

Impossible Things

By JonBuck and Robotech_Master

*Well I would not give you false hope
On this strange and mournful day
But the mother and child reunion
Is only a motion away.*
—Paul Simon

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.
—African proverb

*March 12, 151 A.L.
Cavorite Caravans used skimmer dealership, Baltica*

“Only a hundred and sixty *muuuuuuu*,” the bull-eared man mused. He leaned against a battered chartreuse-and-white skimmer van with classic curved lines and a Volkswagen emblem, addressing a small group of tired-looking men and women standing before him. “For this fine, classic retro flyin’ machine? Only one owner, a tourist family from Eridani. It’s a steal.”

Arlene Gates squinted at the display on the back of her cybernetic right hand. The woman was in her mid-sixties, though modern anti-agathics made her only seem to be in her late thirties—still considered young, when a typical lifespan now approached 150 years. She wore a severely plain blouse and dark slacks. Her dark blond hair fell around her shoulders in tight curls. The inexpensive cybernetics of her right arm and legs hummed. “We don’t quite have that much, Mr. Saleen.”

The salesman raised an eyebrow. “What do you have?”

She showed him the attached display, currently listing the balance of her wallet account. There were dark circles under her youthful violet eyes. The family had only been thawed out for a matter of hours and hadn’t had any chance to adjust to anything. “We can offer a hundred forty-two.”

“Sold!”

:Unbelievable,: Arlene’s second-youngest child Ivor sent to the rest of their family. *:At these exchange rates...even something like...what’d he call it?:*

:1964 Volkswagen Microbus camper replica,: Ivor’s father Roy Stone replied. The 68-year old man’s demeanor said lawyer to anyone looking. His face had the chiseled, strong-jawed “courtroom look” popular in his profession. Unlike the rest of his family, his hair was black. He had a sharp, direct expression in his charismatic blue eyes. His colleagues had often said he had courtroom Presence. He appeared to be in his early forties. *:Something they pulled out of an Earth history database, I imagine. I don’t get it. This design is five hundred years old, for Chrissakes!:*

:Well, except for having lifters built into its wheels, and a hardlight aeroshell. Anyway, whatever it is, it’d cost at least a hundred times as much used back ho—I mean, back on Earth.: Ivor said. *:Even in this condition. I mean, geez, if that thing gets us all the way to Uplift it’ll be a wonder. We’re talking thousands of clicks, Ma. It’s a huge-ass planet.:*

:It’s only about a quarter of what sub tickets would run for all of us,: Arlene’s mother Socah chimed in. She appeared to be an attractive young woman in worn North American Army fatigue coveralls, with blonde hair worn in a Mohawk on top that tailed off into a long ponytail in back. It was only on looking closer that one might notice the

plastic consistency of her skin, or hear the faint whir of worn-out servos grinding when she moved. *:So if it does get us that far and dies, we'll still come out ahead.:*

:I still don't see why we couldn't have commed ahead,: Ivor's sister Olivia grumbled. She had curly blond hair, like her mother, and her father's blue eyes—though they were cybernetically enhanced so much there was little natural about them. Neither plump nor petite, still having her original legs, she had cultivated a fit runner's physique. *:Or even do it now. If we'd let him know we were coming—:*

:We've been over that,: Ivor and Olivia's brother Ferris said. He was the oldest of Arlene and Roy's children, in his late-40s, green-eyed, wavy-haired and a little overweight. The stereotypical absent-minded professor, he was more often in his internal research databases than paying much attention to the outside world. His clothes were already unkempt-looking, for all they'd been folded in storage for several years. *:It wouldn't be fair to have that hanging over his head for three years. He made it on his own, and if we have to we can too.:*

:And there wouldn't be any point in calling him now when we can get the rest of the way on our own,: Socah said. *:We've come almost thirty light years on that tramp freighter. What's a few thousand clicks now?:*

The youngest—Olivia—was twenty-six, so they didn't have the excuse of traveling with young children. Every single one of them had contributed to paying for the roundabout voyage from Earth to Zharus, selling organs for cheaper-to-maintain cybernetics. It had cost more than just an arm and a leg—three lungs, a liver, two spleens, and a couple of kidneys had paid the bill. Arlene Gates and Roy Stone had had to pull up stakes and leave the planet as fast as they could at the time for reasons they still wouldn't go into. There were yet more extended family members still *en route*.

Three years in cryo later, they'd been awoken in some city called Baltica, situated in a rift valley on the northern edge of the supercontinent Gondwana. They had supposed to have been offloaded in Aloha, but after some digging Grandma Socah had found the freighter captain had somehow gotten them down more cheaply here instead, which had been beneficial for their thin wallet. From the standpoint of circumnavigating the continent, it had actually cut tens of thousands of clicks off the final leg of their trip. Baltica was at the twelve o'clock position on Gondwana, whereas Aloha was at seven. Either way, it was still going to be a long trip to Uplift at the two o'clock slot.

Six Earthers whose freshest memories of their origin world were subjectively only a few hours old, trying to haggle down the price on something that looked straight out of the Ground Transport Museum in New Boston. Paradoxically, the fact that both they and the salesman were fully aware of the ridiculousness of the situation actually seemed to act as a bond between them. Or maybe the salesman was just very good at making it seem that way. He probably met a lot of ex-Earthers in their situation, Ivor reflected.

Baltica was apparently a new "polity" as they called them here, barely a decade old. They needed warm bodies to supervise construction and other tasks, but none of the new immigrants felt any need to stick around. Not when their ultimate destination was only a few thousand clicks away.

"So, uh..." Ivor said, scratching his head. His cybernetic right forearm bulged with built-in multitools he'd refused to sell. His hand transformed, extending a scanner that went *ping*. "Where's the boron fuel slug go? Back home, something this size uses a half-meter poly."

"What 'chu folks have got here is a gen-u-ine B-class sarium battery pack," the

salesman said, handing out a few printed pages. “You wouldn’t heard of ‘em, being fresh off the boat an’ all, but just lookie at the manual. The one biggie is, if you pick up sarium cells for cameras, comms, or cyber, don’t *never* try to charge one sarium battery from another. You zero out both batts, and maybe fry ‘em too. Some quantum thingie or other. Ya got a small fuel cell generator on board to charge your gadgets, or the bus’s cells in a pinch iffen ya run out short of the next charging station.”

Ivor gawped at the battery specifications. “*G’wow!*”

“Let me see that,” Olivia said. She soon joined her brother in gawping. “Holy sshhhh...look at this, Ivor! This is impossible! The energy density is just...impossible!”

“When you charge up them batteries, you get back what you put in a hundred times over. I guarantee you folks’ll see ten impossible things afore lunchtime tomorra here on Zharus,” the salesman said. “She’s all ready to go for you nice folks. I wish you luck.”

“Can I ask a personal question, Mr. Saleen?” Olivia asked.

“It’s the ears, ain’t it?” the salesman said with good humor. “And the tail.”

“And having a *huge* bull for a pet,” the young woman continued, pointing at the bull placidly chewing his cud. “I’ve heard of people looking like their pets, but...”

“Oh, you’ll find that a lot around these parts,” Saleen said evasively. “Local fashion.”

“Very interesting,” Ferris said. “Earth’s so damned homogenous these days, you know. Far too little for an Anthropologist like myself to really sink my teeth into.”

“You mean, what isn’t in VL, right?” Ivor pointed out. “Plenty going on in there.”

Arlene’s motherly intuition sensed an old argument brewing between the brothers. Ferris was nineteen years older than Ivor. They had rather differing generational views on Virtual Life. “We’re ready to go, so let’s not burn daylight here.”

“Thanks again, Mr. Saleen,” Roy Stone said. “Everyone, get in. We’re going.”

“Y’all are nice folks. I wish ya the best of luck in your new home,” the skimmer salesman said.

Clem Saleen and his RIDE watched them go. The Hereford bull hadn’t said a word through the whole exchange, not wanting to spook the Earthers. Once they were out of earshot he spoke up. “Ya know, Clem, that there skimmer was worth at least five hundred.”

Clem doffed his hat, using it to fan his sweaty face. “I know, my friend. But those folks really needed a lucky break. I ain’t never seen anyone as fresh off the boat as them, or quite so worn-down lookin’. They don’t know *thing one* about us. You did good keepin’ quiet. They started asking questions ‘bout you, they’d be here all day.”

“Yer welcome, Clem.” The bull RIDE looked thoughtfully in the direction the Earthers had gone. “I think, between them, they have more metal than I’m even made of. Ain’t enough flesh there to build three humans, let alone six.”

“Price a’ doing bidness iffen ye can’t afford fancy cruise tickets,” Clem reflected. “Anyway, good luck to ‘em, and that’s the end of it. Now let’s see if we can’t make up the difference on our next few customers, huh?”

They stopped at a roadside park an hour outside of Baltica for Ivor to break out his tools and rebalance the lifters, with a little help from Socah. It took them almost a whole hour, but by the time they finished the others could tell the difference in the motors’ harmonics. “Should be good for up to 400 kph now,” Ivor said, retracting his

tools back into his arm. The second youngest of the family was somewhat of a metalhead, with visibly cybernetic arms and legs, and replacement eyes that could glow. There was very little left of him that was still organic. “Still wouldn’t take it over 350 for long stretches, though.”

“Great! So, while we’re here, let’s eat.” Olivia nodded to a nearby picnic table. “This thing has an amazing food fabber. Not gourmet or anything, but it makes passable ham sandwiches.” She patted the cabinet across from the door, designed to resemble the micro-kitchenette fixture from a vintage microbus camper. A progress meter composed of tiny incandescent lights slowly filled.

“I’m still trying to figure out how it can do that,” Socah reflected. “That’s not any bigger than the boxes we got in the field back in the 56th. And all *those* did was make rat bars and nothing else.”

Olivia looked more closely at the side of the van. “Ivor, zoom in real tight on the van with one of your arm sensors. My eyes are picking up...the *hell* is that?” The young woman and everyone else looked into the sky.

“I think it’s a whale,” Grandma Socah said matter-of-factly. “California gray whale.”

“Two hundred meters long?” Roy said. “Flying? You can see the skin *flexing*.”

“Probably some kind of publicity stunt. It’s just hardlight,” Arlene said dismissively. Her mood had turned towards the irritable since leaving the city.

“C’mon, Mom, you need some food,” Olivia said, carrying a platter of sandwiches and a bottle of orange juice out to the table. “We all do. Feels like it’s been *years* since our last meal.”

“Well, *that* joke won’t ever get old,” Ferris mused, climbing out of the van after her and stretching. He shaded his eyes and glanced up at the sky, which was a little more turquoise than Earth’s. “Funny, it feels like it ought to be later. Thirty-hour days, I guess. Won’t acclimating to *that* be fun?” He shook his head. “But you were saying, Livy? About the van?”

“I think it’s fabbed, not printed and assembled. Nano-fabbed in one piece, I mean. Molecular-level. Just looking at the tolerances between components,” Olivia said. “Still cheap, though.”

“That reminds me, I haven’t seen any other ‘borgs like us since we thawed,” Ivor mused. “At least, not ones who weren’t fresh off the ships like us.”

“I wanted to see what that sky whale’s about, but I can’t get the mesh to work at all,” Socah said. “I think we have some fundamental software issues here.”

“I can’t get mine to work right, either, and it’s *specialized* for research,” Ferris said, like an addict jonesing for a fix.

“Maybe big bro can hook us up with some patches or something when we get to Uplift,” Olivia said, dishing out five full-sized sandwiches and a finger sandwich for Socah. “We ought to get there by tomorrow morning if we drive all day and night.”

The others sat down and bit into their sandwiches. “Hey, these aren’t bad,” Roy said. “About like convenience store food back on Earth.”

“This *is* good,” Arlene said, her mood improving with each bite. “And it’s nice to know we can eat like this on the go.”

Socah nibbled at her sandwich. “For those of us who *get* to eat much, anyway.”

“Mom, I swear we’re going to get you a new FBR prosthesis once we have the money,” Arlene said. “That one has always given me the shivers.”

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Socah said, waving a hand. “I like to grumble. You kids have more important stuff to spend your cash on. Like that bunch coming in the second ship.”

If it had just been the six of them they could have easily come over on one of the fast Earth-Zharus spaceliners, as Arlene and Roy’s middle son had years before them. But for the whole clan sacrifices had to be made. There were *many* more extended family members on another tramp freighter, due to arrive half a year later at the earliest. Hopefully long enough for them to get established with their son in Uplift.

“This is just so *exciting!*” Olivia burst out, rubbing her hands together. “A whole new world to explore...new sights to see...”

“New technology to figure out,” Ivor said around a mouthful of sandwich, his eyes flickering as he scanned through printed documents on his optic displays. “This qubitite stuff...g’wow!”

“New peoples to study,” Ferris put in.

“New...cases to argue?” Roy chuckled and shook his head. “No, that doesn’t quite scan, does it?”

Arlene patted him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, dear. I’m sure we’ll find *something* to keep us busy.”

Socah finished her medicine glass full of orange juice. “Speaking of busy, you all should probably break out the bedrolls and catch some downtime while I take the first shift driving. I don’t get as tired as you mostly-squishies, so it’s the logical thing to do.”

Arlene nodded. “Good idea.”

“The manual says we can even have the camper roof up while we’re moving, if we extend the aeroshell,” Olivia said. “So it won’t be too crowded for us all to sleep.” She gathered up their used plates and bottle and took them back to the microbus to dump into the recycler. “I guess we ought to get started. It’s a long way to Uplift.”

They piled back into the VW and pulled back out onto the road. As Olivia busied herself with popping up the roof that extended into a canvassed-in slant-roofed sleeping area, Arlene glanced at the rear-view monitor in time to see a skimmer cycle with huge rear lifter pods pull into the lot they’d just left—and then, as its rider climbed off, just before they turned the corner blocking it from view, she *swore* she saw the motorcycle abruptly turn into a giant white rabbit. *I think Mom is right*, she thought wryly. *I do need a nap.*

March 13, 151 A.L.

Coastal Ring Skimmerway, approaching the Traverse Tunnel

Twenty hours, two minor breakdowns, and three recharging stops later, the novelty was starting to fade a little. Everyone had managed to catch up on their rest for the time being, and even Socah had taken an hour’s snooze. Of course, they’d woken up pretty much as the sun was setting, and the night-time driving meant they didn’t have much chance to gawk at the scenery. Besides the ZPS navigation, the Coastal Ring Skimmerway was delineated by sparse, lifter-supported floating lane markers and the occasional rest stop in the sky. Most of the time the van’s autopilot did the work.

They were able to gawk at the night sky, however, especially after Olivia found out how to turn the roof transparent. Thanks to Gondwana’s lack of population density, there were practically no lights to block the view, and 20 light-years was close enough to

Earth that the constellations were still largely familiar, though Sol itself wasn't visible at this time of year. It was almost like being out in space again. Faint aurorae shimmered in the planet's weak magnetic field in green curtains and blue streamers.

As morning approached, the rising sun across the sea to the east was almost as dramatic as the starry night sky. "Would you look at that?" Olivia murmured, leaning against the left-side window and clicking photo after photo through her implants.

"You know, sis, you don't *have* to record everything as if we're never going to see it again," Ivor chuckled. He had the right-hand spot in the van's middle seat, while Arlene drove and Roy sat shotgun. "We're not exactly *tourists*."

"Is that why *your* optics are in record mode, too?" Olivia teased.

Another intriguing sight, more visible in daylight, was all the other traffic. Back on Earth, most consumer skimmer vehicles had a kind of monotonous sameness to them, more or less a single shape only in different colors, like so many flying Easter eggs. Here there were vehicles of every description, most of them seemingly pulled willy-nilly from one museum or another. There were also some fanciful designs that had to have been pulled right out of Earth's Oil Age science fiction. Ferris was able to place a few of them, Socah a few more, but without access to the mesh to look things up most of them stumped even them. "Why is it this place seems to care more about our planet's past than *it* does?" Arlene wondered.

"I imagine there's probably a paper in that somewhere," Ferris mused. "Hmm... calling up my internal research database...wasn't there some rich guy from the colonies about fifty or sixty years back that dug up everything he could about the twentieth century? He dumped the whole *unindexed* database on the Feds before he went back home."

"They were brothers. Joseph and Mikel Steader. Their family financed about half the Colonies up until Zharus," Socah said from the back seat, next to Ferris. "The 56th was assigned to them during their digs. Really nice guys, for some value of 'nice guys' that includes 'a little funny in the head.'"

"That's them," Ferris said. "I kept applying for access to that database over the years, but *never* got approved. We don't know much about pre-Oil Crash history. Not allowing free access was criminal, in my view."

"Well, now we know where it all went," Roy mused. "Copyright law's not my field, but even if all that stuff was in *Earth's* public domain, that doesn't mean they had the right to disseminate it freely here. They should've paid licensing fees."

"Actually, they did," Ferris said. "Almost ten billion dollars to the UN. It was big in the news. Crazy zillionaire pays a fortune for rights to crap nobody cares about anymore, that kind of thing."

"Oh, yeah, now I remember," Roy said, snapping his fingers. "Wasn't paying that much attention at the time. I was little young."

"From the tourist stuff I was able to grab before we left, this place has a reputation as being like a 20th century theme park on a global scale," Olivia said.

"I have to admit, I can kinda see the appeal," Ivor said. "They at least a sense of style back then in how they made stuff. Basic skimmer design back on Earth hasn't changed in at least fifty years. And look at this!" He held up a print magazine he had bought at the last recharge station, the latest issue of *Hot Rod Skimmers*. "Turns out *this* is where Mario Donizetti went. His name's all over this magazine. I wonder if the Volante's any cheaper here?"

“Maybe we could pick one up at the next charging stop,” Socah said dryly. “You saw the size of those public fabbers! I *swear* I saw a choice to make a whole new skim-cycle, like a giant vending machine. Cost two thousand *mus*, though.”

“Two thousand *mu*, Grandma,” Ferris corrected idly. “It’s an irregular plural, like ‘deer’ or ‘elk’.”

“Gee, thanks, Professor,” Socah snorted. “Nice to see all that book-learning turned out to be good for something.”

“The sat-nav says we’re almost to the Traverse Tunnel,” Arlene said. “Look for a giant hole in the mountainside.”

“I want to see the Western Wall someday,” Olivia said excitedly. “Mount Wahoo, almost twice as high as Everest! This planet is so huge! Everything is bigger, faster, taller.”

“These cliffs here are impressive enough for me right now,” Roy said. “Good thing there *is* a tunnel. Hope we don’t miss it and drive on by.”

“I don’t think there’s any danger of that,” Arlene said. “Look!” She pointed out the windshield to the dark gap that had just opened up ahead. Multiple lanes of traffic in several layers were entering and leaving. “It must be fifty stories tall!”

Ivor leaned forward, placing his hands on the driver and passenger seat to support him. “See if you can find a rest stop or something once we get in,” he said. “I don’t like the way the lifters are starting to sound.”

“I don’t much like the way they’re handling, myself,” Arlene said. “I was hoping we could make it to the next charge station, but...”

“I think the cav’s starting to go,” Ivor said, tapping into the skimmer’s diagnostic port. “This was quality stuff, but the previous owner pushed this bucket too hard. The layers are delaminating. I can’t fix it without a muon flush, and, well...”

“Can you patch it together enough to make Uplift?” Arlene asked. “It’s just an hour or so away.”

Ivor shrugged. “I’m all out of tricks, Mom. I’ve done everything I can with the tools I have. Maybe *big bro* could fix it, but not me.”

“Ivor, you’re twenty-eight years old,” Arlene reproved. “Stop sounding like a petulant teenager. Just do what you can and hope it’ll be good enough.”

As they entered the tunnel, the microbus lurched, as the front left lifter blew out with a bang, making the van lurch. “Oh crap!” Arlene shouted, slapping the emergency flashers and local distress beacon. “Hold on tight, everyone!” She throttled back and steered the limping bus toward a small parking lot along one edge of the tunnel’s floor. It was a testament to her piloting skill that they made it down in one piece.

Once they’d come to a complete stop, Ivor slid the door aside and clambered out. He looked at the left front corner and sighed.

“How bad is it?” Arlene asked, leaning out the window.

“The wheel is...well, *gone*,” Ivor said. “We’ve got a spare, but it looks like it took the suspension with it, too. I don’t know how we can fix this without parts and a garage.”

“Dammit, and we were so close!” Arlene said, banging her meat fist on the dashboard. She’d learned to be careful what she did with the metal one, even in exasperation.

“Maybe we can hitchhike the rest of the way?” Olivia suggested, clambering out and leaning down to inspect the damage for herself. “Or even walk? I’ve done the Nome-

to-Fuego Marathon before, and you all have cyber legs.”

