rhianna chuckled. “Oh, I think we can do a little better than that. Especially with ol’ Crazy Joe footing the bill.”

“You guys are okay with us taking in the town while you’re here?” Clara asked.

“Sure, sure, go on ahead,” Lubyanka said. “We’ll find you when we’re done.”

Joe glanced at his watch. “Jules and I should probably head home. We’ve got a lot of packing and prep to do for a long trip we’re taking in a few days.”

“I can hang around, though,” Quinoa said. “I’m already packed; I travel light. Or, well, since I’m an Integrate, I guess you could say I travel *hardlight*.” She summoned a set of glittering translucent body armor for a moment before letting it fade away. “We can walk over to the park, and ice cream’s on me.”

Clara nodded. “Sounds like a plan. Thanks for everything, Mr. Steader.”

“You kids enjoy yourselves. C’mon, Jules.” He nodded farewell, then they all headed their separate ways.

The address for the law office was 1688 Bifrost Parkway, Suite 2G. A nondescript bi-level red brick facade strip mall with shops on the lower floor and other businesses above.

Kim looked into one shop called Seth’s Smartphones and Stuff, featuring replica comms ranging from models that had the size and probably the weight of a brick, with physical buttons and no visible screen, to all-screen glass indistinguishable from modern Earth models for the odd person who didn’t have an implant. Inside was a young man in a blue polo shirt with a small set of bighorn sheep horns and ears who waved at them cheerfully.

“So there’s actual physical shops here. With a guy behind a cash register. That’s...pretty cool,” Kim said. “I mean, you could sort of do that in VL, but it’s still just drone delivery. Here you can walk out with it in hand. I guess it’s because they’re more of a frontier world.”

Clara peered at a display stand of nano-injectors set up in the window of the pharmacy next door. “No Periods, Period,” she read. “Hey, Tim, get a load of this. You remember when you took me out shopping that first time, back on Earth?”

Tim came over to look where Clara was pointing. “Seriously? That stuff is real? Damn. I’m almost envious. It’ll be three years before I can try that. Better get you some of those, you two.”

“Once we have some cash to spend,” Kim said. “What’s money here, anyway?”

“Monetary units,” Tom said. “Just ‘*mu*’ for short’. Some unimaginative Nextus bureaucrat coined the name. They were the first polity on this continent, so they got to decide the currency. But we won’t have any until we’re officially here.”

“Joe did say he gave some to our RIDEs, but they’re not here right now. Oh well.”

“If you need spending money I’ve got you covered,” Quinoa said. “You might want to wait on this stuff if you don’t need it immediately, though. It’s still a little cheaper online.”

“Come on, I think the office is upstairs here.” Tim pointed to a staircase between two storefronts. “Let’s go meet a couple of our heroes, huh?”

“You guys go on up,” Quinoa said. “I’ll just do some window-shopping down here ‘til you’re ready to move on.”

“See you later, Quinoa,” Tim said. “And thanks.”

“Not a problem.”

The logo on the window had a rather foxy theme, with a pair of them running around the lawyers’ names like a yin-yang symbol. Inside, the waiting room had a number of overstuffed green velour chairs with spaces for Walker-mode RIDEs to wait next to their partners. None were currently occupied. A young Asian-looking man with clouded leopard tags sat behind a dark mahogany desk, his RIDE stretched out behind him, napping.

“They’re expecting you. Head right into the office, down the hall to the left,” he said.

“Thanks,” Clara said, leading the way past the desk and down the hall.

Arlene Gates had once been an EarthGov federal judge. She and her husband, Roy Stone, had waded into a growing movement to allow the “hidden depths” the Feds otherwise didn’t like *out* of Virtual Life. The dominant culture on Earth didn’t like those hidden depths. A citizen had to wear everything on their sleeve. For most hobbies, it wasn’t that big an issue. It’s just where it got to people playing as things they weren’t in Real Life when matters got complicated, so the Virtual Life Separation Act was intended to just bury them where they would go and *stay* unseen. Furrries had been among a number of subcultures this could have affected.

The Gates family had fought against that. And for their trouble, even though they’d succeeded in in keeping the VLSA off the books, there had been repercussions.

It was the kind of heroic sacrifice you’d read about in old stories, like Moses leading his people to the Promised Land but not being able to go in himself. They had killed the bill, and expended their political influence to make sure its backers couldn’t try it again for another few years. But they had been left without enough influence to keep the thwarted sore losers from going for a consolation prize—removing *their* playing pieces from the board altogether.

The images of the family living in the corridors of the New Boston arcology were still very clear in Clara’s memory. Their political enemies had systematically deprived them of their careers and their wealth on the flimsiest pretenses. Wearing rags, limbs and organs sold for cheap cybernetics to afford the passage to Zharus they were made to pay for.

At the end of the hall was an office. The furniture wasn’t terribly expensive, and seemed to be largely self-fabbed or second-hand rather than pre-fabbed new. The bookshelves didn’t have a whole lot of dead trees on them either—but then, in this day and age, those were largely an affectation. All in all, the office suggested the occupants were more interested in getting a job done than in projecting an image.

The office had two desks, side-by-side, with four chairs positioned in front of them. Along the walls to either side were a pair of Arctic fox RIDEs,

and behind the desks were a man and a woman wearing Arctic fox tags that matched to the foxes and each other. They had a few more streaks of gray in their hair than in the news coverage—probably due more to their RIDE partners than any aging—but they were still easy to recognize.

Roy Stone and Arlene Gates stood, and stepped out from behind their desks to offer their hands. “Hello, everyone. Glad you could make it, and you can take that phrase in all possible senses.”

Arlene raised an eyebrow. “You always did have a way with words.”

“A good lawyer is efficient. Why use multiple phrases when you can make one do the work of all?”

“Indeed.” Arlene chuckled. “Hello, everyone. Rhianna let us know where you came from and how, and we’re *very* pleased to meet you.”

“Th...thank you, ma’am,” Clara said. “We’re...I can’t believe we’re actually getting to *meet* you. The *heroes* of the VLS Act. There’s not a one of us furries back home who doesn’t know who you are.”

“Thank you for the kind words, but I’m afraid here we’re just a pair of scrappy upstart lawyers among many,” Roy said. “Our practice is barely a month old, so we don’t have a lot of clientele as yet.”

“And here *we* show up, another hot potato dropped in your lap,” Tim said. “We don’t really have any way to pay you—though I imagine Joe Steader will want to cover our expenses.”

“If he does, you should let him,” Kim said. “If someone’s willing to pay you, why work *pro bono*?”

“But I’m sure you know your own business best,” Tom said.

“Let’s start by taking your vital info, the details how you got here, that sort of thing,” Roy said. “Our daughter gave us some generalities, so I have a feeling we’re going to angle for an asylum application. Valda and Darrik, our partners, will record.”