“I suppose we could comm ahead for help, but...I wanted to show up triumphantly,” Arlene grumbled. “Not have to be picked up like some damn fool teenager who ran out of gas.”

“Maybe some passing motorist will stop and offer to help,” Roy said, opening his door and climbing out. He waved his hands at the passing traffic above—a little unnecessarily, since the local distress beacon would do a lot better job getting the word out.

Socah and Ferris stepped out through the open door and looked around. The parking lot adjoined a small park, placed below a light shaft overhead and also well-positioned to catch the morning light from the eastern tunnel entrance. There were a couple of small diners nearby, and a skimmer charging station, but not a lot else. “If we had to break down, at least we picked a scenic spot for it,” Ferris reflected.

“I haven’t seen anything yet on this planet that I haven’t loved,” Olivia added. “What’s happened to Earth, anyway? Everything’s so drab and boring outside of VL.”

“There are some interesting socio-cultural theories about that,” Ferris said. “But...I *think* that was a rhetorical question. I’m not always the best at noticing those.” He grinned.

“Hurry up and wait, then. I’m sure someone will happen along,” Roy said.

“Someone just did,” a friendly voice called from above. “Howdy, everyone! Gondwanan Federated Marshals, Tunnel Patrol, the name’s Richford. I’ll have you back in the air in a jiffy.”

The first thing they noticed about him was the wide-brimmed Stetson hat and dark gray duster he wore, with a star on the lapel that had four silver points and the fifth one of shiny chrome. The second thing was the black raccoon mask, a muzzle, clawed fingertips, and a black-striped gray *tail*. He was fairly short, the triangular ears poking above the brim of his hat only just bringing him to Arlene’s height. He also had two glowing discs on his temples.

:*What...the...hell is he?:* Ivor sputtered to the rest of his family, scanners on full.
:*Some kind of furry android?:*

“If you don’t mind me saying,” the raccoon apparition said, “you folks look like you’re fresh off the boat from Earth. I’ll be outta your way fast. Just let me collect the parts that fell off.” He lifted off the ground and flew away a short distance. The detached wheel floated up next to him. It looked undamaged despite the high speed impact and explosive cavorite burnout.

“Land O’ Goshen,” Grandma Socah exclaimed.

“It’s just some kind of lifter manipulation field,” Ivor said weakly. “I think.”

When he came back, a collection of broken things floating in the air behind him, only Ivor could say anything. “Are you an alien or something?”

“I’m *something*, folks. Just about the opposite of alien. You could say I’m Zharus’s only *native* sapient species,” Richford said. He chuckled. “*You’re* the ones from another planet here.”

“He’s got us there,” Roy said.

“No offense, but I’m amazed this thing got you this far,” the raccoon-man continued. The parts hovered in front of him. “Cheap vending-fabber junk tourists buy for temp transportation. I can patch it enough to get you to Uplift, if that’s where you’re going.”

Ivor popped his own scanners again. “Just what are you doing? There’s *no way* you can fix it.”

The coon chuckled. “Oh ye of little faith. All I can say is, welcome to Zharus. I hope you love it here. Watch. This is a little talent of mine.”

The suspension reattached itself to the wheel, the cracks in the cheaply-fabbed parts welding themselves together. Richford took a perfectly-sized chunk of cavorite out of one of the pockets in his duster and installed it in the wheel hub. “Rev up the other lifters if you please so I can get this reinstalled. I can’t lift the whole thing.”

Ivor stared, eyes glowing a skeptical blue. “But you can’t just—it doesn’t *work* that way!”

“Humor me, sir,” the Marshal said.

Arlene shrugged. “I’m not gonna argue with a raccoon with a badge.” She climbed back into the microbus and started the motors. The bus lifted gently off the ground, tilted toward the lower right.

“Watch closely.” The wheel and suspension parts clicked into place with a few sparks. The furry Marshal sighed with exhaustion as the microbus righted itself. “Run those diagnostics. They should be firmly yellow, but it’ll get you to Uplift.”

“He’s right,” Ivor confirmed. “Holy Jesus fuck. Excuse my French, Grans.”

“Don’t worry about it,” the old woman said. She stared at Richford openly. “Is that some kind of custom full body replacement prosthesis?”

The raccoon chuckled. “Not exactly in the way you mean, Ma’am, but close enough.”

“I knew some furry folks in VL,” Olivia said. “Looked a lot like you. Dabbled in it myself—was just a generic vixen—but I’m the only daughter of a big shot lawyer and a federal judge, so I had to drop it. We get a lot of scrutiny.”

Richford grinned, pearly white teeth making a startling contrast against his darker-furred face. “You might find being on another planet is a really liberating experience. Best of luck to you all.”

“Thanks, Marshal,” Arlene said. “How can we ever repay you?”

“Oh, don’t worry about repaying *me*, ma’am,” the raccoon said, touching the brim of his hat. “It’s my job. If you want to pay someone, then pay it forward next time *you* see someone broken down at the side of the road.”

Arlene nodded. “We’ll do that.”

“Safe trip to Uplift, folks!” the raccoon said. “You-all take care now.” He launched himself into the sky again, and moments later had vanished back up the tunnel.

“Did that just happen? That just happened!” Ivor said, utterly dumbfounded. “A flying raccoon furry dressed like a cowboy completely *impossibly* fixed our piece of junk skimmer. That just happened.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say completely *fixed*, little brother,” Olivia said. “Look at these warning lights. This’ll last maybe the last hundred clicks, so we’d better hustle.”

“I think that’s just nine more impossible things we have left to see before lunchtime,” Ferris said. “For some value of lunchtime.”

“It’s always lunchtime somewhere,” Roy said, climbing back into the shotgun seat. “All aboard, everyone! We’d better hit the road while we’ve still got a car.”

The family piled back aboard, and Arlene opened the throttle. The little bus accelerated up the tunnel, leaving the entrance behind.

The trip through the tunnel took almost an hour, as Arlene insisted on holding the bus down to 150 kph to try to eke as much distance out of the faltering lifters as they could. But the rest of the family didn't really mind so much as it gave them more time to gawk at the Brobdingnagian proportions of the tunnel around them. "It's like a whole other *world* in here," Olivia said. "Parks...buildings...roads...light shafts...whole small towns!"

"I think there are some buildings on the top, too," Socah said. "I catch glimpses of roofs as we pass under the holes, and there are those 'Next Elevator: 3 K' road signs."

"How could they even have *built* something like this?" Ivor wondered. "They'd have had to move enough stone to fill in the Grand Canyon three times over. Where did they put all of it?"

"Perhaps this is our next 'Impossible Thing,'" Ferris mused. "Once we have the mesh back we can delve into the hows and wherefores all we want."

"We're sure as hell not in Kansas anymore," Arlene said.

"Have we *ever* been in Kansas?" Roy wondered.

Arlene rolled her eyes. "It's an expression, dear."

Roy chuckled. "I know."

They passed a sign broadcasting "West Tunnel Mouth: 10 K. Uplift East Dome Entrance: 15 K." "Well, this is it," Arlene said. "We're about to get our first glimpse of our new home." The tunnel mouth was so large, the light was visible even at this distance. The atmosphere inside the microbus grew more hushed as everyone held their breath. Then, finally, they emerged into the light.

"Damn, it's *hot* outside," Socah said, glancing at the environmental display on the dash. The landscape just outside the tunnel mouth was bleak and bare of vegetation, a complete contrast to the lush entrance. "Near seventy! How do folks live in this kind of heat if they aren't 'borged?"

"I imagine it's like the domes on Mars," Roy said. "We should see something just 'round the...bend..." He trailed off as his eyes adjusted to the glare and took in the forest of shimmering domes laid out before them. "Son of a gun!"

"Okay, everyone. We have to stop this. We can't keep gawping breathlessly at every new thing just around the corner," Arlene said. "But, I have to admit, *damn* that's beautiful. It's like a city in a snow globe—a *dozen* snow globes. We have our whole lives ahead of us here."

"Make you a deal, Mom...we'll stop gawping when stuff stops being so... incredible," Olivia said. "That's number what? Three or four on the Impossible Things list? I'm already losing track here. There was always talk of using hardlight like this on Mars, but the government never went for it. I mean, it's an *obvious* use, right?"

"Assuming the emitters are an order of magnitude more efficient than Earth's. Which I guess they are," Ivor said. "Hardlight was invented out here, after all. Well, on Wednesday, anyway, which is like right next door to here. And they don't like Earth very much, so they don't share their advances." The microbus's ride started getting a little rough. "Slow down, Mom. I think the rear lifters are getting gimped now."

"I'm going to set it down on the road," Arlene said. "We'll just have to go the last few clicks on wheels. Lucky thing they're functional, not ornamental."

"I can't remember the last time I drove something that rolled on wheels," Roy mused. "Bicycle in my college days maybe?"

"Wheels are still big in the Army," Socah said. "Or at least they were when I was

in the 56th. You don't fall twenty meters from taking a hit to your tire."

"A fair point, Grandma," Ferris agreed.

As soon as the wheels touched ground, a roaring noise came from where the rear engine compartment would have been. The illusory air-cooled internal combustion engine apparently wheezed trying to keep the replica Volkswagen at 60 kph. Arlene quickly shut it off just as they went through the gate into the Dome. "That's a little ridiculous."

"I dunno, Mom," Ivor mused. "I kind of like the effect. It sort of goes with the rest of the car."

She snorted. "Well, you can turn it on again when *you* drive, then." She looked around as they emerged onto the inner street. "And here we are! Where's our son's place again? We need a map or we'll be driving around for hours."

"Didn't he say it was on the first big street once you get into the dome?" Roy said. "That would be...this one, it looks like."

Arlene spun the steering wheel, turning a sharp right. Fortunately there was little ground traffic this early except for some large animals similar to the skimmer salesman's bull that she assumed were more robotic pets doing errands, and others in humanoid shapes, like bulkier versions of the raccoon Marshal.

"Look! I think that might be it—that cluster of buildings!" Olivia pointed excitedly ahead. "It looks different from the videos—a whole lot bigger. Guess business must have been good the last three years."

"Well, we'll soon have the chance to ask," Ivor said, the envy in his voice clear to everyone.

"This had *better* be it," Arlene said. "I don't think this thing's got more than another klick or two left in it." She pulled the vehicle up in front of the largest of the buildings, and it ambled to a stop right under the large sign that read "FREERIDERS GARAGE."

If there had ever been a night to finally cross the line, last night had been it. To say Zane was a tiger in bed was redundant, since her Integrate boyfriend was a tiger *everywhere*, but if there had ever been any doubt... Rhianna dreamily walked down the quiet street barefoot, humming to herself in the persisting faint afterglow. "You make me feel like a natural woman..." she sang.

Rhianna Stonegate wore a slinky blue dress from her date, carrying her low-heeled shoes by the straps. Her long tawny hair was mussed, and looked like it'd been groomed by a very large cat, which was exactly the case. For the occasion—yesterday was the one-year anniversary of when Kaylee had finally crossed her over to womanhood—her RIDE partner had given her the ability to purr.

Even the presence of the inevitable journalistic floater or two couldn't spoil her mood. She hadn't done anything newsworthy lately, and didn't intend to—even her relationship with Zane was old news. The only reason any of them were still following her at all was that they were so cheap that the news agencies could afford to toss them around like loose change. Another few days and she'd probably fall completely off their radar.

:I'm so glad you enjoyed it so much,: the lynx RIDE sent through their link. She had already gone back to the Garage to check in on the graveyard shift. Ever since the Fritz affair they were open thirty hours a day, six days a week, like a hospital. In fact,

they didn't even fix skimmers anymore. *:Humans! Y'all are always in heat!:* Kaylee jibed good-naturedly.

Entering the grounds through the Dreamchaser's hangar rather than the front, Rhianna paused to reflect. *:You know Kay, when you get down to brass tacks, I really don't feel all that different all the time. Except there are times when I want to go off the pill...and I really feel like a woman right now. It's delicious.:*

Kaylee snorted across the link. *:It's just hormones, you know. Same thing that makes guys roll over and go to sleep afterward.:*

:Oh, so is that why playing Nature Range makes you feel more like a cat?: Rhianna teased.

:Touché,: Kaylee replied, chuckling.

:So, what's gone on here while Zane and I were boinking?: She had put Kaylee in charge of the graveyard shift.

:Think business is finally starting to fall off, Rhi. I don't think we can keep a full third shift much longer,: the lynx RI said. *:Just the emergency crew.:* Since the Fritz affair, Rhi had needed to hire additional staff to keep up with the spike in demand from all the publicity. In a lot of ways this had been a good thing, as it let the garage serve as a training ground for the fledgling franchises. Many of the temporarily-expanded staff would be going on to jobs with the new branches in the next few weeks.

:Think I'll go say hi to the staff before I catnap for a few hours. I'm slightly overdressed, but I don't care. I feel good and I want to spread a cheerful face around a little.: Rhianna smiled broadly.

:I'm sure they'll be glad to see ya. The Lindae should be around in half an hour or thereabouts to take the next shift, then I'll probably join you in a nap,: Kaylee replied.

:Sounds good.: Rhianna stepped into her private garage under the apartment, placing her shoes on a tool chest next to the stairway where she could grab them when she went back up the stairs. She continued out into the more public areas, where a few of the apprentices and other staff were working on the few jobs they had in at the time. She stopped to glance in on some of them, and offer the occasional bit of advice on tricky cases. She didn't have to do that nearly as much now as a couple of months before, she noted with satisfaction. The new hires were all shaping up really nicely, and they'd be a credit to the franchises lucky enough to get them.

She was just on the point of turning around to go back to the apartment when a movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention. Glancing out one of the windows, she saw a chartreuse VW microbus *roll* to a halt just outside. It looked almost decrepit enough to have been an actual period piece rather than a skimmer replica.

:Hey, Kay, you see what just pulled up?:

She sensed Kaylee's return smirk over their link. *:Yeah. Tourists, looks like. Guess they didn't get the word we don't do skimmers anymore?:*

:For anyone stuck with that piece of junk, I might make an exception,: Rhianna said. *:It looks like it's about thirty seconds from falling apart like the Bluesmobile.:* She shook her head bemusedly. *:Must've just pulled into the nearest garage they could find. Well, guess I might as well go welcome them. I won't turn away a needy customer like that.:*

Rhianna stepped out of the garage just as the doors on the VW slid open and people started clambering out. "Hey there, strangers. Can I help...you...?" Rhi blinked drowsily in the sunlight as they stepped down. There was something familiar about

them, but her foggy, sleep-deprived mind couldn't quite seem to place it—then the shield of utter disbelief shattered.

“Hello, Miss,” Roy Stone said amiably. “We’re looking for Ryan Stonegate. I was wondering if you could tell us where we might find him.”

“We were just in the neighborhood and thought we’d stop in and say hello,” Arlene Gates smirked.

The shock that flowed through their link hit Kaylee like being whacked with a spanner. *:Uh, Rhi? What’s wrong?:*

:Uh...buh...uh...f...fuh...: All rational thought had simply shut down.

:Fritz? He’s here? I’ll be down in two min—:

:No, not Fritz...worse than Fritz!: Rhianna sent dazedly. :Family! My family!:

:I’ll be there in ten seconds!:

“Um...I’ll just go get him...” Rhianna stammered. Mom, Dad, Ivor, Ferris, Olivia, Nana, were all there. *All* of them. “Right away.” She turned to go, only wobbling a little bit.

“Something about that woman seems familiar,” Arlene Gates murmured as she walked back toward the entrance. “But I just can’t place it.”

“I know, right?” Roy muttered back, giving her back that piercing look he’d often given the opposing side’s witnesses. “It’s weird. I don’t know what it is.”

“I know what it is,” Socah said. “Leastways, I know what my ears’ voice-analysis package is telling me, even if I can’t believe my eyes. Pitch is all off, but the cadence and stressors...” She shook her head. “One way to know for sure.” She pitched her voice into that familiar vocal range which grandmothers had used with their errant grandchildren down through the centuries—the tones they were automatically granted from on high the very moment their children gave birth to young of their own. Having a cybernetic vocoder only added flourishes. “*Ryan Anthony Stonegate, you come here this instant!*”

Rhianna froze in her tracks. In her mind she was suddenly a boy thirty years younger, back in his grandmother’s kitchen, standing on a chair with the shards of a pottery cookie jar on the floor all around him. She slowly turned, the guilty expression on her face a perfect mirror of the one that boy had worn back then.

For a moment, they all stood there staring at each other, no one quite knowing what to say.

Then Olivia broke the awkward silence. “Say hello to Impossible Thing Five,” she said, gesturing at Rhianna. “Our *sister* Ryan. That’s a cute dress, by the way. And the kitty ears and nose? *Adorable.*”

“Uh...th-thanks...” Rhianna mumbled, tufted ears splaying in embarrassment. “Olivia.”

“Well, I never,” Socah said, hands on her hips. “I had heard the rumors about this planet, but I certainly didn’t expect something like *this.*”

Arlene nodded. “You’ve got some explaining to do, young...er...lady.”

Kaylee chose that moment to pad out into the parking lot, drawing the family’s attention. She walked over and sat down on her haunches next to Rhianna. “So, you’re my partner’s family, eh? Nice t’meet y’all, finally.”

Ivor gawked. “What in...you can *talk?*”

“Just don’t ask me to chew gum at the same time. These choppers aren’t for chewing.” Kaylee smiled toothily.

“Fascinating,” Ferris said. His eyes were flickering in the familiar way they had

when he looked up something on his implants. “That’s called ‘crossriding,’ isn’t it? I think I just found a reference in one of the papers I downloaded but hadn’t read yet.”

“That’d be ‘Crossriders: a survey’, wouldn’t it?” Kaylee said. “Originally published in *Laurasia Sociology Letters* about nine years ago. Pretty damned accurate, where it talks about female RIDEs being cheaper. Ryan bought my chassis for all of 62 *mu*.”

“You really must have left Earth in a hurry if you didn’t have the time to read *everything*, Ferr,” Rhianna said, finally recovering some aplomb. “Just...forget I’m a woman for now. I’m honestly *happy* you’re all here. But what happened? And...when? And...why the *hell* didn’t you send word ahead you were coming? I’d have, I dunno, baked a cake or something...”

“It’s a...long story,” Arlene said. “I’d like to hear yours, too, Ryan. I never thought we were the type to...I mean, your friend Rufus *would*, but *you*?”

Ivor actually stepped up and poked Rhianna’s breast, extending a bio-scanner from his multitool forearm, eyes flashing. “What...how long did you spend in a nano-tank for a body like that? Three, four weeks? You’re still all flesh and blood! Your implant’s funky, too.”

“It’s upgraded with Q,” Rhianna said. Allowing him to grope her had taken an effort of willpower on her part, but it seemed necessary. “I’m all flesh and blood, yes.”

“Huh,” Socah said. “I figured that was an FBR like mine, but that puts a whole other slant on this. You’re a *real* woman then, Ryan. Amazing.”

“Happened a year ago. Took my Fuser nannies about ten minutes to make Ryan into the woman you see afore you,” Kaylee said with a note of pride. “You folks have a lot of reading to do. But on the other hand, those cybernetics of yours are *much* better than anything we got locally, too.”

“Anything non-nano, anyway,” Rhianna said. “And...come to think of it, you’re all more metal than I remember. Except Nana Socah, anyway. Just what did you sell to get tickets? Did you come over on the *Goose* or the *Silverstar*?”

None of them had time to answer. A Code Blue alarm blared in Rhianna’s implant as a RIDE ambulance approached from the southwest. Kaylee’s eyes widened and she Fused with Rhianna in seconds.

:*Rhi, we’ve got an incoming wreck, severe core damage. ER’s prepping for core transplant.*: Kaylee said.

The RIDE ambulance was one herself, a falcon who could gently grab the injured core module and bring swiftly it to the nearest garage. The emergency crew took charge of the critically injured RI and took her into the clean room.

“Did that...cat just *eat* my new sister?” Olivia exclaimed. “You’re all furry! Like that raccoon we met. That’s a *hardlight* pelt?”

“Can’t talk now, everyone. Go have a seat in the waiting room,” Rhianna said through Kaylee. A tigerish-looking young woman on a tigerish-looking skimmer-cycle was just pulling up in front. “Hey, Lindae! This is my family from Earth! I’ve got an emergency to handle, so can you help them out for a few hours? They’ve had a bit of a shock.”

“Oooh!” the woman and her ‘cycle said at the same time, in harmony. Then they combined together into a curvaceous tiger-woman. “Hi, you-all! We’re Linda!” she giggled. “Why’n’cha all come on in to the waiting room? We’ll make some coffee and fab doughnuts, and you can tell us all those embarrassing little stories about Rhianna that only her family would know!”

:Well, we all knew someone was going to be in for a surprise when we got here,: Roy sent over the private family encryption key. :We just didn't know that would be us, too.:

:This is utterly fascinating!: Ferris said :I've found some other papers in my database. There's a whole crossriding subculture here! It's all centered around these RIDEs. Kaylee is a RIDE, by the way. That stands for 'Reticulated Intelligence Drive Extender'. That's a backronym if I've ever heard one.:

:I have a sister!: Olivia said. Her cousins had never really been enough for her. :Her name's Rhianna now. I want to borrow that dress! That's what sisters do, borrow each other's clothes.:

:She certainly is your sister now, Livy,: Socah mused. :Her body's natural, and her body language is completely feminine. She's not faking it, whatever she is.:

:Did you have to poke her in the boob, Ivor? That was really crass.: Olivia continued.

:Sorry! I just had to be sure,: Ivor replied, shivering. :Did that cat really say it only took ten minutes to make him into a woman? How...I want to know how!:

Arlene sat down heavily on one of the waiting room chairs, Roy taking the one next to her. Her husband took her flesh hand. *:Everyone, we need to decide here and now how we're going to deal with this. I know it's a shock, but we've come all this way. Rejecting her would be a horrible wrong.:* Roy gave Ivor a concerned look. *:How are you taking this, Ivor? Don't start getting ideas that you have to follow in Ryan's footsteps like that.:*

Ivor's relationship with his older brother had been consistently competitive since he was five and Ryan was in his late teens. Their youngest son had always acted with a mix of hero worship, envy, and annoyance that he would *always* be in Ryan's overachieving shadow.

:Don't worry, Dad. I'm not about to...do that to myself,: Ivor said. He didn't sound terribly convincing...or terribly convinced.

:Why not? I wouldn't mind having two sisters,: Olivia teased. :Especially after having none. Maybe I can get Ferris to turn girl, too. Then we'd really have some fun!:

:Maybe we could get you to turn guy,: Ivor teased. :See how the other half lives, Oliver.:

Olivia snorted. *:That'll be the day.:* She paused and looked thoughtful. *:Though, if it wasn't permanent, that might be interesting...:*

:I can't maintain impartiality if I become a crossrider myself,: Ferris said. :But I do plan to study the subculture, out of personal interest if not original research.:

"So I guess this must be kind of a shock," Linda said, bringing in a tray of doughnuts. "Here's these. Coffee's brewing, it'll be a few minutes. Shelley would have my hide for a rug if I dared serve *fabbed* coffee where she works."

"You mean, as in grown on a plant?" Olivia said. "Torn from a living thing and roasted? Why would you even need that when you can fab everything so cheaply?"

Linda smirked. "Ask me that again after you've tasted it."

"You're *really* making me wish I could drink more than a thimbleful at a time, youngster," Socah said. "I can't remember last time I had *real* coffee."

"What is that you're wearing?" Linda said. "You look like a Barbie doll, no offense. And I can hear grinding servos loud and clear. I'd offer to fix you up, but we're

not certified for HUM-style medical DE frames yet.”

“Just a little something I picked up in the service. It’s an officer’s G.I. Jane Mark Eight,” Socah said lightly, changing the subject. “Which of you is Linda again? I’m Col. Socah Gates, retired, 56th Heavy Mech Infantry.”

“We are Linda,” the tigress said in stereo. “I’m LindaCat—” and then in an only slightly different voice, “—and I’m LindaGirl. Honestly, we both happened to have the same name when we...met. So together, we’re Lindaer than we could ever Linda before!”

“Fascinating,” Ferris said. “And you just...live together like that?”

“We do!” Linda said. “It’s fun.”

“Are you some kind of...miniature IDE?” Socah wondered.

“You could say that,” Linda said. “Most of the tech is the same—sarium batteries let us have smaller bodies. We just don’t need those huge onboard power generation plants or big fuel tanks.”

“They *would*, wouldn’t they?” Ivor mused. “Just think what they could do with that tech back on Earth.”

“But that only gives half the picture,” Linda continued. “Cuz qubitite—the unobtainium they found in the desert here and made sarium with—also turned out to be the bee’s knees where quantum computing was concerned.”

“You’re some kind of Virtual Intelligence?” Ivor asked. “But modeling a human-level mind is impossible. There are *quantum* aspects in human consciousness graphene just can’t emulate accurately enough. But this qubitite stuff...’qubit’ *implies* quantum.” He started muttering to himself. “I *need* a mesh connection, like, right now.”

“So *how* many impossible things are we up to by now?” Olivia asked. “Eight?”

“You’re implying that you—I mean, LindaCat—is a *true AI*?” Roy said. “I have a Legal Expert System in my own implant, but it’s *not* a sophont like you apparently are. I still call him ‘Les’, though. Dear Lord! The civil rights implications!”

“Still working on those rights,” LindaCat said sadly. “We’ve made great strides the past five months, though. You should ask Rhi about that.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just not dealing with this very well. My middle son is now my oldest daughter, and he’s wearing this...sapient cat armor?” Arlene said. The former judge sighed and rested her head in her hands. “Why don’t you just take the time to explain just...*what* you are,”

“Well, I’m a Q-based Reticulated Intelligence core in a Drive Extender shell,” Linda said. She picked up a few tablets from behind the counter and passed them out. “Wrapped around a person like a furry burrito. We were first made as military equipment in a war a few decades back, but thanks to some tech leaks we went civ almost before the war even ended.” The hardlight flickered out, revealing an armored metal shell—a humanoid tigress in chrome. Then she split and pulled away from her partner, reassembling herself into a metal tigress shape. She waited for several seconds in this form before bringing up her hardlight pelt again, a seemingly-real tigress standing right there in the waiting room.

Next to her, a human girl stood in Easy Fuse coveralls, looking very tigerish herself. In addition to the ears, nose, and tail like Rhianna had, she was covered in a light coat of tiger fur, and her lips had a slight muzzle shape to them. “Hi!” the human Linda said, waving, with Ivor looking at her with open admiration.

“We can also be skimmers, as you saw,” the tigress said. “Our hardlight systems give us full environment seal, so we can act as survival suits in the deep desert. I’m sure

you've seen how hot it was outside the Domes. Temps hit near boiling in the Deep Dry, *and* raw Q ore plays havoc with unshielded equipment like you wouldn't believe."

"And they're *cuddly*, too!" LindaGirl said, kneeling down to hug LindaCat around the neck. "And they can be partners for life."

"Quite," LindaCat agreed, purring and rubbing her head against LindaGirl's cheek.

Ivor flipped through the shop manual tablet from beginning to end in a few seconds. "Nano-motile' chassis and external plating to facilitate mode changes. Fuser nanites meld the rider's nervous system to the RIDE's analogs. Sarium battery packs that can pack *ten thousand times* as much energy as should really be possible unless it somehow circumvents some very fundamental laws of physics. I don't understand how that works, but since I can see the results all around me I'll just accept that it does."

"Nanite-everything is what I'm seeing," Olivia said, looking at her own tablet. She was as mechanically inclined as her two older siblings. "Sarium batteries, qubitite-based computing, hardlight simulation of living tissue. I think we've vaulted past ten impossible things, everyone."

"Like Alice down the rabbit hole," Arlene mused aloud. "I *did* see that skimmer cycle turn into a white rabbit back at the rest stop."

"Why don't they know about any of this back on Earth?" Ivor asked.

Socah snorted. "That should be obvious, shouldn't it? I know better'n anyone else what Earth's government does when it sees a pretty shiny. I've been one of the ones *doing it*. Hell, we're here because *some* smartass judge couldn't keep her pie-hole shut about—"

"Mom, please. We don't need to go into that now," Arlene said.

"Good judges aren't supposed to be political," Socah snapped. It sounded like an old argument.

Ivor snorted and stood up, putting the tablet on the waiting room table. "I'm going outside. Maybe I'll tinker with the van while we wait. I can fix it if I had the right tools."

"You came in that thing?" LindaCat said, aghast. "You're braver than I thought. Y'know, we don't let just *anyone* put their hands all over our private...tools, but since you're family with the boss-lady...and kinda cute..." she purred. "Are you as good as your sister with...mechanical things?"

"Just watch me," Ivor said, thrusting out his chest while apparently completely missing the double-entendres. "Maybe not with RIDEs—*yet*—but I'm a virtuoso with fixing skimmers of all types. I'll have that van in airworthy shape again before Ryan—I mean, *Rhianna*, finishes what she's doing."

"Core transplants are delicate," LindaGirl said. "It's RIDE brain surgery. So she'll be at it awhile. Come on, we'll show you our office and service bay. You can bring in the van. It's Ivor, right?"

"It is!" Ivor said. He followed the cat and girl out of the room.

In the special section of the garage that Rhianna and Rochelle had spent a decent chunk of their advance from the Marshals bringing up to a Donizetti-spec clean room, Rhianna peered at the window from the core imaging scanner projected in Kaylee's head-up display. Five minutes after entering, she was joined by Rochelle, who'd come running so quickly from the alarm she hadn't bothered putting on any clothes besides

Uncia's new "minima" micro-DE shell. The shell was light and maneuverable, but it also left very little to the imagination. Fortunately, there weren't any males in the room to be distracted by it.

"We've got a spalled RI core-interface jacket," Kaylee reported. "Fortunately she didn't have a rider when she hit the water tank. Her first test drive of the DE shell."

"Dammit," Rochelle said. "Her history says she's a Creche-born! Barely been alive two months. Why can't they be more careful?"

"Not really her fault, Shelley," Rhianna said. "At least not entirely. One of her lifters had a hairline crack in the cavorite core. Blew out at the worst possible time. The factory's investigating, and covering all repair expenses."

"If there are jacket fragments in the core..." Rhianna worried aloud.

"We'll just have to hope there aren't," Uncia said, her voice slightly tinny from the smaller vocoder of the micro-DE. The shell was an experimental new innovation based on an idea of Rochelle's, with design input by Rhianna, Dr. Patil, and Signor Donizetti himself, who was donating his time because the project fascinated him—and because he hoped to start making them himself, once they were past the prototyping stage. Little more than an exoskeleton covered over with a hardlight pelt and a few lifters, it gave Shelley and Uncia the appearance of an Integrate without the visible projectors.

Rochelle had been inspired by the way Paul had modified Bertha to Fuse around the light RIDE Hedy. She had come up with an even lighter DE design that could fit inside a moderately large normal RIDE. Once DINcom was perfected to where it stopped losing signal every hour or so, the plan was to use it to link the DE shells permanently, so Uncia could reside in the micro-DE but control her larger form remotely, or vice versa. For now, they were using a modular core housing that could be seated in either the micro-shell or the larger body at need, and using a physical DIN linkage to control both bodies in Fuse.

The foursome worked together in silence for a while, scanning carefully and removing fragments with micromanipulators. If Mavra or Chantilly had been around, their Integrate abilities could have been useful, but they were both on a week's furlough to visit family and friends. Besides, Rhianna believed in keeping their human skills sharp because they couldn't always rely on Integrate help.

At last, they were over the hump—the core was safely free of its damaged housing, and the danger was past. "Preliminary scan results look promising," Rochelle reported. "There might have been some minor surface abrasion, but looks like the deep core's completely intact."

"The new interface jacket's prepped and ready," Rhianna said. She activated a trio of precision lifters and carefully floated the centimeter-diameter qubitite sphere out of the operating cradle. "Let's move her over."

Once settled in its new home, Rhianna sealed up the jacket and attached the exterior contacts that would reconnect their patient to the outside world. "Diagnostics are green! We just need a new shell for her. I'll put her in Nature Range until then."

"Whew!" Rochelle said. "Okay, now that's out of the way, feel like talking about who those people are in the waiting room and why they're freaking you the hell out?"

Rhianna blushed under Kaylee's face. "That's my family out there, Shelley. Not everyone, but my Nana, Mom, Dad, brothers and sister."

Rochelle blinked Uncia's snow-leopard-blue eyes. "You're shitting me."

"I know! I can barely believe it myself. I hadn't even *heard* from them since right

after Rufe and I got here.” Rhianna sounded more happy than shocked at their arrival, now that she’d had time to let it settle. “I think I gave them a *bigger* shock than they gave me.”

“I bet, in that barely-there blue number of yours,” Rochelle said. “Rrrrowl.”

“It is a nice dress, isn’t it? Zane sure thought so.”

Rochelle grinned. “It is. It shows off the person wearing it verrrry well. The person who...was not exactly what her family was expecting.”

Rhianna checked the garage’s various video feeds. Everyone except Ivor and the Lindae were still in the waiting room. She resisted listening in. When she looked around for her younger brother she found him with the Lindae in Bay 10 with their van up in the lifter field. All four lifter-wheels and the suspension had been removed, and she could see replacement parts coming out of the fabber while the Lindae flirted with him openly and he was too involved in the work to notice.

“He seems to know his way around skimmers, anyway,” Rochelle said.

“He’s better than me with them, to be frank,” Rhianna said. “But then, I guess it’s to be expected. They were just a way to pass the time with me. I’ve always been more a tinkerer than a fixer. With him...they’re something to try to outdo *me* at.”

Rochelle grinned. “Oh, one of *those*, huh?”

Kaylee de-Fused once they left the cleanroom, leaving Rhianna in a blue work coverall. “Oh yes,” the lynx said. “He’s just that bad, the little scamp.”

“Well, the Lindae seem to like him,” Uncia commented. “He’s got a lot of ‘borginess, doesn’t he? That right arm makes me think of *Mega Man*.”

“They all do. And a lot more than last time I saw them.” Rhianna shook her head. “Remember how I told you it was only that loan from Rufe that kept me from having to sell my liver for a ticket?”

“...oh,” Rochelle said.

“I doubt they have two *mu* to rub together right now,” Rhianna said.

Rochelle nodded. “Yeah, and they’re *painfully* fresh off the boat. If they were any greener they’d be singing Muppet songs.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry so much, Rhi,” Kaylee said. “Seen the cybernetics arbitrage market prices? They could replace all their replacements with flesh and blood and come out ahead with a decent nest egg.”

On the video feed Ivor had already replaced the rear axle and wheels and moved on to the front. He was working visibly faster than Rhianna could have, even with Kaylee’s assistance. The Lindae were helping out, listening to him seriously as he pointed out some oddities in the skimmer’s construction that could stand a rebuild.

“Wow, he really *does* take after you,” Rochelle said.

Rhianna rolled her eyes. “Yeah, he used to take after me as often as he could. I don’t know what I ever did to inspire that.”

“They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” Rochelle said. “You know, he is kinda cute. Maybe I’ll put the moves on him after Linda finishes with him.”

“Good luck with that,” Rhianna said. “If you’re thinking I’m going to say ‘stay away from my little bro’, I’m not. He’s his own man.”

“Mm.” Rochelle nodded. “Well...now that we’re done in here, let’s not keep the rest of them waiting any longer. I’d like to meet them myself.”

Rhianna nodded. “Yeah, but I think maybe you’d better put some clothes on, first. They might not be *quite* ready for the Aloha look just yet.”

Rochelle looked down, and blinked. “Oh. I’ll...just go use your fabber upstairs for a minute.”

Rhianna grinned. “Riiiiight.”

While she waited, Rhianna checked on their patient. The silver vixen, whose name was Cira, had awoken in Nature Range and was huddling in a den dug underneath a rock overhang, trembling.

“I’m going to say hello to our patient,” Kaylee said sympathetically. “Wish me luck. Looks like a tough case.”

Rhianna petted her partner between her ears, evoking a purr and a headbump against her hand. “And there’s no RI therapists yet,” she mused.

“I’ll do what I can. See you in a few.” The light in Kaylee’s eyes went out as she went into Nature Range.

Everyone came outside to see Ivor’s completed repairs on the VW and applauded as it lifted smoothly off the ground without any hiccups. Ivor blew the horn a few times. “The last owners hacked the lifter power governors and pushed her almost supersonic,” Ivor said. “The rest of the van’s just fine. Treat her right and she’ll last us a few years. I installed higher-grade cav, upgraded the aeroshell and the suspension. She’ll be good up to 600 kph now.”

“I paid for the parts and use of the Bay, Rhianna,” LindaCat purred.

“She insisted. How could I say no?” Ivor replied with a smarmy grin.

Rhianna was one of those applauding. “Consider it comped, Linda. Family gets the first one free. You know, Ivor, I don’t fix skimmers here anymore, but there’s a couple more garages nearby that would hire you in an instant.”

“Maybe,” Ivor said neutrally, regarding his new sister thoughtfully with his cyber eyes. “First things first, though. Our network gear is borked. We can’t still connect to the mesh.”

“I can help with that,” Rochelle said. She was un-Fused in a simple grey cotton dress that set off her ears, tail, and currently light/dark-grey leopard-spotted hair, and she’d turned her nanite cosmetics up a few notches for the occasion. Her hair moved in slow motion, and the garage’s normally harsh lighting was transmuted to a soft glow around her. A small snow leopardess padded alongside—the Walker form of Uncia’s micro-DE shell. “Earth stuff uses different data packet standards. I can get you kitted out with native protocols. Rochelle Seaford, by the way. I’m Rhi’s business partner.” She ran her hands through her hair, rippling it out in classic shampoo commercial style, though it came off as an unconscious gesture rather than intentionally showing off.

Ivor gaped, and so did Ferris. Roy focused his attention on his wife. “*Why* would my brother become a *woman* if he had someone as gorgeous as *you* as a business partner?” Ivor said breathlessly. He looked at Rhianna in wonder. “Tell me, sis, why? Is she a lesbian? *I’d* turn lez for her!” Behind him, Linda pouted and glowered a little.

“It’s complicated,” Rhianna said dryly. “But I assure you, our relationship has always been *strictly* platonic.”

“Cheater,” Linda said, sticking her tongue out at Rochelle. “I saw him first!”

“Sorry, Lindae,” Rochelle said, grinning. “But I’m sure there’s plenty of him to go around.”

Ivor looked from one attractive humanoid to the other well-endowed and furry woman, and apparently *finally* understood what they were talking about as he blushed

furiously. “Er...yeah. Yeah, there is.”

The four Stonegate children looked at their parents for their reaction. Arlene just shrugged. “You’re a grown man. If you think I’m going to criticize your love life or alternative lifestyle, you’re wrong. It’d make me an enormous hypocrite. Roy?”

“I have no objections, your honor,” Roy replied in his best courtroom voice. “When on Zharus, do as the Zharusians do.”

Rochelle chuckled. “You’ve hardly got any idea what Zharusians *do* do, yet.”

“But it looks like it’s going to be fun finding out,” Ivor said.

“My contam sensors are going crazy,” Socah said. “There’s all sorts of nano in the air—coming from *you*, young woman.” She pointed an accusing finger at Rochelle.

“Guilty as charged,” Rochelle said. “Don’t worry—they’re a little annoying, but harmless. They diffuse the light around me, control my hair, stuff like that. Just a side-effect of being me.”

“You have nanites a hundred times better than anything Earth has ever had, and you use them for something like *that*?” Ivor said. “...not that I’m *complaining*, mind...” he added, blushing harder.

“It’s *because* we have so much better nanites that we *can* use them for things like that,” Rochelle said, dimpling as she smiled. “When you build a better hammer, so many other things start looking like nails.”

“I bet y’all are hungry,” Kaylee said, padding out of the garage after finishing getting Cira settled in. “After we get everyone online, how about a trip to Bea’s for breakfast? Then, you-know-where after le grand tour, like we did for Myla. I’m sure Ferris would *love* to see Martinez U.”

“Ryan—sorry—Rhianna and I need a little mother-daughter talk at some point soon,” Arlene said, folding her arms. “Your father and I really want to know why you did this to yourself.”

“I want to do something fun with my *sister*,” Olivia added petulantly. “It doesn’t have to be shopping. It can be *anything* else, I don’t care.”

“Actually, I wouldn’t mind doing something sisterly with you either, Olivia,” Rhianna said warmly. Her eyes abruptly started filling with tears. The emotional dam had burst. “You’re here. You’re *all* here! I can’t believe it! Mom, Dad, everyone...I’ve missed you *so much!*”

One by one, Rhianna embraced her family. To their credit none of them flinched. She hugged her mother and father the longest, followed by Nana Socah, her brothers, and finally Olivia. Rhianna smiled at her. “Well, you’ve always wanted a sister.”

“And here you are,” the younger woman said cheerfully. “I hope you don’t mind if we girl out a little...*excessively* for a while.”

“I’d *love* to,” Rhianna said unashamedly. “Wait’ll you see some of the places we have at the mall.”