Clara glanced to them. “Oh, we should have introduced ourselves to you, too. It’s nice to meet you both.”

“It’s nice to meet you all, too,” Arlene said. She handed her a tablet. “Let’s start by answering these questions. Valda?”

“Officially official,” the vixen said, eyes blinking red. “Go ahead.”

Clara scanned the page. “Okay, well. My name is Clara Mitchell. *Nee* Clark Mitchell, I guess I should say. I lived in Springfield, Missouri, where I

worked in a call center and wrote fiction on the Mesh...”

It took some time, but one-by-one they went over their history. The lawyers asked some focusing questions where appropriate and some things were deemed important enough to send to certain government officials.

“The thing is, it’s kind of important to try to keep Earth from finding out about us. At least not by name,” Clara said. “We’re kind of worried they might retaliate against our families.”

“That ship might already have sailed, though,” Tim said. “I mean, aside from the fact that Lubyanka publicly registered your sudden abrupt sex-change, which happened a lot faster than Earth nanites could do it... well, even if they *don’t* know they’re the families of people who stole the RIDEs, they know they’re the families of furies.”

“And the RIDEs hid out at a furry convention...”

“Knowing the government that forced *us* out, I’m afraid the collateral damage will be much bigger than any of you realize,” Arlene said. “And we’re going to have to protect you, since once the furies start arriving—”

“They’re going to be angry at you, to say the least,” Roy said gravely.

“Well, actually, knowing the furies, it’s probably their *families* who will be the most angry,” Tom said. “As for the furies themselves, ending up in Furry Never-Never-Land *with* their families so they don’t even have to worry about leaving loved ones behind...*they’re* probably going to be in seventh heaven.”

“I suppose Zharus is long-accustomed to absorbing large groups of angry people.” Roy nodded to Arlene. “As your mother would be the first to tell us.”

“They dropped a whole wildcat colony of almost eighty thousand on us about fifty years ago,” the vixen said. “Plus, we get millions of immigrants from all over human space on a yearly basis. I doubt they’ll cause much of a stir.”

“Is there anything else you need from us now?” Clara asked.

Arlene shook her head. “For now it’s enough to get the balls rolling on the asylum applications. Given the...unique nature of your arrival, I’m sure we’ll expedite the process. We’ll have you official enough by tomorrow morning that you can set yourselves up in Uplift with valid ID, bank accounts and such and so forth. Then you’ll be citizens of the polity, with all

the rights thereof.”

“You’re lucky you’re here instead of Nextus. Uplift’s bureaucracy is refreshingly straightforward,” Roy said. “If you have no source of income they’ll put you on Basic Accommodation. The ground floor around here. Food, shelter, and free public fabber access for public domain goods. It’s a starting place for many a destitute immigrant or the bottom for anyone just down on their luck.”

“We’re not *that* bad off,” Tom said.

“Especially since Joe Steader seems to feel partly responsible for us,” Clara said. “Not that I’d ever ask him for any more of a handout than he wants to give us on his own, but he’s already talked about maybe offering us jobs in his company.”

“That will certainly make the process smoother, Miss Mitchell,” Arlene said. “Now, we don’t want to keep you here longer than necessary. You should really go out and enjoy what Zharus has to offer.”

“We certainly have,” Roy said, smiling.

“You know...I just realized something,” Tom said. “In a way, we kind of...I guess followed in your footsteps. We *also* got frozen and shipped out as crated cargo, without a dime to our names.”

“At least you didn’t have to sell most of your body parts to make it,” Roy said. “Count your blessings.”

“My mother says ‘colonial air breathes free’,” Arlene added. “So go outside, take some deep breaths, and enjoy.”

The powerful, stealthy tiger prowled through the jungle, in search of his prey. Carefully he stalked it, exploring up one dead end and then another, but the scent of his prey was strong, and he knew it was just around the next corner. He crouched, wiggled his butt, and then he leaped

Zane Brubeck shoved a pair of desktop hardlight display panels out of the way, and finally found the one he was looking for. “There you are, you little dickens...” He pulled the panel closer to him, and expanded it into a view from a security camera of the floor of the RIDE museum. As always, the place was full of RIDEs and humans, but thanks to the descriptions Quinoa had sent along, he was easily able to pick out the strangers. The

wolf-tagged girl, the serval-tagged boy, the fox-tagged top-heavy girl, the—
Zane’s breath caught in his throat. He *knew* that face. What’s more, he was intimately familiar with those ears and that tail. (Though not that nose. *That* was new.) He zoomed in, switched to another camera so he got a good three-quarter view of his face. *It is! It’s him! Thomas McKnight Lane!*

Before he even realized it, Zane was on his feet. “Hey, Aggie, I gotta take half an hour realtime. An *urgent* personal matter just came up.”

From the next room, Agatha Brubeck snorted. “Urgent, huh? What could be so important to you that you take *that* much time away? We’re up to our eyebrows in organization, you know that.”

“Not important to *me*, sis. Important to *Terry*. So, y’know, *please?*”

“Oh. Well...okay. *Just* a half hour.”

“You’re a saint, sis. Back soon.” Barely pausing to grab his cane, he made his way out of the office, while inside his head he drifted down to a cozy sleeping den and gave a somnolent tiger a good shake. *:Hey, Terry, wakey wakey. There’s someone here you gotta see!:*

Tom wandered along one wall, looking around at all the people and RIDEs as a whole rather than at any one thing in particular. There was plenty of time to take in the gestalt of the place before deciding what he wanted to explore.

This seemed like an interesting place. Unlike most museums he’d seen, which seemed to prefer pinning the past down under glass like so many mummified butterflies, this one was alive, with all its “displays” being fully awake participants in discussion, games, and whatever. Across the way, Kim and Tim were taking in a display that seemed to be about a scale model of one of Earth’s old IDEs from several generations back, while Clara and Quinoa were chatting with a caribou and a snow leopard in another part of the room. Tom didn’t really feel like approaching anyone new just now.

“Tom? Tom Lane?”

Tom blinked and turned. The voice seemed to belong to an anthropomorphic tiger wearing a khaki safari suit and leaning on a cane. Another Integrate, of course. Tom didn’t recognize him, but *something* about him seemed hauntingly familiar. “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

“Not *exactly*. Or I should say, you don’t know *all* of me. But...look, show me your tail.”

Tom blinked. “Huh?”

“Pull it around and show it to me,” the tiger said, as he reached back and brought his own tail forward.

Tom shrugged, and did as he was bid. And then he stared as he brought his tail up next to the stranger’s. The two tails had *exactly* the same patterns of stripes and colors. Tom blinked. “...huh?”

And then the tiger-man said, in a deeper voice which Tom *immediately* recognized, “Hello, Tom. Been a while.”

Tom stared. “T...*Terry*?”