“There are some things we *reeeeally* need to warn you about, though, since you’re new to Zharus,” Rochelle said. “In fact, speaking of...Rhi, why don’t we invite you-know-who to meet us at Bea’s?”

“Great idea, Shelley.” Rhianna regarded the rest of her family and smirked a little. Her parents looked askance at their daughter. “Oh. Just a friend of mine who runs a tourist tour guide business. She’ll give you all the hows and wherefores, dos and don’ts.”

“Well, good,” Roy said. “That’s just what we need.”

“Now let’s get you folks patched up,” Rochelle said. “Please, come into our parlor.”

If there was anything that finally cemented that this woman was in fact who she said she was, it the inside of the garage. Ryan’s workspaces always had a sort of disorderly orderliness to them, and this one was no exception. There were half-finished projects sitting on various worktables, some kind of alcove that held gear that might have belonged to Kaylee, if Ivor was right. Mysterious doodads and thingamajigs shared space with mundane tools.

“So, what are you working on right now?” Roy asked.

“Specialized security and communications hardware and software,” Rhianna said. “I’m running two businesses right now. The garage, and in here.”

“I’m glad you’re doing well for yourself,” Arlene said.

“It’s been a lot of sleepless nights, building it up. As you saw in my last email, it was very touch-and-go at the time,” Rhianna explained. “I’d say business only really took off after Shelly bought in fully. I *needed* a full time software gal.”

“And all the software in the world isn’t any good without hardware to run it on,” Rochelle said. “We make a great team.”

“And a gorgeous one, we might add,” the Lindae said.

“You know, I wonder if I hadn’t spoiled you rotten as a child, if you’d still be the *woman* you are today?” Arlene mused.

“Is that a rhetorical question, Mom?” Rhianna said dryly. “I am who and what I am. I’m a woman for very complex reasons, a major one being Kaylee. A good RIDE-human match is a beautiful thing to behold, and be a part of.”

“You have me *very* curious, sis,” Ferris said. “Sex is just a personal affectation here rather than a determinant of gender?”

“It’s a big planet, Professor,” Kaylee said. “There’s room for a lot of, let’s say, *different* opinions.”

“Once you’ve got network access back, look up Sturmhaven and Cape Nord,” Rhianna suggested. “I’m sure you’ll be fascinated. And maybe a little disgusted.”

“And speaking of which...” Rochelle whipped out her interface specs, and brought up her curtain of hardlight screens around herself. “Okay, transmitting an Earth-style Ipv8 handshake to y’all...now. Once you connect you’ll find a ZharusNet ZIPv2 protocol package. We’ll be all done in just a few seconds.”

They could easily tell that it worked by the blissed-out expressions on their faces. Rochelle grinned at Rhianna.

“This remind you of anything?”

Rhianna smiled serenely. “It reminds me of many things.”

Rochelle snorted. “Oh come on, what kind of an answer is *that*? You know what I mean. They’ve already even *met* an Intie. There’s dandruff all over their network ports.”

“I think I know the guy, too. A raccoon Marshal named Richford. He’s got one of our DINcom alphas. I wonder how hard it was for him to keep a straight face when he realized who they were?” Rhianna said. She watched the expressions on her family’s faces as they individually explored the network. She thought she could guess what each of them was investigating first.

Ferris would be exploring sociology and anthropology databases—that was easy enough to tell from the distracted expression that he wore whenever he wandered down avenues of research. He might even be looking up the Sturmhaven and Cape Nord

references she'd just given him. Arlene and Roy would be checking the local law libraries, and probably having their expert systems collate the major differences between Uplift's jurisprudence and the North American body of law they were used to. Grandma Socah was harder to read thanks to her FBR shell, but Rhi was pretty confident she was checking out either Zharus's military history or the state of cybernetic body replacement technology—or maybe both.

Meanwhile, Ivor was no doubt gobbling up as much technical information and specifications of RIDES as he could, taking his first steps toward becoming a better mechanic than his new sister. But Olivia, who was the one infatuated with *having* a sister, would probably be searching on *her*—finding things that would provoke some serious questions right about...

"Excuse me?" Olivia asked, eyes refocusing on Rhianna. "Sis, is all this stuff I've found on you for real? You *really* did all these things?" A flurry of network traffic passed from her to the other Stonegates as she shared links.

As one, Rhianna's family stared at her anew. Her mother and father walked over to stand very close. "*Rhianna Antonia Stonegate*, just what have you been *doing*?" Arlene exclaimed. Several of the hardlight screens started to display the battle with Fritz, her invention of DINsec with Rochelle, and above all her *very* wealthy, tigery boyfriend Zane Brubeck. "You didn't become a woman to get a *sugar daddy*, did you? I know how you were always near destitution, drifting everywhere with Rufus from Los Angeles to Bombay."

"That was the life I *chose*, mother!" Rhianna glowered angrily at her parents. She stood up straighter to face them. "You *damn well* know me better than that! I never needed or *wanted* any handouts from Nana, from Uncle Steve, or from *you*, so why would I take any from Zane? You'll just have to meet him yourself."

"I *thought* I knew you," Arlene replied. "Then you went and..." She waved a hand vaguely.

Rhianna sighed. "Calm down Mom, everyone. You know we all get cranky when we're tired and hungry. Let's go to Bea's."

"You guys enjoy yourselves," Linda said. "I'm gonna go get started on the day's business. Rhi, Shelley, I'll let you know if any more emergencies come up." She looked wistfully at Ivor, and annoyedly at Rochelle, then headed for the office.

"I'm sure you'll handle things, Linda. You always do," Rhianna said confidently.

Kaylee changed to skimmer mode, which startled her family except for Ivor, who nodded. "I've gotta find me one of you, Kaylee. A willing one, I mean. You're incredible. Armor, transport, and friend all wrapped in one."

Kaylee chuckled. "Well, you don't want to rush into anything. I know someone who could tell you tales of Earthers who *did* and got a little more than they expected. In fact, we're gonna meet her at Bea's, so maybe she will."

Ivor climbed into the driver's seat of the microbus. "Then let's go. I'm starving."

Bea's Breakfast Nook's décor was as outrageously feminine as ever. The men visibly winced when everyone went inside, but their reluctance changed when the hunger-inducing aromas wafted from the kitchen. The new arrivals had had a few doughnuts and coffee, but it was hardly a proper morning meal. Arlene pursed her lips at her new daughter, raising one eyebrow.

"The food's really good here," Kaylee said once she'd changed from Skimmer

mode. “Kinda girly for my taste, though. Little too many of us for a booth this time.”

“You’re just *amazing*, Kaylee,” Olivia said. “I’ve been reviewing as much as I can about Reticulated Intelligences since I got the mesh back—”

“They call it the ‘net’ here, Oli,” Ferris corrected. “It’s the term they used on Earth up until about 2200 CE when ‘mesh’ displaced it.”

“Thanks, Doctor Pedantic,” Olivia said dryly.

“Our new home has a *fascinating* social history,” Ferris said, too focused on his inner world to respond to his sister’s jibe. “This is the only planet where someone can get their sex changed entirely by accident! Incredible!”

“Before you say anything, Mom, I ultimately chose *this*, too,” Rhianna said, patting one of her breasts.

“They look good on you, Rhianna,” Olivia complimented.

“Don’t encourage her,” Arlene snapped.

“She’s just fine as she is,” Roy said gently to his wife. “She’s our daughter.”

“Something a bit larger than your usual booth today, Rhianna?” the matronly waitress Paula asked, eyebrows raised. “This is your family?”

“Fresh off the ship from Earth, however they got here, which they *haven’t* told me yet,” Rhianna said. “I’m glad they’re here, but...” The lynx-eared woman looked at her mother sideways. “Things could be better.”

“I think I understand,” Paula said. “I was the first here of my family. I’m from Eridani originally.”

“Was it hard for you, too?” Rhianna asked wryly.

“Oh, yes. By the time they got here I’d long been used to the culture, and it was a huge shock for them. Maybe later we can compare notes,” Paula said, leading the family and friends to a set of three tables pushed together. “I’ll let you folks get settled and be back in a few minutes to take your orders.”

“Thanks,” Roy said, holding a seat for his wife. They and the others sat down and picked up the menus from the holders in the middle of the table.

“Hey, they’ve got *real* food here,” Ivor said. “And it’s cheap, too!”

Ferris nodded. “Less urbanized cultures have more room to grow natural food, which means it is much less expensive than on Earth.”

“That’s...” Olivia said, aghast. “That’s barbaric! There’s no moral reason to enslave either plants or animals for food anymore! This isn’t the Oil Crash!”

“I see sis is still on her ‘natural food is unnatural’ kick,” Rhianna observed wryly.

“How can *anyone* possibly justify this?” Olivia growled. “Especially here, where you can fab up a whole *blank* cow and get the same taste as so-called ‘natural’ meat!”

“Says someone who’s never had steak from Grand Valley-raised cattle,” Rhianna continued. “Look, I’ll eat a fabbed meal, no problem. But it tastes the same every single time. And I daresay grassfed beef is healthier, too.”

“You sure ate natural food eagerly enough when you were younger,” Socah observed, eyeing her menu with the wistful expression of a eunuch at a harem. “They don’t make fabbers small enough for breast implants, you know.”

Olivia winced. “Grandma, that’s just...ewww!”

“She’s got you there, Livy,” Ivor said with a broad smile. “They have a fab menu here, too, so don’t worry so much. You don’t have to eat non-fabbed food if you don’t want to.”

“Leaves more for the rest of us,” Rhianna smirked. Olivia glowered at her.

“Speaking of breast implants,” Socah said, casting a significant look at Rhianna’s chest. “I’d like to hear just how you came to have *those* beauties, my dear. I gather they’re just as functional as your mother’s or any other woman’s, and you have the *other* baby-making equipment, too?”

“Down to the *genetic* level, I’m female,” Rhianna said. “Even my thought processes...well, maybe not.”

“It’s not like you became an *alien*,” Arlene snapped. “Were you a actually a woman when you recorded the last video missive you sent us, too? Are you hiding *anything else* from us, like maybe some children you’ve borne? Did you *always* want to be a woman that much?”

Kaylee growled. “Now you see here. You’re making too damn many assumptions fer someone who never even bothered to answer those letters Ryan sent home all those years ago. With all respect, you don’t know *anything* about anything Zharus, ma’am. You just *don’t*. So why don’t you just keep yer supposin’ to yerself until you’ve heard the story.”

:Just what are you doing to our daughter?: Roy asked Arlene sharply over a private key. *:Why are you acting like this? Our child’s choice is exactly the kind of thing we were fighting for on Earth!:*

:My mother was right. I never should have spoken out,: the former judge said. *:Judges are supposed to stay out of politics.:*

:But we won! The Act went down in flames!: Roy pointed out.

The prevailing culture on Earth didn’t like hidden depths, but at least gave them an outlet in Virtual Life, the hyper-real simulation space where anyone could be anything. The Virtual Life Separation Act had been intended to legally formalize this cultural taboo by outright *forbidding* anything in VL being brought into RL. 5th Circuit Judge Arlene Gates had read the text of the bill and reacted with abject horror, going so far as to come out publicly against the Act. Her name had appeared alongside those of prominent VL activists like Aleka Petrovna and Anima Darkpaws.

Roy embraced his wife in VR. *:Honey, please. Why can you accept a total stranger deciding to change their sex, but not our own child? Besides, you’ve seen the look on Ivor’s face. He’s going to follow in Rhianna’s footsteps, always has. It’s only a matter of time before we have ‘Ivy’. Are you going to reject her, too?:*

The former judge hung her head. *:You’re right, you’re right. What’s wrong with me, Roy? I never thought of myself as a bigot, but when it comes to my own so... daughter, I just...stop being rational.:*

:It’s all right, hon. I know you mean well,: Roy said. *:Just...try to hold your tongue for a little while, okay?:*

:As Mom would say, “for once,“: Arlene said wryly.

:I never said you were that bad,: Roy said, grinning. *:Anyway, how does the old saying go? We haven’t lost a son—we’ve gained a daughter.:*

Arlene snorted. *:That’s not quite what that means, and you know it.:* She brought her attention back to the real world, where only a few seconds had passed, and sighed. “I’m sorry, Rhianna. That was uncalled for.”

“I think I’m owed a few explanations, too,” Rhianna said tersely. “You weren’t exactly Brubeck-level wealthy, but here you are in a beat-up used tourist skimmer. I know how expensive spaceliner tickets are for people the Feds thought were useful to society, but...I can’t find your names on any liner passenger lists. The *Spruce Goose*

arrived from Earth two weeks ago, and the *Silverstar* just last week.”

“Try checking cargo manifests,” Socah said dryly.

Rhianna’s eyes flickered. “Oh...oh wow. You shipped yourselves here as *corpsicles*? You’ve been frozen three years and thawed only a day?”

“Your aunts, uncles, and cousins are on the way, too,” Arlene said. “We decided there wasn’t a better time to get the whole family off Earth. It...wasn’t cheap, and we... hadn’t had as much time to put by funds as we’d expected.”

“Your mother’s political enemies impeached her and disbarred me for what we did,” Roy Stone said glumly. “Folks have known which way the political wind’s been blowing on Earth for decades. It finally started to stink enough for us we got out while we could. I think that freighter made stops in half of the Colonies before we ended up here—and there were at least fifty more refugees with us. Most of them got off on Zharus.”

“Is that what we are? Refugees from a war-torn planet?” Socah asked morosely, more to herself.

“Mark my words, the emigration door will slam shut, if it hasn’t already,” Roy said. “We’ve been understandably out of it. Too many ghost cities on Earth, not enough people. Planet’s better for it, but...”

“...but it sure is poorer for not having *me* on it, poor thing!” a boisterously cheerful voice said as Rufia strode in, her usual one point five times larger than life and twice as loud self. “Hey, all! Long time no see, squirt!” she said as she tousled Olivia’s hair in passing on the way to the chair Rhi nudged out for her. A pair of elk followed her in, Yvonne and her father Franklin, stately as ever.

“You know, you’re *exactly* the kind of girl Rufus would be,” Olivia said, combing her hair back with her fingernails. “Cute ears.”

“Thanks!” Rufia said, wiggling them back and forth. “I think they suit me. Behind me is my bossgirl Yvonne and her dad, Frankie.”

“*Franklin*,” the bull elk corrected good-humoredly. He and Yvonne bedded down near the table and plugged in. Yvonne rested her head on her father’s back. The two were inseparable.

“My my, I see the gang’s all here,” Rufia continued. “You’re all looking quite *metal* today. Rock!”

“I should be shocked and surprised at your...womanliness, Rufus, but...you’re you,” Arlene said.

“*Rufia*,” she corrected. “Or just ‘Rufe’ if that makes you not comfy. I crossed over six years ago and loving every minute of it. Let me tell you, it’s a whole other perspective on life, if I can get all philosophical about it.”

“Okay, *Rufia*,” Arlene continued. She opened her mouth, then changed her mind, and was silent a few seconds. “Hmm...food for thought. The change has a cooldown of three years, and you haven’t taken the opportunity to change back yet?”

“Nope! Why would I? I’ve got another hundred years to live and I haven’t done all the girly things I want to do yet. Plenty of time to be a man again in twenty, thirty years.”

“Some people do swap every three years. Some every five, just to keep the numbers round,” Rochelle said. “It’s pretty common for married couples to take turns with each other’s RIDEs, for instance. But others find the partner they want and stick with ‘em, whichever sex they end up being.”

“Hmmm, one of the survey respondents in that article *did* turn female for a lesbian girlfriend,” Ferris added. “Now, that has happened on Earth, but it was so rare that it always made the news. Usually the sex-change was an illicit one. Curious...”

“I think that makes fourteen impossible things,” Olivia said. “Maybe fifteen. And it’s only breakfast.”

“Does *everybody* on this planet sex-swap at one time or another?” Arlene asked dryly.

“Maybe not everybody, but a lot do,” Rochelle said. “We look at it as kind of like getting a tat or a ‘plant, but not as permanent.”

“And you can’t tell us apart from natural-born women,” Rufia said. “I mean, look at me. Would you ever think *I* used to be a man?”

“Yes,” Ivor deadpanned.

“Well, I’m the exception that proves the rule,” Rufia said, not missing a beat. “But seriously...” She looked around. “I know for a fact at least a quarter of the people in this room aren’t what they used to be, ‘cuz they’re regulars I’ve gotten to know. But I won’t tell you which ones. Think you can guess?”

The family looked around at the restaurant patrons, enjoying their food and talking with their companions at the tables. The silence stretched as no one proved willing to embarrass themselves by guessing wrong. “I think we can rule out anyone who doesn’t have animal ears?” Socah said.

“Actually, no,” Ferris said. “They have salon-clinics that do it here, too, just like the cyber-implant clinics on Earth. The difference is, it takes minutes, not days.”

“Getting a good scissors haircut takes more time,” Rochelle said. “You see, the Fuser nannies that act to integrate human and RIDE nervous systems are adapted from the very same ones that change sex.”

Rufia stood up. “Hey, everyone! Say hello to Rhianna’s family from Earth! They just got here this morning.”

The large woman’s request provoked some polite, friendly hellos and even applause. “Good on you getting off that hellhole!” a man cheered.

“So, in the interest of a little culture shock for our new Uplifters, who here’s a regular crosser?” Three hands went up, only one of who had RIDE tags. “First-timers!” The first three hands went down, replaced by three more—all male hands. “Congrats, guys! Have fun.”

“I get to piss standing up!” one crosser said. Again, he had no RIDE tags.

Paula rolled her eyes. “We’re trying to serve breakfast here, bucko.”

“Whoops. Sorry, Paula,” he quickly replied.

“I’m downloading every scrap of data and whitepaper on this tech I can find,” Ivor said. “Add Impossible Things sixteen through twenty to the list, sis...I mean, Olivia. Almost forgot I have *two* sisters now.” He smiled, an expression everyone in the family knew meant there’d soon be a third Stonegate sister.

Rufia caught that immediately. “Whoa there, Ivor. I know you’re a permanent resident, but at least wait a few months before you get your boobs on.”

“You have too much metal in you right now for the Fuser nannies to work anyway, if I’m any judge,” Rhianna added. “Speaking of cybernetics...and I’m mentioning this *especially* for Nana, here’s the latest cyber market prices. You can all be fully flesh and blood again in a few weeks, tops, if you *really* want.”

Socah blinked. “Hold on, what? Would you mind unpacking that a little?”

“I’m willing to pay for it out of pocket,” Rhianna continued. The odd looks from the rest of the table only multiplied.

“Excuse me, Rhi,” Rufia said. “I’d better take this. I speak fluent tourist.” She grinned.

“Take it away, Rufia,” Rhianna said, patting her old friend on the shoulder. “This is her thing, all.”

“You know how cyber’s dirt cheap and bio’s outlandish sky-high back Terra way?” Rufia said. “Flip that here. Sarium power cores mean our nanites are a lot busier little bees. They do stuff faster. Including assemble cloned body parts. Or bodies. And there *are* metalheads like Ivor here, they’re just the ones who got the bucks to indulge their weird hobby. They pay high prices for gen-u-wine Earth stuff, ‘cuz Earth builds a *lot* better cyber than we do here.”

“Since Earth has crummy batteries and can’t just make *people* bigger the way they do IDEs, they have to be really energy-efficient,” Rhianna said. “Nana, your GI Jane could probably run five years on a single charge if you put sarium cells in it. Or days instead of minutes at emergency power.”

“Five...years?” Socah said. “Years? Not months or days? *Years?*”

“Earth tech’s found energy efficiencies we’re still trying to reverse-engineer,” Rhianna said. “It hasn’t been a huge priority. We just have such an abundance we just don’t *need* it. So people who want it still pay top dollar for Earth cyber. And since Earth has bulk export restrictions but doesn’t take stuff out of people’s bodies when they leave, there’s just the one way to get it.”

“There are some people who spend decades on cruise ships just going back and forth to cash up on the arbitrage,” Rochelle said. “Sell their organs on Earth for cyber plus cash, sell their cyber on Zharus for organs plus cash...lather, rinse, repeat.”

“As much *practical* sense as that makes...that’s actually kind of horrifying,” Ferris said. Far from being horrified, he had the happy expression of a man in his element, soaking up all these new things.

“A few of the girls I dated on the *Goose* basically had permanent homes on board,” Rhianna said. “They lived quite well. So anyway, Nana, the point is that, well... like Rufe said, biotech is cheap here.”

All the years Ryan had been growing up, Socah had regretted, sometimes out loud, that she had taken the Army up on its body-replacement offer all those years ago. It had led to rapid promotion through the ranks—but after she retired, she had time to realize just how much she’d given up. On Earth, cloning was just within the realm of the possible, but so slow and expensive it was out of reach to anyone except the very richest. That was why organs and limbs fetched such a high price. But on Zharus...

The implication wasn’t lost on Socah, who stared at Rhianna as if she’d just casually offered her a Holy Grail because she had an extra. “Oh, my dear, dear girl. I’ll have to think about that—I’ve been in this titanium can for so long I don’t know if I can go back to being flesh and blood just like that. I’ve just spent the last ten minutes reading about these HUM-FBR frames, as they call them here. Hardlight skins like yon RIDEs have, and I could taste everything again, too. But...your offer is duly noted, and *much* appreciated. You warm this old soldier’s heart. Or central circulation pump, anyway.”

Arlene looked down at her metal arm. “Huh. On the other hand—so to speak—I’m not particularly attached to this.”

“Actually, you kind of are,” Rufia said. “It’s hanging right off the rest of your body...” Rhianna bapped her playfully.

“Sold my original and my legs to pay for the ticket,” Arlene continued. “The modern-day equivalent of gnawing off a limb to escape a bear trap, I suppose.”

“But you *did* escape. Our...personal issues aside, Mom,” Rhianna said, “welcome to Zharus, everyone.”

Rufia flipped through the e-ink menu. “Now, let’s eat! I have a grand tour planned for everyone. In fact, you’ll be the guinea pigs for my Immigrant Welcome Wagon services. If y’all you don’t mind.”

“I don’t,” Ferris said. “I could use a guide. Though I’m not so sure I’m as interested in the local tourist haunts as the others.”

“Perhaps I can be of service for that, sir?” Franklin said, raising his head. “I gather there are topics you want to spend time on that the rest of your family finds *slightly* tiresome?”

Professor Ferris Stonegate smiled at the dignified elk. “You’d be correct, Franklin. I accept your gracious offer, sir. Thank you.”

“Rufe and I will tell you everything we’ve done since we got here,” Rhianna said. “Pretty mundane until the last year or so. It’s been been...*interesting times*.”

“Save it for tonight,” Roy said. “We have a long time to catch up on things. So we’ll do it properly. There’s no rush.”

“I’ve rented y’all a house nearby,” Kaylee said. “It’s got a big home fabber, so you can furnish it however you like.”

“Smart thinking, Kay,” Rhianna said, reaching over to pet the lynx on her shoulder. Kaylee purred and headbutted her rider’s hand. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

:*Still be male, probably*,: Arlene sent wryly to her husband...but forbore to say out loud this time.

Paula came back by. “Are we ready to order?”

There was the usual moment of awkwardness as several people started to order at once, then stopped and waited for each other, then all started again, then finally everyone nodded to Arlene to go first. “Well,” she said, looking at the menu again. “I think I’ll have...”

In the tour that followed, Rufia, Yvonne, and Franklin strove to find something for each family member to linger over. Ferris decided to stay with Franklin at Martinez University instead of going on the rest of the tour. The ordinary tourist attractions didn’t appeal to him as much as exploring the closest major center of learning on this new world—not to mention spending time with Franklin, with whom he had immediately “clicked.” Rhianna suspected Ferris might just be the first of her immediate family to find a RIDE partner—at least, once Ferris had shed enough metal to make it safe to Fuse. Rufia took his place in the bus, and gave directions to Arlene from the shotgun seat.

For the rest of the family, Government Center, Founders Plaza, the Public Library, and the Courthouse were soon behind them. It took almost five hours to cover all that ground, but that didn’t even reach midday at 1500 hours. Ivor salivated over the city’s older RIDE Museum, but Olivia wanted to visit one of the new Creches.

Finding out RIDEs could *breed* in the Nature Range environment had stunned

the lot of them to near speechlessness and pushed their growing Impossible Things list into the *hundreds* at a stroke. “I want to come back here later and spend more time,” Olivia said with great intensity. “A *lot* more time.”

“I’ve lingered here a few afternoons, myself,” Kaylee said. “Maybe I’ll introduce you to my kittens later.”

“I’d love to meet your children, Kaylee!” Olivia said.

“Yet the civil rights status of you folks is *still* unsettled,” Roy said, clenching one fist. “Look at this, Arlene! This is a travesty!”

“If you prick us, do we not bleed?” Yvonne said in a Shakespearean flourish. “Wait, scratch that. We don’t. Well, unless you count Fuser nanos.”

Arlene nodded. “We’ll have to see what we can do about that. Maybe there’s something in the Colonial Charter...”

“Looks like the crusading judge has found her next crusade,” Socah said. “But you know what? I don’t think I’ll mind this one so much.”

Rhianna smiled brightly at her parents, and shared a look with Kaylee, who seemed very satisfied over this turn of events. “Happy to have you onboard, Your Honor,” the lynx said in Walker mode. She headbutted Rhianna’s mother affectionately.

“You really are very much a cat, aren’t you?” Arlene said, petting Kaylee’s cheek ruffs. “And your fur is so real!”

“She’s been my willing bed pillow a few times over the years,” Rhianna said.

“I know I could look it up,” Ivor said, “but I’d like to hear it from the lynx’s mouth, as it were. Why hasn’t anyone used a human mind as an RI neural template?”

“Your sister’d know more about that, honestly,” Kaylee said, nodding at her rider. “What did Mom tell you, Rhi?”

“Templates *only* based on humans are too much for the qubitite substrate to handle. We’re *too complex* just at the baseline. Any attempt at an untempered human template fries itself in a flash of ionizing radiation. When you apply an animal template to the same substrate, it effectively *uplifts* it to full sophont. That’s not to say that human-level intelligence is impossible without animal neural templates, it just has to be done differently. Nujose Polytech’s researchers over in Laurasia made that particular discovery. I’ll let you do your own research from here, Ivor.”

“That’s fair, Rhianna,” Ivor said. Her siblings liked using her female name as often as they could. “Something called an ‘Emergent Intelligence’. Now, *that* tech’s less than ten years old...hmm...”

“EIDEs are really hot stuff right now,” Rhianna said, seeing an opening. She thought hard about what to say next. “You don’t have to follow *exactly* in my footsteps, bro.”

“Come on, I *always* do my own thing,” the metalhead insisted, provoking an eyeroll from Olivia. “What?”

“I didn’t say anything,” Olivia said.

“I’m more metal than Rhianna ever was,” Ivor said. “I’m better at skimmers than she ever was.”

“I really kind of expected you to follow me out here as soon as you could,” Rhianna said, noting how the examples he used were only what he had accomplished relative to *herself*.

“He almost *did*,” Roy said. “He almost sold everything for one of those silly brainboxes that are barely more than an actual box with arms and legs about six months

after you left. Your mother, Nana, and I put our collective foot down on that one.”

“Oh, that’s so cuuuute!” Olivia squealed at a fawn playing with a bobcat kitten in the play area. The building was arranged a lot like a daycare center. Nobody was *quite* sure how to raise an RI from basically an infant state all the way to adulthood. The traditional method of “baking” an RI—the First Boot—essentially started them as mature adults. Doing it the old way carried its own set of problems the Creches were trying very hard to avoid—nobody wanted another Fritz.

“I doubt this style of creating new Ris will ever *fully* replace the original ‘Adult Boot’ as they’re calling it now,” Kaylee opined. “There are...*other* issues nobody anticipated. The Creche-born are rather reckless, irresponsible...”

“Just like raising human teenagers, then,” Arlene said, smirking at her children. Socah laughed.

“Very interesting,” Olivia said. “They’re not sure how long to keep them in a child state, or if they should raise them to full adults in Nature Range before they see the real world. One group’s developing what they call a MADE—A Maturing Animal Drive Extender. It basically emulates the natural maturation process—it ages as the RI matures.”

Rhianna shook her head. “It’s a nice idea, but did you see the cost estimates? They’re trying to adapt Integrate-grade Fuser nannies. I could be wrong, but that’ll *never* be practical. Just look at who’s funding the project.”

“ZIEF. The Zharus Integrated Ecology Foundation,” Olivia read. “Dedicated to... are these people for real? They want to integrate the whole planet? What does *that* mean?”

“Gray goo is what it means, Livy,” Ivor said. “A complete technorganic biosphere from viruses to people. Speaking as someone who’s *already* very technorganic...no thanks. That’s just crazy.”

One of the Creche’s employees, obviously an Integrate herself, approached the group. The gray fossa projected a kind of motherly calm with the kind of eternal patience borne from endless innocent questions. She stopped in front of the Rhianna, Kaylee, Rochelle, and Uncia. “We wanted to express our gratitude for saving young Cira. We’ve retrieved her core from your garage. She’d love to speak with the four of you, if you have the time. We’ve placed her in a feral DE for the time being.”

“Of course,” Rhianna said. “Excuse us, everyone. We won’t be long.”

“Can I come with you?” Ivor asked glibly in a tone Rhianna had heard up until the day she’d left Earth. It was enough to make her flinch. “Is that a no?” he continued.

“*Ivor*,” Arlene warned. “Act your age!”

“Okay, okay!” the cyborg said, looking pale. “You’re right. I don’t know what came over me.”

“Regardless, you can come, if it’s okay with Mary-Anne here,” Rhianna said. “Just *don’t ever* use that tone of voice again. Reminds me of that time you showed up out of the blue when I was on the job all the way in Sydney—and you were *twelve*. Brrrr.”

The fossa nodded, smiling. “It’ll be a good experience for both of them. Cira hasn’t met an Earther cyborg yet.”

“Oh, I’m not planning on being a metalhead that much longer,” Ivor replied, tapping the exposed metallic surface on the left side of his skull. “But thank you, ma’am.”

:I don't know how much more of this I can stand,: Rhianna sent to her friends in fast-time. *:Ivor hasn't changed a whit.:*

:Where's Sydney?: Rochelle asked.

:On the other side of the planet from New Boston,: Rhianna replied. *:About an hour's sub flight, like here. Tickets were pretty cheap, too. But...geez. He was an annoying little tagalong when he was young. Rufia can back me up on this.:*

:He was, no bones about it,: Rufia added. Normally she wasn't a person to badmouth anyone, so this was a major admission. *:Though I think we still need to give him a chance. He is gonna join the estrogen brigade, Rhi. I've seen that look before.:*

:Then we'll welcome her with a proper crossriding party. I'm not going to worry about it,: Rhianna said cheerfully. "Let's go and see our vixen patient."

The Uplift Creche was a modular structure that could easily be modified to meet its own swiftly-changing needs. Its core was a vast Q-mainframe specifically designed by Dr. Patil for RI breeding. There was a "Core Incubator" where blank cores were inserted and the new consciousnesses were born and lived. The mainframe ran in a 1-year-per-week time compression mode, which was the limit a Fused human mind could really handle. The majority of the building was the Drive Extender Garage. It held both Laurasian-style non-Fuser animals for the young ones and Gondwanan types for those judged mature adults.

Before they left the facility every RI got a choice of what type of Drive Extender they preferred. From there on out, they had to find their own way in life, just like humans.

Also like humans, they had parents. Cira's were with her when Rhianna and the others walked in. "There they are!" the silver-gray tod said. "We can't thank you enough! It's doubly an honor our child was saved by you all personally."

"Our pleasure, Darrik," Kaylee said. Cira was in a fox-sized Laurasian frame, hanging her head. "What's wrong, young vix?"

Cira perked her ears and raised her head. "Well it's..." her eyes widened when she saw Ivor. "What *are* you? Some kind of Intie?"

"This is my little brother Ivor, fresh from Earth," Rhianna said.

"Never met a human with so much metal before, and I've been around a few years," Darrik said. He and his mate, Valda, stood up and walked around him a few times.

"I'm about three-quarters 'borged," Ivor said, watching the huge foxes circle him. "I'm not an 'Intie'."

Rhianna decided to step back and see how he handled this. Kaylee stayed nearer to him, just in case.

"I suggested her brother come in and say hello," Mary-Anne said. "You may find the two of you have some things in common."

"He doesn't look like a stupid screwup who can't do anything right to me," Cira muttered petulantly. Rhianna *firmly* bit her tongue.

"The accident?" Kaylee asked. "Your memories just before are a little scrambled..."

"Um, not really," Cira admitted. "Just a little privacy safeguard that looks like a natural scramble. Something I learned from my friends. *F-former* friends, anyway."

"Hmm..." Rochelle mused.

Ivor pondered, sitting down so he was closer to eye level with her. “So, you did something stupid you regret. You’re looking at the poster boy for doing crazy things, right here.” He thumped his chest, which clanged. “You’re not the first young person to almost get killed doing something stupid. We’re lucky, you and I. We’re still alive to tell about it. So, why don’t you tell? It won’t hurt.” He chuckled. “Besides, I get the feeling it’s not as much of a secret as you think.” He glanced at Mary-Anne, who nodded.

The young silver vixen warmed to Ivor. “Uh...well...We were...I was racing.”

“Racing,” Darrik said flatly.

“I was *winning!*” Cira barked, but lowered her head again when she saw that wasn’t going to hold water. “We found this place that didn’t have any DINsecs, so an Intie friend hacked the cameras for us...”

“I think I know *who*,” Mary-Anne said. “But that’s for me to worry about. Go on, Cira.”

“That shell we bought you was top of the line!” Valda huffed. “We have to tell the insurance company! They’ll deny our claim!”

“Now hold on, dear,” Darrik cautioned. “I don’t think she was fully at fault here. Aloha RIDEworks admitted the cav should’ve been recalled on those lifters.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Cira’s mother said. “She’s *not* getting another one.”

Cira herself looked up to Ivor, ears perked. They were obviously sharing something they didn’t want anyone else to see or hear. Mary-Anne had a smile on her face—Ivor didn’t have DINsec, either. Rhianna cocked her head. “Ivor? I don’t seem to remember *you* almost getting killed doing something stupid...”

“Happened about two years after you left, sis,” Ivor said, smiling faintly. “I’ll tell you later, maybe. After you tell *us* how you ended up with boobs.”

“That’s fair,” Rhianna said.

“We’ve decided to put you back in the Creche for two more v-years,” Darrik said. “You need more time.”

“I *flunked real life?*” Cira wailed, burying her muzzle in her forepaws.

“That seems a little harsh to me, too,” Ivor said. “But you’ve got your whole life ahead of you, and you won’t miss very much out here.”

“It’s going to take, like, *forever!*” she said. “And all my friends have left the Creche already.”

“I’ll still be here,” Ivor said. “That is, if you want a weirdo human-ish chunk of metal and graphene like me as a friend.”

“You could say we’re grounding her until she’s the equivalent of twenty human years old,” Darrik said. “I suppose that is very harsh, but...at my First Boot I had the advantage of being that equivalent age. We want to ensure you have that advantage too, Cira.”

“But I’m not booted like you two! I was born! I’m the fruit of your virtual loins!” the vixen complained. She cocked her head at her parents. “You don’t really know what you’re doing, do you?”

“Cira, this is new for everyone, including your parents,” Mary-Anne said gently. “They never *had* parents themselves, so they’re being...cautious.”

“*Most* people who have traffic accidents just get fined,” Cira grumbled. “Not jailed for *two years*. And how’s two more years hunting rabbits in Nature Range supposed to prepare me better for RL anyway?”

Mary-Anne looked thoughtful. “Perhaps there’s another way.” She glanced at

Darrik and his mate, and their ears perked up as they engaged her in silent conversation.

:Curiouser and curiouser,: Kaylee sent. :I think I know what they're planning...I just hope your brother can handle it.:

:Since Ivor doesn't have DINsec, right now Mary-Anne probably knows him better than I do,: Rhianna said. :At least as far as what's happened since he cybered up.:

"It seems to me that what Cira needs is not so much more time in the Creche as more time in the *real* world with a positive role model," Mary-Anne said. "Someone who has made the same sorts of mistakes, and learned from them. Let's face it, life in the Creche doesn't necessarily prepare for life in the real world as well as we would like."

"I think I see what you're getting at," Ivor said, reaching out to scratch the small vixen between the ears. "And I could use a good friend who knows more about how things work around here than I do. How 'bout it, Cira? Wanna come home with me?"

"You'll have to do it in that shell you're wearing now," Mary-Anne said. "At least until your parents are satisfied you're ready for a full-sized one again."

"Or until someone else is," Rochelle said, grinning at Rhianna.

"I...think that'll work," Cira said. "I'd rather be in the real world like this than the Creche full-sized." She looked at her much larger parents. "Well?"

"We want you to stay in the Creche building—in your present shell—for a couple days, first," Darrik said. "It's not us. It's Mechanic's orders."

"We do need to make sure there's no deep core irregularities," Rhianna said. "We're confident there aren't, but it's just SOP."

"I can live with that," the young vixen said.

"I'll come back by to visit tomorrow," Ivor promised.

:Well, this is an odd turn of events,: Rhianna said. :And a side of my brother I haven't seen before.:

:They have to grow up sometime,: Kaylee said. :Even if it's only a little bit.:

Ivor was unusually subdued as they walked down the corridor back toward the others. "That was a good thing you did back there," Kaylee said thoughtfully. "Whether she 'deserved' it or not, another two years in the Creche would have driven Cira stir-crazy."

Ivor shrugged, hands in his coat pockets. "Seemed like the right thing to do," he said. "Like I said, I've been where she is before. Besides, I'm gonna partner with a RIDE someday anyway, right? Might as well get to know one."

"So," Rhianna said. "Wanna talk about it?"

"It'?" Ivor said.

"Your accident, when you were in Cira's shoes," Rhianna said. "Get the sense that metal wasn't all for the trip tickets."

"Not...all of it, no," Ivor said. "But...no, I don't wanna talk about it. Not yet anyway."

Rhianna nodded. "All right, I won't push. I should tell you, though...when you Fuse—if you Fuse—your partner will know about it. You'll both know everything about each other."

Ivor glanced at her. "Really?"

"Yeah," Kaylee said. "There are ways to keep everything firewalled off, but the

partnership doesn't work as well that way.

"Huh." Ivor thought about that for a few moments. "Well, it doesn't change anything. I like Cira, and I'm kinda looking forward to having her around."

Rochelle nodded. "And having the rest of your family around will probably do her good, too."

"Yeah, there is that." Rhianna chuckled. "Well, let's tell them who's going to follow you home and ask if you can keep her."

"My ex-wife would love this place," Ferris mused to Franklin as they wandered through the busy corridors of Martinez University. The *place* was unfamiliar, but the *feeling* was anything but. There were students rushing to and from class, professors generally walking at a more sedate pace, and various staff—human, RIDE, and plain robotic—doing their jobs. It was a comfort on this new, alien world that actually frightened the professor more than a little, all pretense aside. "There aren't a lot of examples of early twenty-first century university architecture left that aren't fanciful Frank Gehry garbage. Everyone on Earth thinks that the twentieth looked like Gehry's work!"

"She was a connoisseur of architectural history, then?" the bull elk RIDE asked. He sounded a little like his historical namesake, Franklin Roosevelt. Fitting, given he was based on a Roosevelt elk, and his still-missing female counterpart (and Yvonne's mother) was named Eleanor.

"Marjorie was an architect," Ferris informed, putting his hand on his new friend's dark brown withers. "And a little bit of a neat-freak. I fear that was one reason why we divorced. Even with my implant nagging me I'd forget to bathe for a couple weeks."

Franklin made a show of sniffing him. "Well, I can report your current odor does not offend. You still smell of coldsleep fluid seeping out of your pores. It's quite refreshing."

"Really? Refreshing, you say?" Ferris said, raising one eyebrow skeptically. "I think it smells like my stale old socks."

The two of them shared some heartfelt laughter. Franklin reminded Ferris of one of his own professors in graduate school, a more world-wise man than most academics in his field tended to be, or were encouraged to be. Ferris's ticket, even for coldsleep on a tramp freighter, had easily been the most expensive of the six of them. They had *wanted* to get rid of his parents and grandmother, but the government was very much aware of what a brain drain could do to a society.

Where his cybernetic legs joined with his real flesh still itched. *Subjectively* he'd had them less than a week before being put into coldsleep. "If I didn't have these crazy legs..." he mused aloud.

"Then we could Fuse," Franklin said. "A sad state of affairs I doubt will last too much longer, my friend. Bio-fabbed replacement limbs and organs won't cost more than a few hundred *mu*."

"I have..." he checked his wallet. "Six. I don't think that's even enough for a toenail."

"Ah, but those legs of yours are *easily* worth sixty thousand, each," Franklin pointed out. "At least, if you find the right buyer. More realistically...maybe twenty."

"Vast riches! I can see why arbitrage works so well," Ferris said. He looked at his

surroundings. They had wandered outdoors and were nearing a building that his internal map said was the original U-shaped structure that the whole polis had been founded in. “Now, there’s a thing. Admission is...two *mu*. I can afford that.”