“Partly,” Terry said. “The other half of me’s Zane Brubeck, the guy who built this place. And we’re *both* glad to see you—him for the first time, me again.”

“I...I...” Tom stammered, still staring—but after his talks with Harriet and Quinoa, it didn’t take him long to figure out exactly what he was seeing and why. “...you know, *not* buying you and staying has been one of the great regrets of my life.”

“I do see you kept my tags all this time. I’m flattered, really. What’s with the nose?”

“Well, I, uh...kinda got another tiger RIDE. Or he got me. He was, uh, a one-off, so apparently that means I get a nose tag. He’s at the Freeriders Garage, getting tuned up.” Tom was aware he was babbling a little, but he couldn’t help it.

“Ah. Yeah, Zane told me how you came to be here. I’ll look forward to meeting your new partner.”

“Uh...what about you? How’d you end up with Zane, uh...Brubeck? Any relation to Clint Brubeck?”

“My Dad,” Zane put in.

“Kind of a long story. After I got rented a few more times, I broke fetters, escaped, then ran into this guy out in the desert, and we hit it off so well we’ve been together ever since. First just together, and then *together* together.”

“I’m, uh, glad you found someone,” Tom said. “I do wish it could have been me. I was such an idiot for leaving. I thought I had stuff back on Earth

I needed to do, but...now that I'm here, I honestly can't see why I ever went back."

"Well, I'm glad you found someone else, too," Terry said. "So you got one of Harold Steader's old play-toys. What a pair we make, huh? I'm a consumer-grade workhorse who ended up with a zillionaire, and you're an Earth tourist who ended up with another zillionaire's bespoke RIDE. Maybe we two *were* supposed to be together, and *Zane* would have wound up with Hobbes."

"I can't say *I've* got any complaints," Zane put in. "But I do see from your memories that the two of you got along pretty well. I'm a little surprised at that, given how you were about humans when we first met."

"He was actually my first renter after I got repossessed from the kid who put the hardlight in. Back then, the whole thing was new and different, and unlike *every single person* who rented me afterward, *he* wasn't an idiot. And he really was *this close* to buying me out of the contract and staying." Terry sighed wistfully. "I don't really have any complaints either, but sometimes I do think back and wonder about what might have been."

"I really *am* sorry I left," Tom said. "I often regretted it. Especially since it didn't seem likely I'd ever make it back here again."

"But look at you now!" Terry grinned. "You're back again, and you're still rocking *my* old stripes. You even got another compatible tiger, so there was no need to change the tags you already had."

"And I guess this time I *am* here to stay," Tom said. "Certainly can't see going back to Earth in the foreseeable, given that I helped steal four RIDEs from their government science lab."

Zane raised an eyebrow. "Seriously? *That's* a part of the story I didn't get. I think I'm going to be buttonholing Crazy Joe and Rhianna about this if and when I ever have a spare moment. But I'd wondered how RIDEs ended up back on Earth; I guess that explains it."

"It *was* kind of a foregone conclusion that they'd snuck out *some* of our technology after all this time," Terry rumbled. "I don't like to imagine how many *other* RIDEs they must have already snuck away and disassembled."

"Brrr," Tom said. "I never thought about that angle."

"Well, at least the amount of damage they can do with anything

they've learned has to be pretty small," Zane said. "They'd need raw Q to duplicate any of our most advanced tech, and the only place to get that is right here on Zharus. And there's a world of difference between sneaking out a few RIDEs and sneaking out tons of ore."

"Careful there, pard," Terry said. "You're awfully close to invoking Murphy."

"Yeah, I guess I am," Zane said. "But we'll have to bring it up in some of the Fleet brainstorming sessions."

"Fleet?" Tom asked.

"Uh...nothing. Forget I mentioned that word." Zane made a zipping motion over his muzzle. "Just a classified project I'm helping out with. You'll hear about it in a few months."

"Ooooookay." Tom glanced around. "So...you built this place? Why?"

"Well, after I met Terry, and a few other RIDEs along the way, I realized it was a travesty the way we'd been treating them all this time. So I sank some of my fortune into finding and recovering as many as I could, and giving those that wanted it a home here."

"He's been a *good* partner," Terry purred.

"Takes one to know one," Zane said. "Anyway, I had the money, there were *people* out there no one else was helping...it's not rocket science to know what to do next."

"It's nice. I could see spending a lot of time here. Especially since I know part of the founder." Tom grinned. "I really would like to hang out with you some more. And introduce you to Hobbes."

"We don't have a whole lot of free time at the moment," Terry said. "That's the downside of being Integrated to a corporate magnate. When *they're* busy, so are you."

"Ah, but you've got access to the 'net, you know," Zane said. "And you don't ever do anything but sleep these days anyway. I think it'd be good for you to stay awake and hang out *virtually* with Tom—especially while he and his friends are getting settled in here. Maybe you could do some Nature Range with Hobbes, too."

"And give you periodic reports on their progress, no doubt," Terry said.

"Well, yeah. What good is being an Integrate if you can't split your

attention sometimes?” Zane chuckled. “Anyway, you say sleep all the time because you’re *bored*—well, this ought to be interesting enough to keep you up for a while.”

“I guess you do have me there.”

“I have you everywhere. That’s why being an Integrate is so fun.”

“I wonder if that’ll ever happen to me and Hobbes. Or any of the others,” Tom mused.

“You probably shouldn’t worry about it,” Terry said. “It’ll happen if it’s *meant* to happen. If not, it won’t. And there’s plenty to enjoy in life either way.”

Zane sighed. “Much as I’d love to stay and chat, I’m afraid I hear my sister calling me, and I need to go manacle myself to my desk again. But we’ll get your and Hobbes’s comm code from Rhianna, and we’ll *definitely* be in touch.”

“How about that?” Terry mused. “Wait until I tell Kaylee about this. It’s *really* good to see you again, Tom, and I *will* see you around.”

“Same to you, Terry. And I’m glad you found another good partner. See ya!”

Tom bemusedly watched the khaki-clad tiger disappear into an “authorized personnel only” side exit, and shook his head in wonder. “You run into old friends in the weirdest places.” He shrugged, and went off to see what Clara and the others were doing.

Clara and Quinoa had been doing some looking around of their own, and had just finished having a chat with a couple of Nextus/Sturmhaven War veteran RIDEs, a caribou named Blitzen and a snow leopard named Nils. They were clearly long-time friends, and kept up a constant patter of friendly insults. Clara was amused at all the different food-based nicknames Nils used for Blitzen—“ol’ lunchmeat,” “ol’ ribeye,” “ol’ rump roast,” and so on—without, as far as she could tell, ever repeating one during the entire conversation.

It gave her kind of a funny feeling to realize that she was talking to a pair of artificial intelligences who had been made several years before she’d even been born. *Does Earth even know they’ve got real AI here?* she wondered—before mentally facepalming. *Duh, of course they do; why do*

you think you had to rescue three of them from a research lab?

They'd had an interesting conversation about things to do and places to see for newcomers to the world, and it was genuinely fun to talk to people with such a different perspective on things. Clara wondered how Lubyanka would get along with them, and resolved to bring her here sometime.

But now she and Quinoa had moved on, and Clara had paused to glance across the way to where Tom seemed to be holding a conversation with, of all things, a tiger Integrate in a khaki safari outfit. She sighed. This was the first real chance she'd had to stop and think about things since waking up in Joe Steader's mansion that morning, and now her thoughts were returning to...that kiss. *Those* kisses. She still wasn't entirely sure what the hell she'd even been thinking—but the worst part was that she couldn't be sure she didn't want to kiss him *again*.

Then she became aware Quinoa was looking at her oddly. "Huh? What is it?"

Quinoa grinned slyly. "Oh, I know *that* expression. Know it *well*."

Clara blinked. "Huh? You couldn't possibly."

"No, really. Try me."

"All right, so what is it you *think* you know?"

"*That*, my girl, is Crossrider Expression...hmm...yes, I'd say Expression Number 3, Variant R. It's a classification system I've come up with for my own amusement." Quinoa smirked.

"Okay, so what's it mean?"

"Expression 3 is what we see on the face of someone asking herself, 'Am I falling for the guy who used to be my best buddy before, and what do I do about it?' And Variant R, for 'repressed,' means you come from somewhere that gender roles aren't quite as flexible as they can get here. Such as Earth, or other backward places like that. Go on, tell me I'm wrong."

Clara stared at her. "Am I *that* transparent?"

"To someone with as much experience as I've had? Well...yes."

Quinoa grinned.

Clara sighed. "I guess it's a common problem here."

"Kind of, but I've had reasons for seeing a lot more of it than you

might expect. I...well, I kinda used to go around making crossriders.”

Clara blinked. “What?”

Quinoa rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t always as *responsible* as you see me now. Since I first Integrated, and up until a few months ago, one of the ways I got my jollies was to find some handsome-but-poor guy who wanted a RIDE, and offer to buy him one if he’d, ahem, *spend the night* with me. But I’d only buy him a *female* one.” She smiled mischievously. “You’d be surprised how many of them were interested. It did kind of cause some problems later, which is why I don’t do it as much anymore, but at the time I didn’t really care.”

Clara goggled. “Uh...wow. Seriously?”

“Yeah!” Quinoa giggled. “I know, it seems kind of immature, but I just liked knowing I was going to be the last one to have them as a guy for at least three years...and I guess it made me feel kind of powerful knowing that guys slept with me at the cost of their own manhood. Pretty silly, really. But they turned out to be a bunch of *nice* girls.”

“You’d just...match them up with a female RIDE, and that would be that?”

“Uh-huh! And then I’d spend a few days helping them get used to girlhood...so I had the chance to run across the ‘why is that guy who was my best friend *soooo hawt?*’ scenario more often than you might think. I’ve considered hanging out a crossrider counselling shingle.”

Clara sighed. “I just don’t...why did he and I...?”

Quinoa raised an eyebrow. “Have you two done the nasty yet?”

“No!” Clara insisted hotly. Her cheeks felt like they were on fire. “We just...kissed. A couple of times. He did it to distract a guard...but then later on, I kissed *him*. And I don’t know *why*.”

“Mm-hmm. And you *liked* it, and you’re not sure why or what that says about you,” Quinoa said.

“I didn’t—he—it—” Clara sighed. “Darn it, you’re right.”

“Because you’ve always thought of yourself as hetero, and you’re worried that you might actually be gay?” Quinoa prodded.

“Yes! I—yes, that’s it.” She continued blushing. “Not that there’s anything *wrong* with being gay. But it’s never been who *I* am.”

“Would it make you feel any better if I reminded you that you’re a *girl*

now, so being attracted to a guy *is* your new hetero?”

“It doesn’t work like that!” Clara insisted. “It *shouldn’t* work like that.” She paused. “...*does* it work like that?”

“Maybe more than you might think.” Quinoa chuckled. “Look, it’s like this. You humans—and we Integrates too, I guess—are basically thinky-bits on top of an animal. Our bodies have their own animal instincts and urges, and we use our thinky-bits to fool ourselves most of the time into thinking those instincts and urges actually *come from* the thinky-bits. But actually, those things grew up back in the days before our top bits *were* very thinky, and they’ve always been there since before our ancestors had their first rational thoughts. They’re concerned with things like getting food, killing the scary monsters before they kill us, and propagating the species.” She paused. “Pay special attention to that last one, there. That’s important.”

“Seriously? You’re saying because I’m a girl now, I suddenly wanna boink guys?”

“Well, I think your *body* does, at least a little. And your head’s not used to that, so you don’t know what to do about it.” She shrugged. “And it’s not as if things are *really* that cut and dried, or we’d just have one sexual preference, not a whole spectrum of them. Your thinky-bits do affect it, too. It’s just that the animal-instinct foundation your thinky-bits are built on top of just shifted in an earthquake, and the rest of you isn’t sure how to settle yet.”

“So I’m not ‘thinking with my ‘nads’ anymore, but with my *ovaries*,” Clara said.

“Bingo! And you’re not used to that.” Quinoa shrugged. “Doesn’t help matters where you come from, either. Earth has a long, long history of people being stuck with their birth biology, because the only way to change it involved knives and hormones and could only get you so far. And even after nanites came in to rebuild you from the genes up, the process was long and expensive because they don’t have sarium battery power there. So it didn’t get used as much, except when people had a clinical diagnosis of gender dysphoria. So on Earth, ‘switching teams’ still has that stigma to it. You only do it if something’s *wrong* with you. And if you *did* it, it must *mean* something’s wrong with you.”

Clara stared at her. “But...why else would you *want* to?”

Quinoa laughed. “You see? There you are.” She glanced across the room again, to where the tiger was now heading for an exit while Tom slowly made his way toward them. “You know, a couple of years ago a new Integrate I know, loopy and powertripping on his new abilities, made one of the most condescending speeches I’ve ever heard, to his would-be girlfriend—another Earth-expatriate crossrider. Used the phrase ‘people, not plumbing.’ I try to keep that speech in mind as an example of what *not* to say.” She grinned. “I notice you don’t have any cyber. Why? I understand that stuff is basically free on Earth—they’ll give you more for your meat than it costs to buy metal.”

Clara blinked at the sudden change of subject. “I just...never needed the money *that* badly, I guess. I’ve got family who’s reasonably well off, and they’ve never let me get that far down. Anyway, getting cyber is pretty much a one-way street. Or...at least it was back on Earth. Now I think about it, Mr. Stone and Mrs. Gates put most of their bodies in hock to leave earth, but they seem to be all-organic again.”