The shelter had been built long before the planet’s current zeerust craze, so from the outside it appeared more advanced than many of the buildings that surrounded it. There were places where lifters had once been affixed so the structure could be moved. In the center was a physical mockup of the original Dome projector that the local mesh said was now in Bifrost Park.

A large raccoon, who looked painted rather than real, ambled up to him. “Hello there, mister cyborg! Welcome to the Uplift Founders Museum! I’m Jinkies!”

Ferris didn’t know what to say, except, “Uh...hello, Jinkies.”

“Hello again, Mr. Franklin!” the female raccoon continued.

The elk bobbed his antlered head in greeting. “Pleased to see you again, young lady. Is young Miss Martinez here today?”

“Naw, she’s in summer school right now. Thursdays are slow around here, so I make sure everything’s where it oughta be.”

“And not a speck of dirt that isn’t supposed to be there, I wager,” Franklin said. There were numerous artifacts inside that had to be maintained in the dirty condition they were in. “Everything is restored to the day the of the polis founding, Dr. Stonegate.”

Jinkies perked her ears. “Stonegate? Are you related to Rhianna?”

“I’m hi...her older brother,” Ferris said, catching himself before messing up the pronoun. It was harder to understand what his brother had done to himself than Ferris wanted to admit, hence the intensive research about crossriding motivations. “I just arrived from Earth a day ago.”

The raccoon RIDE smiled delightedly. “Ooooooh! Come on in, then! Let me show you *everything!* And that’ll be two *mu* for admissions, each.”

:How are you holding up, dear?: Roy Stone asked his overwhelmed wife as the music played over the radio speakers. It was his turn to drive the van as they traveled between attractions. *:This has been...the last month has been...very trying.:*

The farther away the Colony, the more the federal government had subsidised their ticket, so Zharus was the logical place to go even if Ryan hadn’t emigrated here. Three frantic, hellish weeks had passed between the end of Arlene’s impeachment and Roy’s disbarment. They had sold everything in their New Boston arcology home, lived in the corridors, been chopped up by cut-rate cybernetics dealers, and generally tried to avoid thinking about it.

:All I can think of is the moment I woke up,: Arlene said, looking out the bus window at the buildings sliding by. *:I smelled the air of Zharus, and everything horrible that happened to us on Earth just...evaporated. We’re here, Roy. It worked! We’re here with our son! Our child!:*

Roy decided to let the gender issue pass for now. *:Keep counting those Impossible Things. These are the days of miracle and wonder!:*

“For our next stop,” Rufia said from the shotgun seat, “we’re headed to something almost as new as the Creche. You folks met some of the newest RIDEs there, so I figure meeting some of the originals would put another spin on things.”

“Kaylee said she was the third, didn’t she?” Arlene said, looking at the skimmer-cycle escorting them with her former son in the saddle.

“Yup!” Kaylee said. “Whole continent went nuts for us after the war was over. Chauncey’s got a place there, too.”

“Yahoo!” Socah shouted, pumping her fist.

“But he doesn’t actually *live* there,” the lynx added.

“Boooo!” Socah grumbled.

Arlene laughed. “Mom, you sound fifty years younger.”

“Colonial air breathes free, child,” Socah said, echoing what her daughter was thinking. “I mighta left Earth earlier, but I didn’t want to leave you kids behind.”

“Well, you’re here now,” Rhianna said. “And speaking of being here, here we are.” They pulled into the parking lot just inside the new entrance to the Brubeck corporate campus.

“So, this is where your *boyfriend* works, sis?” Olivia said brightly.

“This museum was founded as a living exhibit of the history of RIDEs,” Rhianna said loudly. “As well as a RIDE adoption center. It works with the local creches to help find new adult RIDEs jobs or homes.”

“I’ve been reviewing the text of referendums that passed last December,” Roy said. “They feel very sloppy to me.”

“Well, around here it’s considered a good day if our ruling council members wear pants to work,” Rochelle said. She was floating along behind the van on the hoverboard that was micro-Uncia’s skimmer form. “What can you do?”

“I’m sure Ferris will love it here. A whole city-state run by academics!” Arlene said.

“Seriously, yeah, they were a starting point,” Kaylee said. “Folks figured it was better to strike while the iron was hot and get *something*, rather than wait around and let the enthusiasm die down. We’re hoping to hash things out better later.”

“Sloppy, but I agree it’s better than the previous *status quo*,” Roy said. The skimmer parking lot was mostly full, so Roy had to settle for a relatively distant parking place. He looked up at the air traffic. “There’s a lot more skimmers in the air here than on Earth...”

“The high-qual cav on Earth I wouldn’t put in a lawnmower here,” Ivor sneered. “The nano-fab method removes a lot of pico-scale flaws that makes the graviton thrust more powerful. Even furniture has lifters here!”

“Looks like the place is busy today,” Rhianna said. “If you like it, we can come back after hours sometime when we can have the folks who live here to ourselves.”

“I see your name on the building as co-curator,” Socah said dryly.

Rhianna blushed. “Yes...well, I didn’t really have a whole lot to do with founding it, believe it or not. Zane just asked me to help run it once he’d gotten it put together. Really, it’s his guys who do most of the work.”

“Well, I’m happy you haven’t let this fame go to your head,” said Roy.

“Believe me, I’m more likely to run *away from* the cameras than I am to run *toward* them,” Rhianna said. Kaylee and Uncia turned back into their lynx and snow leopard forms, and they all walked toward the museum building across the lot. Rhianna still got a few friendly waves from locals and a few “hey, it’s her!” whispers from obvious tourists. Rochelle got more than a few appreciative stares that only grew more intense when Uncia-minima changed to her close-fitting Fuser form and made them both look like an Integrate.

: *Whatever you do, don’t tell Ivor Signor Donizetti’s involved with that new*

minima *DE*,: Rhianna cautioned Rochelle. :*He'll fanboy all over both of you.*:

:*Oh, don't worry so much, Rhi. We can handle it.*: Rochelle replied.

:*Wait until you see our next idea.*: Uncia said. :*The maxima. It's...not ready for your review yet. We won't be able to afford it until the DINcom money starts flowing in.*:

:*I can hazard a guess.*: Rhianna deadpanned. :*I'm sensing a theme here. A Dreamchaser-based suborbital, maybe?*:

:*Mmmmaybe.*: Uncia replied.

"I want you to meet my kittens!" Kaylee said. "Keiko and Liam. We just found Liam about two weeks ago. Another kitten, Anny, is with Zane's sister Agatha...and Katie's off doing her Marshals thing."

"I saw a lot of Katie in the vids," Socah said. "She's...a talented Citizen."

"She is," Kaylee agreed happily. "I'm *verrry* proud." She sighed. "Liam, on the other paw..."

"Problem child?" Arlene asked.

"Not as such. He's just very cynical and bitter," Kaylee said. "A rescue team found him abandoned near Old Smokey—we've been trying to find all the abandoned and buried Ris we can these days. He was abused by his last rider. We've put him in a Laurie frame, no Fuse mode. It's just been hard to convince him he needs to find a job. Thinks the world owes him."

"Thing is, I'm not sure he's really *wrong* about that," Rhianna said. Admission was free, so they followed the crowd inside. "*Someone* sure as hell owes him something—morally, anyway. It's a crime, the way some people treat RIDEs."

"At least it's a crime *now*," Roy said pointedly.

"Here, Alpha Camp, and in Aloha," Kaylee said. "Nextus... elsewhere...we're not there yet."

The main room was full of people, a stark contrast to how it had been the first time Rhianna had seen it. About half of the RIDEs were seated on their display pedestals, chatting with those around them, and the rest were off their pedestals and mingling with the crowd.

The Kodiak bears, Queenie and Big John, along with their three cubs, were very popular with children. Currently Queenie was surrounded by a half-circle of human children and Creche-borns in juvenile animal Des. A young girl shared floorspace between a whitetail fawn and a green hadrosaur, listening raptly as Queenie described the collapse of the qubitite mine she and Big John had been stuck in for over two decades. A few of them were nodding off under her soothing Cajun voice.

"She sounds straight from Baton Rouge," Olivia said.

"If you asked her, she'd say New Orleans and the Delta," Rhianna said. "Of course, since no RIDE's ever been within light-years of the place, it's kind of academic whether it's above water or not."

"A lot of RIDEs are given these broad regional accents, and 'back stories' to match," Rochelle explained. "Sort of like cartoon characters that way—since they're so different from 'real' people in looks, you exaggerate some familiar element to make them more 'accessible'."

"That why Kaylee sounds like she's from the Ozarks sometimes?" Ivor asked. "Her accent comes and goes."

"Y'all are really observant," Kaylee said, grinning. "Naw. I get that from my first

rider, Anny Hewer. *Hooboy*, you should hear how she talks! I pick up the rest from Rhi's New Boston accent. Makes for a *wicked* funny mix, don't it?"

As they entered the Meet and Greet Room, a number of the RIDEs looked up and saw Rhianna, followed by the people with the RIDEs, and the room grew a little quieter as half the conversations died down. "Rhianna, *cher!*" Queenie called. "Good to see ya, hon! Who're your friends?"

"I'd like to introduce my family from Earth, Queenie," Rhianna said. "Fresh off the ship."

"That's wonderful!" Queenie cheered. "Come on, ever'one! Give 'em a paw!"

The crowd's reaction was much the same as it'd been at Bea's Breakfast Nook, with cheers, congratulations, and good-luck wishes all around. Roy knew how to handle the crowd and did so with great aplomb, quickly taking the focus off of his children. The young RIDEs looked more confused than anything. They were little more than grade-school age, so they couldn't have known the significance anyway.

"You're a *wonderful* storyteller yourself, Queenie," Arlene said. The she-bear RIDE was the size of a normal Kodiak bear, but considering they were enormous animals to begin with they were natural Heavy Armors of all types. "It's wonderful to meet you and hear that story."

"Big John and I are gen-u-ine heros," Queenie said, striking a pose.

"My *beb* here has no real concept o' humility," Big John needled cheerfully. He motioned with his huge forepaw at their cubs. "This here are Bo, Luke, and Daisy. Say hello to the nice folks, cubs."

"Hullo," the three of them chorused shyly. After the first few months the bears had decided to have their cubs finish growing up in real life, rather than in the Creche's time-compressed Nature Range. It meant they needed new Des as they grew older, but the expense was paid for by the Developmental Psychology Department at Martinez U and their new Child RI research program.

"Mom, why are they made of so much metal?" Daisy asked. "I'm *supposed* to be metal on the inside! They're metal on the *outside!*"

"In human terms, they're about ten or so," Queenie explained. There was a lot of stress and uncertainty in her voice. "Full of so many questions."

"They tend to drive one to distraction at that age," Socah said. "Between my own children and my grandchildren, I know it *very* well."

:*Your parents and grandma...I'm a little shocked,*: Rochelle sent to Rhianna.
:*I've met my share of Earthers, but I don't think I've ever seen any treat RIDEs as people so quickly.*:

:*My parents have been civil rights advocates for a long time, though Mom's been subtle about it,*: Rhianna said. Their chat with the bears had gone into VR, since they said no more aloud. Since most people on Earth had implants that kind of conversation was second nature.

"Okay, move aside! Give a lynx some space! I'm walking here! I'm walking here!" A male voice straight from Brooklyn shouted somewhere in the crowd.

Kaylee sighed. "Liam..."

"Ma!" Liam said. He lifted over the crowd, a tawny, spotted lynx with white ear tufts standing in the air as if on solid ground. "It's too crowded in here! I see your meat's with you."

"*Don't* use that word," Kaylee said, ears flattening. "Son, just don't."

“Just pulling yer chain, Ma,” Liam said. “Hello, Rhianna. What’s up with all dese people?”

“Dese people’ are Rhianna’s family,” Kaylee said sternly. “Where’s Keiko?”

“Right here, mother! It’s very crowded here today,” Keiko said from somewhere in the crowd. “Pardon me, excuse...”

Kaylee often wondered if her other two sons were as rough around the edges as Liam, but they hadn’t been found yet. “Have you made any decisions about your future yet, Liam?”

“I’m gonna take the money and run,” Liam said, laying down in the middle of the pathway just to be obnoxious. He started grooming himself, completely ignoring everyone around him. “I’m heading to AlphaCamp after I get a new DE. Or maybe I’ll just buy one from the new Deworks there. Designed by RIDEs, for RIDEs and all that.”

“If you’re expecting me to object, I won’t,” Kaylee said. “I love you.”

“Heh,” Liam said, looking around. “You don’t have to say that out loud, do you?”

“She does, actually,” Socah said. “Embarrassing you in front of other people is part of what family is for. Isn’t that right, Rhianna?”

“Who and *what* the dafuq are you?” Liam said giving her a consummately feline look that combined smugness with mild condescension. “You ain’t no gynoid.”

“I’m your mother’s partner’s grandmother, and I’ve been in this plastic-skinned can longer than *you’ve* been alive,” Socah said amusedly.

“Well, laaa-dee-daaa, you’re so special,” Liam sneered.

Rhianna facepalmed and Kaylee facepawed simultaneously.

“I’ll have a chat with you in VR later, Liam. Maybe we’d better go,” Kaylee said.

Socah chuckled. “Don’t worry about it, Kaylee. As I said, embarrassing you in front of other people is part of what family is for. Besides, I still haven’t taken in the Chauncey exhibit yet.”

“Well, then what are we waiting for, Nana?” Rhianna said excitedly, taking her by the cold plastic hand and leading her around Liam to the scale model at the end of the room. “This is going to sound like bragging, but before I...crossed over, Zane brought him to me to fix up, completely out of the blue. Chauncey helped save his life, you know. I was speechless the whole time.”

“And where is he now, if he isn’t here?” Socah asked.

“Over in the Martinez-U Engineering School,” Rhianna said. “Bunch of really talented students over there maintain and modify him. He’s still a working IDE after eighty years.”

“They’re the ones who supercharged him for that battle with Fritz,” Kaylee added.

“Yeah. That antiquated hunk of junk beat the *shit* out of Dad all right,” Liam needed.

“‘Dad’?” Ivor asked.

“Add it to the growing list of long stories we’ve gotta tell,” Kaylee said sourly.

“Let’s keep on keepin’ on, if yer parents are done chattin’ with da bears.”

“Seeya, Mom,” Liam said, trying to sound indifferent but not *quite* managing it.

“Don’t leave Uplift without saying goodbye, son,” Kaylee said. “Please.”

“Um...I won’t. I promise.” Wall of indifference shattered, Liam got to his feet and quickly scampered off into the crowd.

Keiko finally got through the crowd, who had been watching the soap opera before them with interest. Compared to her brother or her sisters she was very polite

and shy, having had a very kind, gentle rider since her mustering out—an old woman who only Fused on weekends and otherwise gave her the run of her home, in addition to a dozen other feline RIDEs living there. The Gondwanan version of the crazy cat lady.

“We’re ready,” Arlene said, petting the she-bear on her wide, shaggy head. “Great meeting you Queenie, Big John. You’re both *extraordinary* people. Best of luck with your cubs.”

“And to you and yours,” Queenie replied. “Thanks for the advice!”

“Saturday in the park, and every day’s the Fourth of July...” Rufia sang cheerfully as the microbus pulled to a stop in one of the skimmer parking spaces. She was sitting shotgun while Arlene drove, with Yvonne following along behind along with Rhianna, Kaylee, Rochelle, and Uncia. Roy, Socah, Ivor, and Olivia sat in the back of the bus.

“She’s running really smoothly, Ivor,” Arlene said.

“I could squeeze another hundred clicks per hour out of her if I added an impeller where those fake exhaust pipes are,” Ivor said. “It might be ‘fabber-vendor junk’ but she’s a lot more durable than she looks.”

“Now, where’s this legendary ice cream place I keep reading about on the yelp here?” Olivia asked.

“You sure you want some, Livy?” Rhianna asked. “It’s *strictly* no-fab.”

“Eh, I might give it a try,” Olivia said. “Gorgeous park!”

The Bifrost Park dome emitter drew everyone’s attention, but especially Ivor’s. There was a plaque affixed to the base: “The Polis of Uplift owes a debt of gratitude to Rhianna Stonegate, Rochelle Seaford, and their RIDE partners Kaylee and Uncia. Their brave defense and quick restoration of the city’s oldest, most symbolic emitter enabled the swift end of the December 3, 156 AL terrorist attack.”

“They wanted to give us a medal,” Rochelle said. “We all thought that was just too tacky. But we *do* like the plaque.”

“I still think they should have put us RIDEs first,” Uncia smirked. “But other than that, yeah, it’s nice.”

“But that’s just...I mean, g’wow!” Ivor said, running his hand across the plaque. “You got recognized by the whole *city!*” He stared anew at his sister, the light of adulation glowing in his eyes.

“Whole *polity*,” Rufia corrected absently.

“And it’ll be here *forever*,” Ivor continued. “Hundreds of years from now, people will read that plaque and know who you are. Or were.”

“All I can say is don’t believe those simmed reenactments you’re no doubt finding,” Rhianna said. “It wasn’t nearly as heroic at it looks.”

Socah nodded gravely. “It never is.”

“*Kaylee* did all the fighting,” Rhianna said. “And we were only part of it. Team effort and all that.”

“But all the things you *did* do...” Ivor said.

Rhianna laughed. “Okay, I don’t have that much humility. We *were* pretty badass, weren’t we?” She smiled at her friends and family.

“I still wish I’d been here when it was going down,” Rufia said wistfully.

“Oh, c’mon, you had some pretty amazing adventures yourself,” Rochelle said.

“You keep saying that, but I slept through most of it,” Rufia grumbled.

Rhianna used Kaylee’s eyes to see how her parents were reacting to this latest

revelation about their child. Arlene seemed *enormously* conflicted as her gaze alternated between her new daughter and Ivor. *:I'm really sorry about this, Mom,:* Rhianna said to her privately. *:I was hoping he'd gotten over the hero worship while I was gone, since he didn't follow me right away.:*

:Ivor and Olivia have always had problems finding their own paths,: Arlene replied with a VR sigh. *:Ivor always wanted to be you, and Olivia wanting a sister has just consumed her entire life. I even suggested she have a daughter, but she wouldn't go for that. She's still mad at me that I never had another daughter after her. I did consider it at one time, soon after she was born.:*

Roy cleared his virtual throat. *:But I have to admit, I'm very, very proud of you. I'm doubly sorry we smothered and spoiled you so much when you were young. I know that's ultimately why you left.:*

The first seventeen years of Ryan's life he'd been a spoiled brat with everything handed to him. Once his younger siblings were born he realized just what he was, and his personality changed just through strength of will. Suddenly he wanted to do everything himself, even refusing an allowance. But that didn't stop his mother from being an overprotective mama bear. Once Ryan was old enough he decided to do "charity work" with the post-Oil Age planet-wide cleanup still going on, so had seen as much of the world as he could, learning how to make do with very limited resources in the process.

Ryan had been a scrawny runt as a child and teenager, and that had carried into adulthood. Until he'd met muscular, gentle-giant Rufus he'd had to contend with being bullied, too. *Then* Rufus had planted the idea of leaving Earth. Putting twenty light-years between his family and himself seemed like a good idea.

The savings had taken years, and by the time he could afford the ticket (with Rufus's help) Ryan had largely reconciled with his family anyway. They'd even approved of his emigration, provided he communicated regularly.

:Thanks Dad,: Rhianna said. *:That means a lot.:*

:I'm proud, too,: Arlene added. *:You've grown into a wonderful, brave young... woman.:*

:Thanks, Mom: Rhianna sighed. *:I'm just worried what craziness Ivor is going to get into now. Learning to fix skimmers is one thing, but if he goes out and tries to be a hero...:*

:I'm more concerned he thinks he has to be a woman, too,: Arlene said. *:With that fox he's adopted...:*

Rhianna sent a shrug emoticon. *:If he thinks he has to, let him. She finds she made a mistake, she can change back in three years. Might be a valuable lesson.:* She chuckled mentally. *:If all he thinks he has to do is 'outgirl' me, that's getting off pretty lightly. I'm not particularly feminine.:*

:Oh? And what was that dress you were wearing when we first saw you?: Arlene said dryly, trying not to sound too reproachful. *:We'd like to meet this "Integrate" boyfriend of yours.:*

:Oh, I'm sure Zane will be around sooner rather than later, Mom,: Rhianna replied evenly. Aloud, she said, "Anyway, the best ice cream in at least twenty light-years awaits. Follow me." She led the way across the park, toward the small building with the huge line. "Don't worry. They're fast servers. But it's worth every minute."

"I haven't seen a line like this since the Pirates ride at Disneyland Reborn," Olivia

said. “Maybe I’ll just find us somewhere to sit...”