Quinoa nodded. “Right. It’s a change you *could* make, but you had reasons for not wanting to—and it’s not convenient to reverse, but it can *be* reversed. Crossing is like that here. You might cross for any number of reasons—maybe you need to for a job, or to get a cheaper RIDE...or maybe you get one as a gift from your girlfriend.” She winked. “Or you just feel like it. It’s just so *easy*, you can do it in a few minutes and undo it in three years. You can find a *lot* more reasons for doing something like that than for doing something that takes *forever*.”

“I...guess...” Clara admitted.

“I like living in a world where people can fall in love more easily, because they can remake themselves or their partner can, to meet each other’s needs. Of course, it’s not so easy for Integrates like me to do that, but nothing’s stopping humans. More than once I toyed with the idea of crossing myself when I was a teen, but I just didn’t want to put myself out for three whole years at that point. Thought maybe I’d give it a try in my thirties or forties. But we see how *that* worked out.”

“You just talk about it so easily,” Clara said.

“It is easy, that’s the whole point. Which means there’s no real stigma to it here. Which means, in turn, you shouldn’t spend so much time

worrying about whether it's *right*, for some value of 'right,' to pal around with lover boy, there. Worry about whether you can make a relationship between a man and a woman work, at whatever pace you feel comfortable with." She grinned. "And if he comes on too strong, don't hesitate to smack him with a rolled-up newspaper right on that kitty nose of his. The nice thing about the nostalgia craze around here is that there are plenty of actual newspapers to be had."

"Oooookay," Clara said slowly. Then Tom finished making his way through the crowd to them, effectively ending the conversation. *I guess that's one way to look at it*, Clara mused. *And who's to say she isn't right? But it'll take a little more than a pep talk to get me over this*. Still, she did feel a little better. Now that she looked at it in a new light, maybe she *had* been dwelling too much on the propriety of a relationship between Clark and Tom. But she *wasn't* Clark anymore, now, was she? And the rules might just be different for *Clara*.

"Hey, what's up?" Tom asked. "You won't *believe* who I just met."

Tim wandered through the museum, following Kim who was declaiming breathlessly on various artifacts of historical interest. She seemed to be particularly keen on the scale model of the old Earth IDE, which had belonged to some local hero named Clint Brubeck—the father of the guy who built this museum. *Trust her to zero in on some dusty old historical artifact*.

Meanwhile, Tim wasn't saying much at the moment. He was still trying to come to terms with his new self. Now that the surge of anger under which she'd made the change had passed, he was definitely starting to get the notion that this hadn't been such a good idea. There was more to it than just "peeing standing up." *A lot* more.

For one thing, his new little friend seemed to be very...eager. It stood up more often than a grade school teacher's pet when the teacher asked a question. It did so at the slightest provocation—including, apparently, just *thinking* about it doing so. Tim looked down and sighed. *I wish it was just a banana in my pocket, 'cuz I'm sure not glad to see it!*

And it even complicated the "peeing standing up" matter to the point where it lost some of its appeal—because when he tried to pee while *it* was

standing up, it was a very uncomfortable and awkward, if not painful, experience. More than once in just the last couple of days, he'd found himself standing in a restroom for long minutes, thinking of cold showers and *willing* muscles to relax and the blood to flow back out so he could get on with his business.

It wasn't just the thing's physical behavior, either. When it was doing that, it brought such strange sensations with it. A sort of tingling, ants-in-your-pants feeling he didn't remember having when he'd been on the other side of things. And in turn he caught himself with all sorts of strange urges and desires—triggered, no doubt, by all the hormones that Mr. Happy was releasing when he stood up to have a look around. It was worst when he looked at Kim, and *especially* when he caught a side-on view of her. *Oh God, Kip, I am soooo sorry. What have I done?*

Kim turned, raising an eyebrow. "What's that?"

"Eep," Tim said. "Did I say something out loud?"

"I think you did. I think I know what, too." She smiled, and his little friend tried to stand to attention again.

Tim sighed. "I am so sorry. If I'd known you were dealing with...*this*, maybe I wouldn't have gotten so mad and..."

"The thing is, I kind of *wasn't* dealing with that," Kim admitted.

"Once I got past puberty, it all settled, mostly."

Tim groaned. "Oh god, I have to go through *years* of this?"

"I gather that for crossriders, the process is accelerated," Kim said. "At least that's what this book Maddy was showing me said. Your body's already matured past it, it's just that your mind hasn't quite caught up yet 'cuz it's not used to the strange new inputs. But it'll get there. You're probably in for an uncomfortable couple of months, though."

Tim looked suspiciously at her. "What about *you*? Shouldn't you be having this kind of symptoms, too?"

Kim smiled serenely. "Who says I'm not? I'm having a few little things...but I gather that girl stuff mainly happens all at once, at a certain time of the month, and crossing automatically puts you at the start of the cycle. I've got a few weeks to go for that...and there are those handy little nanite injector thingies for when that time comes around, if it gets to be too much to take."

“I think I hate you,” Tim grumbled.

“I can’t say it’s *entirely* comfortable having these big things stuck on... but this new bra helps. As does the artificial myomer reinforcement Maddy wove into my back muscles as part of the crossing process.”

“This is your three-year-long revenge on me for my one moment of weakness, isn’t it?” Tim grumbled.

“Hey, it’s not all sunshine and happiness for me,” Kim said. “You know what my tags, plus *these*, make people think I am? Give you a hint: I’m gonna cross the street *quickly* until I get these fixed, lest anyone think I’m *standing on the corner*.”

“Um,” Tim said. “Yeah, you’ve got a point there.”

“Of course, they’ll probably think that anyway as long as we’re Fused...” Kim sighed. “I dunno, maybe we should go our separate ways—her look for another partner, me look for another RIDE. But I’ll give it a few more days before I make up my mind.”

“I guess I don’t have any problems with Quentin, other than the ears being a little weird.” Tim looked down at himself again. “But all the rest of it...this is gonna be hard.”

“It is hard, when you’re not used to the body you’re in.” The friendly voice came from behind them, and they turned to glance up at the pedestal their wanders had taken them past. An immense lynx lay on top of it, paws dangling over the edge. She was about twice the size Kaylee had been. “We RIDES have to deal with that too, sometimes. Hi, I’m Keiko.”

Tim blinked up at her. “Wow...you’re a *big* kitty.”

“Don’t I *know* it.” Keiko sighed. “My original shell was more like Liam’s.” She nodded toward another lynx a few pedestals down, who was similar in appearance and size to Kaylee. “But my last owner wasn’t a bike sort of person, and she had me put in a skimmer car shell instead.”

Kim frowned. “They could just...do that? Change your body without asking?”

“In a word, yes.” Keiko licked the back of one huge paw with an enormous tongue. “I suppose it was better than being stuck on the dealer lot for another several months. And she was a nice person in all other respects, so I was glad I could be what she needed. It’s just...awkward being so much *larger* than I’m supposed to be. Mom and Rhianna say they’ll find

me a shell closer to my old one as soon as just the right one pops up on the market. But since this one's in no danger of *breaking down* right now, I can afford to wait."

Tim blinked. "Mom'? RIDEs can have mothers?"

"We sure can! At least the core part of us. RI engrams can reproduce by creating a new intelligence based on shared characteristics of both parents. That is how Liam, I, and our other siblings came about. We were born during the war, from our mother, Kaylee, and our father...who we don't talk about. The technique was then buried for a long time, but recently rediscovered."

"I think we met your mother, down at the Freeriders Garage," Kim said.

Keiko nodded. "She works there. I gather you are recent crossriders?"

"Yeah," Tim said. "Not...*entirely* willingly."

"That is often the way," Keiko said. "You will find there are many who have that in common with you. There are plenty of support groups available."

Kim nodded. "Thanks, we might have to look into that."

"As I say, I sympathize with the feeling that you're in the wrong body. That feeling *should* go away after a while for you, but I have it all the time." She hunched her shoulders in a feline shrug. "But I will get it fixed sooner or later. You should go on, see the rest of the displays, talk to more of us. This is a *very* nice place."

Kim smiled. "It is. Thanks for the chat."

Tim nodded. "Yeah. We'll say hi to your Mom for you next time we see her."

"Thank you. Enjoy the museum." Keiko placed her head on her paws and closed her eyes.

That was interesting, Tim thought as they walked on. *Even RIDEs can get body dysphoria? Huh*. Even though the situations weren't really close, it still made him feel a little better to know he wasn't alone in his awkwardness.

He glanced over at Kim, who was moving on as if she didn't have a care in the world, and sighed inwardly again at the way that certain part was behaving. *The sooner all this is over, the better*.

After another hour or so of walking around, the newcomers got back together, and Quinoa rented a skimmer to drive them back to the garage. Clara had been most impressed by the way they seemed to have so many different backgrounds—some made for war, some made for mining, some (like Kim’s Madeira) made for pleasure.

Yet they all had in common that they were thinking, feeling creatures, and most of them had been ill-used or neglected by humans in some way over the course of their lifetime. She would have expected more of them to be bitter against humans, but most of them seemed to have made their peace with their past and were welcoming the new changes as a chance to make a new beginning.

She was still thinking about that as they walked back into the garage. “Hey, everyone. We’re back. How’d all the upgrades go?”

“*Horosho!*” Lubyanka said. “I’m back to my full military specs again. *Better*, in some cases.”

Quentin nodded. “Same here. They do good work.”

“I got my battery back,” Hobbes said. “That was all I really needed.”

“And I think Rochelle and Uncia have worked a miracle with my core,” Madeira said. “I had fetters I never even realized I had, and now they’re gone. I feel *much* better—and I think I’ll be able to make you feel better, too. I have no qualms about resculpting you now.”

“I recommend starting at an A-cup, try it out for a while, then working your way up to find your comfort level,” Rhianna said. “I’ve had Kay adjust me a few times. Hard to squeeze into tight places at my default, sometimes.”

“I don’t know if I need to go down quite that far, but we’ll see. Maybe I’ll have her sim it on me in VR before I make the change.”

“Well, petite does have its good points, now that I can think that way,” Madeira said. “But I’ll do whatever you want, Kim. I *can* do that. Feels like I’ve been living in a fog until now.”

“Great! Let’s get started on that, then. Show me what you can do.” Kim stepped up, and they Fused.

“Hey, Hobbes, guess what? I actually met my first RIDE—the one I rented on my vacation here a few years back,” Tom said. “Craziest thing is,

he's Integrated with Zane Brubeck now."

"Intriguing," Hobbes said. "Good to know he's still around."

"And that you won't have to worry about me going back to him, huh?"

Hobbes chuckled. "I suppose I'd be lying if I said it hadn't been a concern."

"Wait, you were paired up with *Terry*?" Kaylee said. "Small damned universe sometimes."

"Oh, you know him? Yeah. Except for the nose, I even still have his tags."

"Huh. I hadn't noticed 'til now. But then, I weren't looking," Kaylee said. "That tiger kept me sane through a bad time."

"He was a great guy, back when I knew him. I was *this* close to buying him out of the rental contract and staying, but...I had things to do back on Earth. I thought. Kind of regretted it ever since. So I'm glad he found a better situation later." He grinned, and patted Hobbes on the head. "Just as I have."

"As we all have," Tim said. "Except for, oh, *one or two little things*." He sighed. "But I guess I'll learn to live with them...for the next three years, anyway."

"I'll do everything I can to help," Quentin promised.

Rhianna smiled. "So, you're here. I'm sure my parents have the ball rolling on your legal status. You've probably had the welcome-to-Uplift Milkbottle ice cream mondae. The Steaders are covering your expenses. You're Zharusians, in every way that matters. What now?"

"Dunno. Find a place to stay, I guess." Clara shrugged. "Mr. Steader offered to put us up at his place, but I don't want to put him out."

"It wouldn't be any trouble at all," Quinoa said. "But I can understand wanting your own place."

"There's an apartment complex with vacancies down on Horne Street, maybe five blocks from here," Rhianna said. "It's not the most luxurious, but they have RIDE accommodations in every unit and each floor has a fabber. We have a few customers who live there."

"Sounds perfect," Quinoa said. "If you guys want, I can get the paperwork started for you."

"Sure, why not?" Tom said. "One place is pretty much as good as

another, as far as I'm concerned. Especially if they're set up for our partners."

"Four *separate* apartments, right?" Tim asked.

"On the same floor," Quinoa assured. "First five months of rent and utilities paid. That's half our year. Long enough to get on your feet."

"Sounds good to me," Clara said. "If it's okay with you, Lubyanka?"

Lubyanka flicked an ear. "What are you asking me for? You're the human, I'm just...oh. I have *rights* now, don't I? This is hard to get used to."

"Isn't *that* the truth?" Hobbes reflected. "If only these laws had been in place when I was made."

"How can you still be so *nice* to me after I crossrode you and kidnapped you to Zharus?" Lubyanka wondered. "I had accepted going into this that you would probably ditch me once we were back—but that would be all right, because at least I *would* be back."

Clara chuckled. "Silly wolfie, I'm *on Zharus*. The Furry Nirvana! With my expenses covered, even, at least for the moment. That makes up for at least half of everything *else* you ever did to me. And, well, I *do* like wolves. And I'm stuck this way for three years anyhow. So why should I break in some other RIDE when I've already got one here who already knows everything about me?"

"I suppose there is something in that," Lubyanka admitted.