“I’m going to bring you a plain vanilla cone,” Rhianna said. “Trust me. There’s nothing cruel about the way these cows are treated. There’s no factory farms here.”

“But it’s still...” Olivia began. Socah cleared her throat meaningfully, and Olivia rolled her eyes and sighed. “Okay, okay! I’ll do it. I’ll try the vanilla. With sprinkles. Dipped in chocolate.”

“Alas, those poor chocolate beans,” Ivor teased. “Cruelly torn away from the only home they’d ever known...” Olivia stuck out her tongue at him then flounced off to find a table.

“Pardon us a second,” Kaylee said. She Fused up with Rhianna. “I’m gettin’ a RIDE’s Dream, and this way we can share.”

“What’s that, then?” Roy asked. “You have to do that to...?”

“Taste anything, yes. We’re a lot like Socah in that regard.” She nodded respectfully at the eldest in the family. “It’s an elegantly simple chocolate fudge mondae...uh...yeah. Before you ask, no Mondays here on Zharus, so...”

“They only exist in ice cream form,” Rufia said, wiggling her eyebrows. She and Yvonne Fused as well.

“You all do that so casually,” Olivia said, looking around at the crowded park. “If Ferris were here right now he’d have some insightful cultural observation to make. Last I heard from him he was blissing out with Franklin in the MU campus museum. I’m going to comm him to get his butt over here.”

They shuffled through the ordering and pickup window surprisingly quickly. After picking up their orders they enjoyed their various treats in the silence of good food—everyone’s mouth too full to do anything else with it, like speak.

Then Rhianna felt Kaylee stiffen. *:Uh-oh. Look.:*

Rhianna’s eyes lifted to the 2D hardlight display pane on a post beyond the table. Usually used for civic announcements and information text crawls, it also broadcast hourly news briefs. One of those had just begun—and the slide behind the anchor, with her face on it, made Rhianna’s blood freeze and boil simultaneously.

The SNN Celebrity Update anchor with the stentorian voice was saying, “RIDE civil rights icon Rhianna Stonegate’s life took another soap opera turn today as six members of her family arrived unexpectedly on her doorstep after a three-year sojourn in cryo-suspended transit—entirely unaware that the young man they had previously known as ‘Ryan’ was now a ‘Rhianna’. Our floater on the scene captured this *exclusive* footage of the surprise reunion. We’ll start with our fashion reporter, Darla Days.”

“Thank you, Michael. As you can see, Rhianna’s wearing a rather *stunning*...”

Rhianna and Kaylee facepawed. “The next floater I see I’m going to *pop*.”

By now the rest of the family was staring at the screen in horrified fascination as it displayed their first encounter with their unexpected daughter for all to see. “They can just...*do* that here?” Ivor said.

“The price of fame, kiddo,” Rufia said, grinning. “And having a free press.”

“Of course, they’d do it back home, too,” Roy said.

“It’s just that the only ones seeing the footage would be the government,” Arlene said dryly. “I gather they *expect* those news drones to be shot down?”

“They cost about ten *mu* each,” Kaylee said. “We sent them about a thousand *mu* five months ago as pre-payment for future poppings. I think we’ve gone through over half of it. It’s kind of a game, really. They’ll pop with a low velocity pellet slug.”

“Only on Zharus can you *subsidize* the paparazzi annoying you,” Rufia said.

“And you have to put up with this all the time?” Socah asked.

“Well, it *was* kind of dying down, since we hadn’t done anything newsworthy lately,” Rhianna said wryly. She looked around and was pretty sure she could see about a dozen floaters hovering at stand-off range all around the park. “So much for peace and quiet.”

“If any of them get too close to me, they’ll regret it,” Socah said firmly.

“You know, I want to try Fusing,” Olivia said, looking at Rufia speculatively. “I don’t have as much cyber as everyone else. Mainly my internal organs were parted out.”

“All of you folks have enough cyber-parts I don’t recommend it,” Yvonne said. “My bio-sensors are pretty accurate. Otherwise, Olivia, I’d love to. You’d look cute with my ears and tail.”

“There’s a walk-in organ regen clinic at the hospital,” Rhianna said. “We can go there after this. Takes a couple days to grow most organs, longer for a whole body. And they’ll handle brokering the cyber parts for you too, if you want.”

“Impossible Thing 1,250 or something,” Olivia said, finishing her sugar cone.

“I think you missed one, sis,” Ivor said. “You forgot to count you eating non-fabbed food and not complaining about it once after your first bite.”

“I have no comment at this time,” Olivia said primly, and everyone else laughed. She sounded just like her father when the media asked him to comment on a case. “Oh, hey, Ferris and Franklin are finally here.”

Franklin was one of the 000 prototype Heavy Communication Armors, so his bulky cycle mode was based off the VM-1 Chinook. For ten years he’d been a display in the Nextus War Museum, so had been restored to his original configuration. Ferris himself was an incongruity on a skimmer-cycle. He slumped in the saddle, eyes closed, not even gripping the handlebars. The anthropology professor was probably in deep VR conversation with Franklin and doing major research.

“He’ll probably have a paper to submit to one of the planet’s anthropology journals before the sun goes down,” Roy said with no small amount of pride.

The last time Rhianna had seen him, Ferris had just gone through an acrimonious divorce where his wife took complete custody of their children. The man was an introvert and had been known to go weeks without washing, days without eating, and generally neglectful of his body. Rhianna had pegged him for getting a brainbox and just ignoring the outside world completely, but surprisingly he’d never even considered the idea.

“We’ve arrived, Ferris,” Franklin announced.

Rhianna’s older brother opened his eyes and dismounted. “Thank you, Franklin. I suppose I could use some ice cream.”

“Lucky for you, they still have some left,” Rufia quipped.

The old elk RIDE converted to Walker form and gave Ferris an affectionate nudge in the back with his nose. “Then you’d better hurry, my friend.”

“Glad to see my daddy’s getting along so well with your brother, Rhi,” Yvonne observed.

“They do seem like a good match, don’t they?” Rhianna mused. “We should make sure and get Ferris de-borged, too. He really does need a keeper sometimes.”

“My ex-wife got tired of doing it, hence the divorce,” Ferris said from the line. “I’m hoping to get *them* off Earth, too. Eventually. I bear her no ill-will, but I do miss my

kids.” He looked up at the media floaters. “I feel like I should tap dance for the camera or something.”

“Sorry about this, everyone,” Rhianna sighed. “I’ll ask them to back off, but no promises. I’m afraid you all just became extremely newsworthy by association.”

“If the worst that can happen to us is everyone knows who we are, maybe that’s not so bad,” Roy reflected. Already the people at the surrounding tables were starting to look over in their direction. “At least they just seem *interested* in us. No rotten fruit in evidence.”

“Ugh,” Rhianna said. “Really?”

“I hadn’t even known there *were* fab programs for rotten fruit,” Arlene said. “We found out.”

Roy put an arm around her shoulder. “We’re away from there now.”

“Speaking of away from there, we probably ought to move on soon,” Rufia said. “Now that the word’s out, it won’t be long before the *human* reporters show up to pester us. They’re more annoying because you *can’t* just shoot them. Not very hard, anyway.”

“Let’s head over to the clinic, and we’ll get them off our backs,” Kaylee suggested.

“Then we can head over to your new place,” Rochelle said. “You’ll like it, it’s got a great view of the desert.”

“It has a home fabber?” Olivia said. Her eyes flickered, probably looking up model information and specs. “Why do you even need large factories on Zharus when you can have one in any home?”

“It’s more a matter of quality than anything,” Rhianna said. “Plus, the raw materials for specialized products aren’t as cheap as you’d think.” One floater got *just* within laser range, so Kaylee popped it. Local regulations stipulated they couldn’t be durable enough to withstand something that could actually hurt someone—but neither could celebs being observed use anything stronger to bring them down. It was a curious balance between individual privacy and freedom of the press.

Back into the microbus they went, the Fused flying an escort the short distance to the regeneration clinic. They were met at the door by the Clinic’s Director, who looked an awful lot like actor Matt Smith, the Eleventh Doctor. There was a general *Dr. Who* theme in this section of the building.

“I bid you greetings to the Regeneration Center, come right this way,” he said, gesturing in a friendly manner. “They can’t follow you in here. No need for introductions, I’ve been watching the news. We’ll get started right away. Just call me Eleven.”

“The truth is, Col. Gates, for someone who’s been in an FBR like yours for so many years, we don’t recommend a full-body regeneration from the get go,” Eleven said. “In fact, your present FBR is more advanced on the inside than anything we have here. What we *can* do, apart from reconditioning all the worn-out parts of course, is install hardlight emitters. We have compatible units with your G.I. Jane. You need to be eased back into full senses if you wish an organic body in the future.”

“Will I be able to eat?” Socah said wistfully.

“We’ll install a standard digestive energy extraction unit, as well as a AA-grade sarium battery pack replacement to make room for it. With the power efficiency your FBR possesses, and the chemical energy extraction, you may never have to recharge by plugging in, though you’ll still have that capability.”

“And with the hardlight skinning you can look however you want to, Nana,” Rhianna pointed out.

“When we can get started?” Socah said excitedly, leaning forward in the chair. She sounded very child-like.

“I’ll order the parts we need from the fabbers now, and schedule the work to be done at the same time as the rest of your family’s,” Eleven said. “That way you can all walk out together.”

“I’m so *happy* for you, mother,” Arlene said, hugging her. The rest of the family had already gotten their own good news. In two days they’d be back in the clinic to get most of their cyber-parts replaced with real ones. They were keeping their cortical implants and a few minor parts here and there that wouldn’t be enough to interfere with Fusing a RIDE, if they wished. Arlene raised one eyebrow and looked at Ivor. “So, my son, are you planning on getting any *other* parts replaced? Hmmm?”

“I don’t know what you mean, Mom,” Ivor said innocently. “I just wanted to make sure they could integrate my tool-arm into the...upgrade. I don’t think I could live without it at this point.”

“Our specialists are looking into that, Mr. Stonegate, but I doubt there will be any problems,” Eleven said. “Plus, there’s the Q-processor upgrade and DINsec security package for each of your present cortical implants. Now, there we can definitely do better than your present capabilities.”

“Impossible Things...you know what? Just forget it,” Olivia said.

“You do understand, of course, that any and all Q-based tech would have to be removed again if you left the star system,” Eleven said. “Not that I expect you’re planning to, but we need to be clear on this at the outset. Don’t want any more wars breaking out.”

“Believe me, we only just got here,” Roy said. “The last thing we want to do at this point is go anywhere else!”

“Good to hear it. But before you leave this building, I’m prescribing a Zharus Diurnal Acclimation package for your current implants,” Eleven said. “It’ll take just a few days to adapt your body rhythms to our thirty-hour days.”

“Wonderful!” Arlene said. “Now, what’s next?”

“We’ll have to ask Rufia, but I’m inclined to take you to your new house,” Rhianna said. “It’s been a long day, and you’re still running on 24 hours.”

“And *you* need some sleep yourself soon, if I’m not mistaken,” Arlene said.

“A pretty young woman like yourself needs her beauty rest,” Socah quipped, winking. “Especially after being out ‘til all hours of the morning the night before.”

“Not until I see you settled in your new house,” Rhianna said firmly. “I’d be a poor hostess otherwise.” She nodded at Eleven. “Thanks, Doctor. You’ve really put a shine on things today.”

“My pleasure,” Eleven said. “See you in a couple days.”

“The word you’re looking for, Rhi, is ‘googie,’” Rochelle said. The house on the west side of the city, near the Dome border, was elevated high enough for a spectacular view of the Dry Ocean beyond. “Ladies and gentlemen, the Billion Year Drought.”

“Maybe I should’ve been a xenogeologist,” Ferris said breathlessly. “But what is with that house? I won’t say it’s ugly, but it just seems *very* Zharusian.”

“Googie architecture was zeerusty even in the 1950s,” said Yvonne.

The two storey house had a tilted white roof with lots of tall windows, a three-car garage, and gray fieldstone walls. Two or three media floaters glinted in the air nearby, but they seemed to be keeping their distance. Apart from the RIDEs' willingness to zap them with lasers, the operators had noticed Rochelle and Uncia's presence as well. Besides, there wasn't any sense in being *too* annoying, Rhianna thought wryly. They hadn't gotten any interviews yet.

:Is the house DINsec'd?: Rhianna asked Kaylee.

:I had the house fabber turn out a 4.2 unit. Just needs installation,: Kaylee said. *:I also made sure that their Q-based implant upgrades will have the latest beta spec.:*

:Good kitty,: Rhianna said. She was getting very tired. It was 1900 and sleep hadn't exactly been top priority the night before. *:Nana's right, though. I'm going to crash before too much longer. I just might Fuse-sleep. You have some errands you need to run anyway, right Kay?:*

:They can wait.: Kaylee said. *:We should make sure your family is settled first.:* She sent the unlock signal to the garage door, and it slid open to reveal ample room for the microbus, as well as for the others' skimmer cycles to pull in beside it. It slid down behind them, blocking out the floaters. "I've set the house windows to privacy mode. We're good."

"Whew." Rhianna sighed in relief. "As annoying as the media is, even they wouldn't break and enter for this kind of scoop. It's just public space that's fair game." She turned to the bus as Arlene and the others slid the doors open and started climbing out. "Welcome to your new home-for-now. C'mon, we'll show you around."

The inside was as stylized as the outside, looking nothing like what the former Earthers were familiar with. The appliances were all mid-20th century zeerust with physical push-button functions and hidden hardlight emitters. The fabber had a room to itself. Ivor and Olivia went right in to get a close look at it.

The house wasn't unfurnished. There were chairs and couches, a dining room, a replica of an early 2000s "sunflower" G4 iMac that had its flat screen on a movable arm. It had a standard room layout for the era as well, with a living room, dining room, family room, and master bedroom downstairs, and three bedrooms upstairs. The only things that would have been out of place were the RIDE alcoves in the bedrooms and garage.

"I hope the rent isn't too much," Arlene said. "I could never have afforded something like this on Earth."

"It's not," Rufia said. "There's room to spare here, even under the Domes, so it's cheap—especially given what you'll have left over from the cyber sales."

Rhianna retrieved the DINsec unit from the fabber then went and found the house's network hardline.

"So, that's the DINsec thing I keep reading about?" Ivor asked. "Keeps the black hat Integrates out?"

"Pretty much. Shelley and I invented them after one stranded us in orbit on our own ship," Rhianna said. "Necessity and all that. We weren't the only ones working on this sort of thing. It was a parallel invention."

Ivor blinked. "You have a *ship*?"

"Just a small one," Rhianna said. "We can show you tomorrow, or something. Give you the even grander tour."

"Oooh," Ivor said, eyes gleaming.

Arlene frowned. "I'm still not entirely clear on what an 'Integrate' even is. Most of the articles on your recent fame take it for granted people already know."

"Well, you've already met at least one of them," Rhianna said. "Do you remember running into any...strangely furry people on your way here?"

"There was that raccoon with a badge who fixed the lifter when it broke down," Ivor said.

"Yeah, we noticed," Rochelle said. "One of the Marshals. They're good people."

"Anyway," Rhianna said, "Integrates are what happens when—" Then the doorbell rang, with the classic "Ding-Dong!" pattern. "I guess we'll get to turn away our first reporter," Rhianna mused.

"I'll get it," Arlene said, heading for the front door. "I'm used to talking to the press now." When the door didn't open automatically she turned the knob. Everyone made sure they weren't in view of the open door.

Standing on the doorstep was a humanoid tiger in scout khakis, leaning on a cane with one hand and holding a fruit basket in the other. "Ah, hello," he said, offering the basket. "Zane Brubeck. Thought I'd, um, stop by with a housewarming present. Welcome to the neighborhood."

"Rhianna, your boyfriend is here," Arlene deadpanned in the tone mothers used for teenaged children waiting for their dates.

"I'm not ready!" Rhianna replied, picking up on it. Then she and her mother shared a laugh over the absurdity.

Zane's ears twitched, then he grinned. "Oh, you're *always* ready enough for me, Rhi!"

Olivia rushed out of the fabber room. "What did I miss? Did I hear my sister girling out? Her *boyfriend* is here?"

"Come on in, Zane," Roy Stone said. He looked calm and collected at meeting a humanoid tiger, as if he'd done it all the time. "I've been wanting to meet you. Been a little unclear about this 'Integrate' business, myself."

Zane nodded, handing the fruit basket to Arlene and following her inside. "Hello, sir. I've been wanting to meet you, too. All of you." He grinned. "Though until just a couple of hours ago, it was only in a sort of theoretical sense. It was a pretty big surprise when I saw you on the news. Came over as soon as I could find out where you folks were."

"Hi, Zane," Rhianna said. "This is my Mom, Arlene Gates, my Dad, Roy Stone... brothers Ivor, Ferris, sister Olivia, and Grandma Socah. Everyone, Zane Brubeck, CEO of Brubeck Mining and the first public Integrate."

"So, your parents combined their last names for their kids, huh? Neat idea," Zane said. "Conserves hyphens for the needy."

"Could get rather long for future generations," Arlene said, giving Zane a Parental Look. "The celeb sites say you've been going out regularly for half a year now."

"Mom..." Rhianna said. "I'm thirty-seven. I think that—"

"So we were wondering," Roy said, smirking. "What are your intentions regarding our little girl?"

"Not you too!" Rhianna said. "Come on, Dad! I don't need you looking over my shoulder."

:I think they're just joking a little at your expense,: Kaylee said soothingly.
:Remember how they were with Olivia's boyfriends?:

Olivia herself was biting the back of her hand to keep from giggling too much. She sidled over next to Rhianna and put her free hand on her big sister's shoulder. *Now you're gonna get it, sis. I'm eating this right up.:*

"Well, I'm considering marrying her for her money," Zane said, grinning. His tension seemed largely to have evaporated with the ice breaking.

"I imagine she's doing quite well with this DINsec business of hers," Arlene said with a note of pride.

"Actually, she pretty much gave those away free," Zane said. "Because it was the right thing to do."

"There's something else Shelley and I are working on," Rhianna said. "It's all real hush-hush. I'll tell you about it later."

"Anyway, I'm just a measly Q mining tycoon," Zane said. "Rhi's gonna make me look like a pauper in a few years, just you watch." He chuckled. "So it makes sense for me to consolidate my financial position early, by marrying her," he continued quite reasonably.

It was often hard to determine if Zane was joking or not, and Rhianna's eyes bulged a little trying to do so. If she'd been drinking anything a spit-take would have followed. It was fortunate she was still Fused with Kaylee. "Uh..."

"Wow!" Olivia exclaimed. "Come on, sis! He's a great catch. I dated a tiger guy in VL for a few months when I was in my vixen phase. I bet he's fun in bed!"

Arlene raised her eyebrows, then pointed at an empty spot on the floor. "What do you think, Roy? Would a tiger-skin rug work right there?"

"All right, I'm *mostly* kidding," Zane said. "We haven't actually gotten as far as marriage proposals yet. But I assure you, my intentions *are* strictly honorable."

"Have a seat, Zane," Roy said, gesturing towards the couch. "I think we all have questions to ask you—about yourself, and what Integrates are."

"Thanks," Zane said, taking the seat where suggested and leaning his cane against the side of the sofa. "I'll be happy to tell you anything you want to know."

Ivor's scanners were going full power on Zane. "I'm detecting...large amounts of qubitite...among other things my scanners just can't make sense of. Past ten minutes I've read everything about Integrates I can get ahold of, and I still don't understand more than RIDE, plus human, equals Integrate."

"That's about the size of it," Zane said. "You see, when a RIDE and a human love each other very much..."

Rhianna de-Fused and took the seat next to Zane as he explained Integrates and Integration in the humorous style that was Terry's contribution to their combined personality. He used projections from his hardlight lenses to illustrate the story, which fascinated Socah, Olivia, and Ivor more than anyone else.

"So...wait," Olivia said. "If it's been known ever since RIDEs were *invented* that this could happen...why do they keep making them?"

"It does seem like a bit of a safety issue," Ivor said.

"If they'd been invented on Earth the Consumer Product Safety Bureau would've sent Dr. Patil to Sedna and melted down everything else," Socah said. "So there just has to be something in the Zharusian character. It has to have some element of acceptable risk...clearly you've gained some truly incredible benefits, Mr. Brubeck—and Terry, if you're in there somewhere."

"Well, without RIDEs, qubitite would be too expensive to mine in the areas

where the best plays are,” Zane explained. “AA-grade Q is only found in the Deep Dry. The bulk of it is right under my company’s main platform. I don’t know *how* he did it—he must have had hardlight environmental seals in Chauncey before almost anyone else even thought of them—but my father defended that site for two weeks in his IDE. The power drain must’ve been enormous, but he always outlasted the claim jumpers.”

“So, you’re the son of the Clint Brubeck, legendary Colonial Scout,” Socah said matter-of-factly. “He’s been popular in adventure fics for the past fifteen years or so—at least, he was when we left. So many penny-awful stories about finding the ruins of alien civilizations in his trusty do-anything IDE Chauncey.” There was wistful, fangirl note in her voice similar to Rhianna’s whenever she worked on the IDE.

“You know, Chauncey started life in the 56th *long* before I got command,” Socah continued. “He was just your average bog-standard Block 3 walking tank mecha. I don’t think those served more than a decade before they were replaced. Nothing really special about his service life. They were given to the Scout Corps, then your father bought him outright when he went solo.”

“I think I know where Rhianna got her love of things mechanical,” Zane said.

“Certainly not from me or my husband,” Arlene said.

“No, that’s just where she got her good looks,” Zane said.

“She has *great* genes,” Kaylee added from the corner of the room, where she’d been recharging. “And I should know.”

Arlene blushed faintly. “Flatterer.”

Zane turned back to Socah. “I’ll be happy to let you take Chauncey for a spin sometime if you want,” he said. “He’s better than he’s ever been—thanks to Rhi.” He grinned. “That’s one of the cardinal rules of dating, you know: Always get the grandmother on your side.”

“I just might take you up on that, once I got a ‘real’ skin on me,” the old soldier said. “Some of those fics had him do all these fanciful things, he had a jet mode, a tank mode, a submarine mode. Whatever the plot needed, Chauncey could do! Your father was always tinkering with him. He’s from my generation, you know. I was sad to find out he’d passed when I got my ‘net back. My condolences.”

“Thanks,” Zane said. “Yeah, the world’s a poorer place without him. My youngest sister Maddie followed in his footsteps the most directly—she’s out there right now, exploring. Who knows what other strange metamaterials like Q or cavorite are out there?”

Arlene looked at the couple in front of her, tiger-man and new daughter. “Okay,” she said primly. “Rhianna, you never said anything about RIDEs or Kaylee in your vids. Now that we’re all settled in this nice home you’ve rented for us...I think we’re owed a little explanation *why* you ‘crossed over’.”

“Just a *teensy* bit,” Olivia said. “Sis.”

“I’ve got a part in this, too,” Rufia announced, sitting down next to her old friend on the sofa. “Frankly, looking back on it, I was a complete bitch for five years. Sorry, Rhi.”

“Water under the bridge, Rufe.” Rhianna gave Rufia a sideways hug, then settled in. “It really started about two years after we arrived on Zharus, when we left Nujose in Laurasia for Burnside. See, Burnside is a rather volcanic, fertile—”

“We did more odd jobs for three months before we decided to hitchhike around the Coastal Ring,” Rufia interrupted. “We still had no real conception of how farking

huge this planet is. That one was my fault, really.”

“Hijinks ensued,” Rhianna said. “We were on our third day out, heading towards Cascadia, when we came across this guy and his broken-down skimmer—”

“It was the most *epic* MacGyver fix I’ve ever seen, before or since,” Rufia added. “Ryan fixed it with little more than a wing, a prayer, and some duct tape.”

“*Actually* it was some misaligned cavorite,” Rhianna said. “I had to fix it by hand and some implant-assisted eyeballing. See, the man was flying a Donizetti Mangusta SUV, and those—”

“Use dual centerline lifters and quadro-stabilizers,” Ivor said. “It was one of Donizetti’s earlier designs when cavorite was a lot more expensive, plus Earth stuff sucks compared to here anyway. If he didn’t make any changes to the stabilizer alignments to account for that—”

“Let *me* finish here, please,” Rhianna said firmly. “The skimmer was a direct import from Earth, and the owner hadn’t made the cavorite support collar changes. He also hadn’t maintained his emergency beacon. Kind of crazy. Or maybe just lazy.

“After I fixed it, after riding with him for a few hours and chatting, out of the blue he offered Rufe and me a fresh start in Uplift. I’ve never met anyone more generous in my life. He had this plot of land with a garage building on it that was just outside the Dome here—the polis expands them periodically. Anyway, I set myself up as a skimmer mechanic at first, while Rufe did his odd jobs running comm gear.”

“Ore carrier drydock crew, that sort of thing,” Rufia said. “It paid the bills.”

“He crashed on my couch,” Rhianna said, prodding the larger woman on her forearm. “Then this RIDE thing sort of whapped us both upside the head. We both realized we each *needed* one, but the majority of my *mu* was going into garage equipment.

“I also wanted a challenge. A singular project that would teach me everything I needed to know about RIDEs, inside and out.”

“This is where things started hitting the fan between us,” Rufia said. “I learned about crossriding, and thought being hot girls together would make it a fun thing to do.”

“A fun thing to do? Like being a woman was some sort of game?” Arlene said. “Coming from *you*, Rufe, I’m not surprised. But I can’t imagine Rhianna would go that far with you.”

“I couldn’t,” Rhianna said. “Though I’ll admit, even at the time, it had a certain... appeal. But I was trying to get my business on its feet and I honestly didn’t want the distraction.”

“So, I got my girl Yvonne,” Rufia said. The elk, standing behind the sofa, put her head over her rider’s shoulder. “And I can’t imagine life without her anymore.”

“Awwww, you make me feel all mushy,” Yvonne said.

“I had less than a hundred *mu* to spend at the time,” Rhianna said. She accessed the house’s network and started to project recorded memory from that day. “The RIDE markets were flooded with surplus, so prices for male or female units were depressed. I had narrowed it down to two choices. The first was a mostly-intact male LEO-CSA—a lion command armor. He was about 98 *mu*, so just within my budget. *Then* I found... this...”

Kaylee grimaced, seeing herself as a skeletal chassis, stripped of everything but her RI core. She whimpered a little and rested her head in Rhianna’s lap.

“I know, Kaylee. I’m sorry.” Rhianna petted the lynx’s cheekruffs.

“It’s okay, Rhi. Go on,” Kaylee said.

“Ugh!” Rochelle said. “By the time I saw her she at least had most of her internals replaced.”

“You can see what I meant by ‘a challenge’,” Rhianna continued. The expression on her brother’s face, as he took in every detail of Kaylee’s bare chassis, was telling. “But I took a really close look at the chassis before I bid. I don’t think the Auction House knew what they had. I’d done enough research to recognize a 001-series when I saw one. Only 62 *mu*? Sold! Thing is, I didn’t know if it was a male or female unit.”

“Why do RIDEs have a sex anyway? At the core, they’re mechanical beings,” Roy asked. “I mean no offense. I’m simply curious.”

“If you want the techy explanation, the neural templates our cores are based on have analogous sex-specific structures,” Yvonne said. “I have a *female* elk brain. If you put my core into a *male* DE frame I’d go nutso from gender dysphoria. Humans brains are a lot more flexible than ours here, so they can change to match *our* sex, rather than the other way around.”

“Anyway, this was when I hired Shelley,” Rhianna said. “I’m fair to middling on RIDE software, but I know my limits. I needed someone *good* to handle that end of the business. I was *completely* out of my depth when I was at the stage when I could reboot Kaylee.” She smirked at her friend.

“This is also where Terry comes in,” Zane said.

“That’s your...RIDE half?” Socah said. “Go on, please.”

“That’s right,” Zane said. “I belonged to this great kid at the time. He’d decided to get me fitted out with a full hardlight package.”

“That was my second or third full upgrade like that,” Rhianna said. “Kid still had to take out a loan to afford it, so I went the extra klick. Watching Terry’s reaction as I calibrated everything, I decided no RIDE should be without a hardlight skin.”

“I’d never had one before,” Zane said. “I’d never felt anything like it. It was like being...real.” He grinned. “And now I have both sets of my memories, I know that’s *exactly* what it was like.”

“And while he was in the shop, I was just booting again for the first time in almost thirty years. There was some...trouble at first. Terry kept me sane through some bad times,” Kaylee said, headbutting the tiger-man and purring.

Rochelle sighed. “Almost six years later and I’m still kicking myself I didn’t catch you were going into an old half-assed safe mode instead of shutting down, Kaylee. When they removed your secondary q-processors it did a number on the interface jacket firmware.”

“And *I’m* still kicking myself for not knowing more about fetters back then,” Rhianna said. “If I’d known then what I knew a few months later, Terry, you’d have been able to tell us what was going on right away, and you’d *damn* sure never have left my garage like that.”

Zane shrugged. “We make mistakes, we live and learn. No lasting harm done, at least to me.”

“So, then I discovered I’d bought a *female* lynx,” Rhianna said. “Rufia got all excited about that.”

“We were *finally* going to girl out together,” Rufia added. Her enthusiasm faded. “Or so I hoped, deep down. That’s...not how it turned out.”

“Opposite-sex RIDEs can be operated in what’s called ‘Passive Mode’. It prevents

physical changes beyond normal RIDE tags—ears and tail—at the cost of keeping the RIDE asleep during it,” Rhianna explained.

“I just *couldn't* just sell Kaylee, and setting her ‘free’ when she could just be snatched up by someone else just didn't feel right. I wasn't going to abandon her like that anyway.” Rhianna shivered. “We got on well, she was a good friend from the get-go. I decided to use Passive when I needed to armor up—and created a sort of female alter-ego named ‘Kaylee Cross’. I doubt I really fooled anyone who mattered, folks here are willing to play along. But...” she looked sideways at Rufia.

Rufia actually seemed bitter. “You were in denial for five years.”

“You *still* think that?” Rhianna said, sighing. “It was something I had to work up to, okay?”

“I sense a very old argument here,” Arlene said.

“We had some *epic* flaming rows over it,” Rufia said. “I guess it shows just how strong our friendship is that we never *really* decided it was over.”

“So, what *did* make you stop using Passive?” Ivor asked.

Rhianna pondered how to explain the whole Towers incident in just a few sentences. “Well, to skip over a whole lot of details, I was in a situation where being in a Passive-mode Fuser would have been deadly-stupid. Passive mode you lose access to almost three quarters of onboard processing power. It helps if you have an implant like I do to run autonomic systems, but it's just dumbass to use it in combat.”

“Then I made her into the woman you see today,” Kaylee said.

“I haven't regretted anything,” Rhianna continued. She tapped the side of her head, then had to yawn. “Female brain structure. No gender dysphoria, see. My body feels quite natural. It's the resocialization and emotional differences that's an adventure.”

“You adapted well, I'll say ‘dis for ya,” Zane said, briefly projecting a hardlight pair of Groucho glasses and cigar.

“This is all just so much to take in,” Arlene said, hands atop her head. “When someone can change themselves so completely in the space of ten minutes, there's still a part of me that thinks this is some kind of elaborate hoax.”

“It is kind of shocking, especially if you weren't born to it like Zane and me,” Rochelle said. “We grew up with this kind of thing being ‘normal.’ You all didn't. I think that's really why it took Ryan so long to give in.”

“Hey, I knew about it since a few days after we landed,” Rufia said. “And it took *me* two years to really wrap my brain around the idea you could do this in *Real Life*. Now, you may find this next fact shocking.” She leaned forward and whispered. “There's *no VL* here on Zharus.”

“You're kidding,” Olivia said incredulously. “You're...not kidding?”

“The difference between Zharus and Earth is that here you *can* be whatever you want—or whoever. You can collect identities like trading cards,” Rufia said.

“There *are* small VR bulletin boards, chatrooms, MMORPGs, and other hangouts, of course,” Rochelle said. “Places where you can roleplay with friends or whatever on a smaller scale. I hang out on some of them myself. But there's not the kind of globe-spanning single VR culture I understand VL is. There's just no need for it. It's a place you *visit*, not live in.”

“Closest thing there is, I think, is Nature Range and Bambi's Forest,” Kaylee said. “It's meant for us RIDEs, mostly run on our internal systems. We gotta feel like animals

every so often. Keeps us mentally healthy. It's a place where humans rarely tread, 'cause you gotta be an animal, too."

"And a lot of humans have trouble wrapping their heads around some of the things we animals do," Uncia said.

"Well, this has all been very illuminating," Socah said. "But have you seen what time it is? My internal chrono's on Zharus time now...I've been up almost forty hours! I'm amazed you all—"

The long day finally caught up with Rhianna. Suddenly very drowsy, she leaned against Zane's side, and to the surprise of everyone except Zane, started to contentedly purr very loudly.

"I did that," Kaylee said. "I gave her that ability, I mean."

Zane put an arm around Rhianna. "It's adorable, really." He grinned. "I think we should probably go ahead and take her home. Been a long day for her."

"For everyone," Arlene agreed. "Let's all get some rest. What time is it?"

"It's barely dark," Olivia said, stretching. "I can feel that program of Dr. Eleven's working, though. I think I'll be fine before I get my new guts installed."

Zane put his other arm under Rhianna's legs and scooped her up from the sofa. "I'm just going to take miss sleepygirl home now. It was great meeting you all. If there's anything I can do for you, let me know."

"Ryan always did work himself until he dropped," Arlene said after everyone was gone. "That's our child alright."

"Rufia's a hoot!" Socah said, clapping her hands and laughing. "We're going shopping tomorrow!"

"Oooh!" Olivia said. "Maybe I can get Rhianna and Shelley to take me shopping, too!"

"Why bother when you can fab all the clothes you need right at home?" Ivor said.

Olivia gave Ivor an old-fashioned look. "That's just *fabbing*. Shopping is... *shopping*."

Ivor rolled his eyes. "All right, fair enough. Far be it from me to get between girls and their...*shopping*."

Olivia giggled. "Just you wait 'til Cira's ready. We'll get *you*, too."

"I'll...look forward to it," Ivor said dubiously.

"Franklin is...not what I expected," Ferris said. "In fact, I don't know if I can say I expected anything from a true AI. He has an *amazing* mind. We get along well."

"You two spent long enough at the University," Ivor said.

"We wandered the campus," Ferris added. "I also learned that our new sister *teaches* new apprentices in the RIDE mechanic trade. Jill-of-all-trades, our Rhianna."

"I have a sister," Olivia said. Tears filled her eyes. "That's the only thing I've ever *really* wanted..."

"Don't push her *too* hard, Olivia," Arlene warned. "What do you plan on doing otherwise? You're interested in so many things."

"I want to find a RIDE to partner with," Olivia said. "Maybe I'll head down to the city Creche after I'm whole again."

"But what do you plan on doing for a *career*?" her father asked pointedly.

"Okay, okay," Olivia replied. "I'll have an answer for you by the end of the week, Dad. Sheesh."

“Alright. I’m going to hold you to that,” Roy said firmly. “Once we’re acclimated everyone finds a job. We can’t lean on your sister *or* her boyfriend for very long, and we need to build up some savings so we’re ready to help the others settle in when they get here. Your mother and I will take the local bar exam next week. What about the rest of you?”

“Franklin and I roamed the halls at Martinez U long enough to know they’re not looking for any Anthropology faculty,” Ferris said. “There are openings in Punta Sur, Nextus, Sturmhaven, and Califia. I’d prefer the Nextus position, since it’s fairly close as things go on this planet.”

“*Not* Sturmhaven!” Arlene said. “I can’t *believe* this planet’s Colonial Charter even allows a place like that to exist! They have to be exploiting a loophole. The civil rights curtailment if you just *happen* to be male. Misandrist doesn’t *begin* to describe it! I’m amazed there’s any men left there.”

“Going to agree with your mother on this one,” Socah said. “Sturmhaven is right out.”

“The position *did* require a change of sex...so I’ll strike it from my list,” Ferris said. “Besides, Franklin has rather *strong* feelings about Sturmhaven, himself.”

Now everyone looked at Ivor. “What?” he said innocently. He’d been looking speculatively at his own chest, probably simulating being a woman with his implant. “Okay, okay. Am I that transparent?”

“We’re your family, Ivor. We *know* you,” Ferris said in a tone that implied they also accepted him how he was.

“I *hope* you’ll take Rufia’s advice and wait a few months before you ‘cross over’ as they call it here,” Arlene said. “But with that new friend you made at the Creche, I expect you won’t. I won’t stop you, but I do have *one* suggestion.”

“What’s that, then?” Ivor said.

“I’m your mother. I had a girl’s name chosen for you before we’d decided to have another boy, so please allow me to use it,” Arlene said. She extended her flesh hand. “Do we have a deal, Ivy Dorothy Stonegate?”

“Deal,” Ivor said, shaking it without hesitation.

Olivia squealed with joy. “That makes *two* sisters! You *sure* you don’t want that job in Sturmhaven, Ferris?”

“*Doubly* sure now,” Ferris replied, chortling. “Can’t see myself as being any *less* of an absent-minded slob as a woman, anyway.”

“So, what’s the final Impossible Things count, Livy?” Ivor asked.

“Two, three hundred?” the young woman said, bewildered. “I stopped trying to keep count and I’m too tired to care right now.”

“Well, everyone pick a bedroom,” Socah said. “I’ll just nod off on the net for a while. Time to come out of first retirement.”

Ryan’s dreaming mind had taken the name of the Amazon Beanstalk back on Earth a little too literally. It was a winding, leafy green stalk reaching into high orbit, with the elevator cars replaced by giants carrying cargo or people in wicker backpacks. The passenger boarding areas at its base were also very medieval-fairytale looking. Ryan grumbled at his subconscious as he scratched his itchy wool clothes.

Dreams were the only place Ryan could be Ryan, though he had only taken advantage of his lucid dreaming implant for this purpose a few times. It felt strange,

almost alien, to be without breasts and female plumbing. But it was appropriate for this dream.

It was the day he'd left Earth. The whole family was there. Not just parents, brothers, and sisters, but grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins as well. They were all coming to Zharus—all sixteen of them, eventually. Ryan didn't have cordial relationships with all of them, either. The legacy of his Spoiled Brat years still lingered with jealous cousins. His mother's accusation of finding a sugar daddy to take care of him would be a natural assumption for many of them—not to mention the repeated begging for money. The Gates and Stone family members all had their own flaws, some of them severe.

A gorgeous woman in a wenchy dress, leading a tiger on a leash, sauntered up to him. "Is this seat taken?" she asked in a sultry voice.

"Have a seat, Zanie," he said, laughing. "That's a very pretty tiger."

"Handsome, not pretty," the tiger said in Terry's voice. He sat on his haunches and started licking the back of his left forepaw.

"I figured turnabout was fair play," Zanie said, gesturing at herself. She had blanket permission to enter Rhianna's dreams. "It's been quite a day, hasn't it?"

"Understatement of the *decade*," Ryan said, moving closer to her. "This is the last thing I ever thought would happen. I honestly thought I'd never see my family again." Ryan sighed.

Zanie hugged him. "But there's something else bothering you about this, isn't there?"

"I suppose I didn't particularly *want* to see them again, in some ways," Ryan admitted. "I left Earth in the first place to get away from them. Things were a lot less complicated without them around."

Zanie giggled.

Ryan glanced at her. "What?"

"If this last year has been *less* complicated than life with your family, that must be some family!" Zanie said.

Ryan laughed. "Wait until the rest of them get here. When they do...well, 158's going to be quite a year. With that, and DINcom going public..." He shook his head. "While it's nice *having* family, and I'm really glad they're getting away from Earth while the getting is good...it was nicer to have them where they couldn't call me up or drop by any time when I'm in the middle of things. Or ask for a handout. Mom and Dad's bunch wouldn't, of course, but all the cousins...'Hey, you've got lots of money, why don't you give me some?'" He rolled his eyes. "I *do* want to help them some—I'll set up some scholarship funds and stuff—but I don't want to just be Miss Moneybags."

"Yeah." Zanie nodded. "I guess we're going to live in interesting times, all right." Now it was her turn to sigh. "Still...I wonder if you know how much I envy you."

"I think I see what you mean," Ryan said. "Sorry. Here I'm complaining about having too much family while you've got hardly any." It was just Zane and Agatha as far as the Brubeck family on Zharus was concerned.

Zanie shrugged. "It's no big. I'm used to it. I do miss Mom, Dad, and Maddie a lot, though."

"You should be seeing Maddie again in a year or two, at least," Ryan said. "Boy, won't *she* be surprised."

"Assuming something didn't get her out there," Zanie said. "It can happen to the

best scouts...even a Brubeck.”

“Or maybe she’ll return in triumph after making contact with the first real sapient alien species,” Ryan suggested.

Zanie chuckled. “That would be *all* we need.” She sighed deeply, chest heaving. She fluttered her eyelids coyly and put on a very British accent. “So, what *shall* we do with ourselves in thy dream, milord?”

Ryan smiled hungrily, then reached for Zanie’s bodice lacings, giving one a gentle tug. “Oh, I’m sure we’ll think of *something*, milady.”

THE END