"I *do* reserve the right to swap to another RIDE after the three years are up, if I want to go back to being Clark again," Clara said. "But we can talk about that when the time comes. And, of course, if *you* should ever decide you want to break it off, you've got that right also."

"That seems...more than fair," Lubyanka said.

"Same deal here," Tom said. "Hobbes, I'll be happy to be your partner as long as you're happy to be mine. And if you ever disagree with me on anything, say so. I'm willing to listen."

"Ditto me, you, Quentin," Tim said. "And I imagine Kim probably feels the same way, but she seems to be kind of busy at the moment, so..."

"Annnd we're done!" Madeira announced. "I think we found something agreeable." She de-Fused, revealing Kim now had a considerably slimmer chest.

Kim looked down at herself, and smiled. "Oh, yes, this is *much* better.

Thanks, Maddie. I can see my feet!”

“I’m happy I was able to help,” Madeira said. “Indeed, I’m *very* happy that I *was* able to help. Thanks, Rochelle and Uncia.”

Rochelle beamed. “Always happy to clear away some unneeded fetters.”

“We unlock comms and media tablets, too!” Uncia said. “Firmware is us!”

“Okay, great! Then why don’t I get you guys all set up with the new apartments, and we’ll check in a little later to see where Uncle Joe and Rhi’s folks are on getting things worked out for you there?” Quinoa said.

“Sounds good,” Clara said. “Thanks for everything.”

Quinoa grinned. “Hey, it’s the least we can do, no? So c’mon, let’s go see where you’re gonna be living for the time being.”

“Have fun storming the castle!” Uncia caroled.

Kaylee snorted. “If you think I’m gonna quote the next line, I ain’t playing.”

Uncia giggled. “I guess that *would* take a miracle.”

“Okay, then let’s mount up and head out,” Tim said. “Right, Quentin?”

“Sure thing.” The serval converted over into his speedy skimmer bike form, and the other RIDEs followed suit. Quinoa lifted into the air, waved to Kaylee and the others, then led the way up the street.

Uplift’s eclectic architecture was in fine display along Horne Street. Centuries of architectural styles all mashed together in a mixed-use zone, like New York City of old, none more than five floors high. Brownstones, all-glass fronts, 23rd century Martian bubble-habs, with shops on the bottom floor and residences above. The apartment building was an exception, going ten floors high—nearly tall enough to touch the dome, of which they were near the outer edge.

“Well, this sticks out. How’d they get a permit for it?” Kim wondered.

“The building predates the dome,” Hobbes said. “Uplift expands their main domes periodically. This building was basically a self-contained complex before then.”

“I’ll bet it had a huge air-conditioning bill,” Tim observed.

“Your units are all on the sixth floor,” Quinoa said. “Let me go wrap

up the paperwork in the management office and I'll have the crypto keys for you. Then...you kids are free to do whatever."

"I forgot to ask...do these apartments have furniture?" Tom asked.

"You can get some basic self-assembling flat packs for free out of the fabbers. Nothing fancy, but it'll do until you have real money rolling in."

Clara blinked. "You can fab furniture? That was ridiculously expensive back home."

"Well, this stuff is what they call 'Basic Accommodation' here in Uplift. Public domain designs and free public fabbers. We're not a post-scarcity economy, but in some places we're getting pretty close." Quinoa shrugged with her wings. "It's basically the kind of stuff you furnish a dorm room with. Cheap and functional, but nothing fancy or really very durable. If you want better, you have to pay real money."

"Well, it'll be just like home, then," Kim observed.

"Even simple stuff like that would have been kind of beyond the pale for what Earth fabbers can do, unless you're feelthy stinking rich," Tom said. "But as I found out last time I was here, you guys' Sarium tech has kinda turbocharged *everything*."

More than a few people on the street—of various kinds—recognized Quinoa as they passed. A monitor lizard Integrate of indeterminate gender waited at the door of the Management Office. "Come in, Miss Steader. Happy to do business with you and your friends. I'll get all y'all set up right away."

Quinoa stepped in, and a minute or so later stepped back out with keycards for each of them.

"Wow, that was fast," Tim said.

Quinoa chuckled. "Well, not really. The paperwork actually took about three hours, but we 'people of qubitite' are able to speed up the clock virtually. That's why they've got one on staff, in fact. If I hadn't been around, your RIDEs could have met with them the same way."

"Wow," Clara said. "Thanks for putting in that kind of effort for us."

Quinoa shrugged. "Not a problem. It really didn't feel like much time at all. Anyway...why don't you guys head upstairs and get started fabbing furnishings. I'll get back to you as soon as I have something more to tell you."

Tom nodded. “Okay, sure. Thanks again.”

“Sure. You’ve got my and Uncle Joe’s comm codes. Ping us if you need any help.”

“We’ll do that,” Quentin promised. Then, as Quinoa headed back outside, the four RIDEs and four humans headed for the elevator.

“So, who wants which card?” Tom asked as the huge elevator took them up. It was a tight fit for everyone, but the complex as a whole seemed appropriately scaled for a large Fuser to fit in the hallways. “The floorplans are basically the same. Apartments 633 to 637.” He held them like playing cards. “Clara, Luby, why don’t you two take the first pick.”

“Looks like 633 is closest to the elevator, so dibs there.” Clara took that key. “Tom, why don’t you take 635 next door to me, which’ll give Tim and Kim 634 and 636?”

“Seems as good as any other arrangement,” Tom said. He paused. “But why is it you want to be next door to me?”

“Well...uh...y’know, in case I need to borrow a cup of sugar or something.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. “Uh-*huh*.”

“Look, just take your damn keys. I think I need some ‘me’ time now. C’mon, Luby.” She opened the door to 633 and headed inside.

The empty apartment smelled a little antiseptic. Just to the right of the entry foyer was a small kitchen, then the living room, with a hallway to the bedroom and RIDE room further to the right. Sliding glass doors led out to a balcony large enough for a Fuser or small skimmer to use as a landing pad, with a good view overlooking the city. The floors appeared to be hardwood or a facsimile. The shewolf’s hardlight paws made a sort of tap-click sound as she walked.

Bare walls and windows, completely empty. The apartment was a blank slate. And it matched Clara’s mood perfectly. “Excuse me for a minute, Luby.”

“Of course,” the shewolf said.

Clara headed for the bathroom. Not because she needed to go, though. Stepping into the shower without first taking her clothes off, she turned on the cold water on the touchscreen controls. After nearly a minute she shut it off again, shivering a little. “Okay...n-n-n-not dreaming. Thank

God, n-n-n-not dreaming.”

“You know, you *could* have just had me pinch you...” Lubyanka called from the next room. “Or, well, bite you anyway...”

Dripping water on the floor, Clara left the bathroom. “Can we Fuse up, Luby? I could use a dry-off and there’s no towels.”

“Just because I’m white and fluffy *doesn’t* mean I’m also a towel. But all right...” Her hardlight winked out, and she split apart and reassembled around Clara. “There. All better?”

“Better. Thank you.” Still Fused, she looked around. The textured ceiling was just barely over the tops of her ears. “I still can’t believe I’m really here.”

Lubyanka chuckled. “The day after we met, you woke up *hoping* you’d been dreaming.”

“Yeah, well...I can’t say I wouldn’t rather still have the right set of dangly bits, but all in all, could be worse. And if I have to make a new life for myself, at least I’m on the best planet in the galaxy to do it on.”

“You have no argument from myself on that,” Lubyanka said, lolling her tongue. “Now, I have some *mu* I can spend on some better furniture than the public domain designs. There is a furniture store a block west. Shall we get started?”

“All right, but first show me where the fabber is and how it works. I want to print out *some* stuff, at least, just so I can get a feel for how the tech works here. And I need more clothes than what I’m wearing.”

“You wouldn’t rather go shopping at the mall for those? Shopping is one of the great female pastimes, even for a Woman of Sturmhaven.”

“Ha. Not right *now*. Maybe in a day or so. Right now, I just need to relax. It’s been a long day, and I haven’t even been awake for all of it yet.”

“Oh, that reminds me. We should begin conditioning you to the 30-hour day. I have some biorhythm adjustment programs to help you with that, if you like.”

“We can talk that over later. Right now, where’s that fabber?”

The floor’s fabber had its own dedicated room at one end of the building. There were human and Fuser-sized tables next to it, with people waiting for their orders to appear out of one of several output trays of various sizes and shapes. It seemingly dispensed everything from food to

furniture.

“I’ll show you the catalog of furnishings available. Just choose what you want, and I’ll send it to the fabber’s queue.”

Clara blinked at the list, then went to bed frames. “Why do they all have Swedish names? What’s this one? Hemnes? Malm?”

“Like so many things on this planet, it’s a 21st-century pop-cultural in-joke, involving a Swedish furniture store chain. Often confusing to newcomers.”

“Uh...okay. This one. The...uh...how do you say this...Song uh sand? Sahn ge sand? Uh...well, that one.” There were a few other items that came as a package deal, including a foam mattress, bed sheets, pillows, all in a compressed form to save space and weight. The system also suggested various other “Apartment Warming” pieces of furniture, dishes, cookware, and appliances—and none of it cost a penny. Or *centimu* as they called it here. All Clara wanted was a bed to sleep in, so she stuck with that before hitting the Complete Order button. “Why is it offering meatballs while we wait? And...it’s playing music while it fabs? *What* all began with a god named Thor? And what is it with this planet and songs about Vikings, anyway?”

“It’s that pop-cultural in-joke thing again. You see, this is why Earth has waited so long to invade us. They take one look at us and decide we’re all so crazy that all of the stories about our technological advances lack credibility.” She sighed. “Or at least they *had* done. I suppose I can say from personal experience that they’re getting over it.”

“Is there some kind of a wikipedia or tropes page or something that lists all of these? I think I may need to keep it handy.”

“...*everyone has a home. And if you don’t have a home you can buy one there!*” the fabber sang as it finished. A moment later, a blue wooden crate slid out of one of the larger fabber outputs, containing the entire order.

Lubyanka leaned over and picked it up by a large handle. “This is where being a Fuser comes in handy. Otherwise, you’d need a hand truck to cart it back to your room.”

The instructions were simple: Place in center of room, activate, then move out of the way. When she did, Clara realized that the “self-

assembling” advertised really meant *exactly* that. Using built-in micro-lifters the bedframe put itself together, then the mattress unfolded and started expanding. The pillows were in small capsules. Just one button push and a toss, they inflated themselves on the floor. They pushed the bed’s headboard up against the wall.

“Looks like you’ll have to make the bed yourself,” Lubyanka said, gesturing at the purple sheets with her nose. “Since the bed already *made* itself.”

“This planet’s going to spoil me.” Clara put her hands on her hips, then she pulled on the front of her shirt. “You know, I guess we *could* go shopping. Or should. Find something more fitting to start my life as Clara. In both senses.”

“I’m sure our friends would like to come along,” Lubyanka said.

“Meh...they’ve got their own transportation, all of whom have also been here before. Let ‘em find the place themselves. We’re not going to do *everything* together. We’d stop being able to stand each other in short order.”

“Very well. Shall we?”

“Sure, lead the way.” Clara followed Lubyanka out the door and down the hall to the elevator.

Later that evening, Clara laid on her back on purple sheets, staring at the ceiling and reflecting on the events of the day. It had been a singularly busy one, and one of the weirdest ones she’d ever had. But then, what else could you say about a day when you woke up on another planet?

Now that she had time alone to reflect, Clara wondered what her parents would think of her disappearance. *Had* thought of it, given that the event was more over a year gone. She hoped they were doing all right. But it wasn’t as if she could write them a letter to ask.

But it had turned out well so far. She and Lubyanka had a place of their own, with decent if sparse furnishings, and thanks to Harriet they had one of the richest men on the planet on their side. Which should mean at least they’d be able to find good jobs here so they could start earning their own living.

The only thing that really worried her was her own feelings toward

Tom. For all that Quinoa had explained to her that attraction was perfectly normal and didn't mean she was a bad person, she was still conflicted about it. Did being a straight man *always* translate to being a straight woman for crossriders? What was *Tom* going to think of her? Let alone her parents, if and when they ever found out.

She pulled on the collar of her night new shirt, looking down her cleavage, wondering how many crossriders did something like this their first days after. *Cleavage gazing? I wonder if Tim's laying in bed, looking at his...er... let's not go there.*

Then her thoughts turned to the collateral damage. Namely, the furry convention-goers in Springfield, not to mention the rest of the community on Earth. The Feds had a habit of scaling "recolonization" ticket costs to how useful the person was to society, the more expensive, the less they wanted the potential emigrant to leave. If they were angry enough they might even just place them all in cryo for free and send them away.

Clara felt herself drifting nearer to sleep, but there was something she had to find out. She pinged her partner. *:Luby, can you do me a favor and see if there's any news from Earth on a mass recolonization of furrries this past year or so?:*

:I have already been looking. I see nothing relevant, apart from a few stories about the brief controversy surrounding F3 apparently concealing a military prototype. But bear in mind, we only have access to the news from three or four months after we left, and whatever was deemed important enough for public dissemination from diplomatic torpedoes. We did not travel that much more slowly than ordinary passenger ships. Any organized expulsion would take longer than that to assemble.:

:I guess Harriet got us a more direct route than the Stonegates could afford.: Clara sighed, which turned into a yawn. *:Well, thanks for trying.:*

:Pozhalusta. Good night.:

Clara yawned again, pulling herself more deeply under the covers, and drifted off to sleep.

THE END