

Joe & Julius

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G.I. Joe

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Nextus

Ever since he'd first encountered them, Joe Steader had been a fan of twentieth-century war movies. Especially the mid-twencen ones focusing on World War II, starring doughty types like John Wayne, Gregory Peck, Henry Fonda. They were probably more than anything else what had gotten him and his brother Mikel into SCA reenacting. He knew they were products of their era, and based in a war where there was as little moral ambiguity as there could rationally have been, but he had still found their sanitized, generally bloodless, black-and-white “we’re-the-good-guys-they’re-the-bad-guys” depiction of war appealing.

As he rode his big Chinook AIDE bike through the blacked-out streets of Nextus, peering nervously into the sky for any signs of another Sturmhaven bombing run, Joe cursed himself for a naive idiot at the same time he wished he could go back to those days. Could he ever bring himself to participate in another SCA event after all this?

Joe pulled the big skimmer cycle down the ramp to the bunker entrance, and leaned over so the scan plate next to the door could capture his biometrics. After a moment, it warbled its approval and the door hissed open in front of him. *Guess I'm still not an enemy infiltrator yet*, he thought wryly as he pulled into the parking bay for the Nextus Nano facility where he'd moved his office. The Admin Plaza skyscrapers just weren't all that safe anymore, and since he was an investor and nominally a board member, NN was happy to make allowances for him.

Apart from the office, those allowances included this Chinook bike, which had been fully state-of-the-art military-issue only the year before. Joe wished he could enjoy it more—gearhead that he was, he'd been itching to get his hands on one of these for the longest time—but his enthusiasm for the new hardware had been tempered by the knowledge that the cost of getting it was that men and women of both Nextus and Sturmhaven were dying stupidly out in the Dry.

So many of these bikes had been lost to Q-dust out there that they'd just stopped sending them, and now reserved them for civil defense and other in-city purposes. Such as providing a little extra protection for fat-cat corporate executives who were too dumb to stay indoors all the time where it was safe. Joe had never yet had occasion to pop the transformation switch in anger, but he'd practiced with it on the range. It was fun enough clomping around in big metal clompy feet as far as it went, but the Ad-I made a box of hammers look like a PhD—which was the *other* reason he didn't enjoy it.

The stupid thing was like a GPS that instead of giving you bad directions tried to *predict* everything it thought you might want to do and then do it for you—often with results that would have been hilarious to any theoretical observers. When you tried to move to the right when it thought you wanted to move to the left, the result was a sort of impromptu pirouette that ended with a jarring impact as you landed on your metal-plated butt. Small wonder most *experienced* soldiers just used them as targeting computers and kept the maneuvering functions disabled. It *was* a wonder that the

military had even thought they'd be worth using even if they *didn't* fizzle out in the Dry.

But the scuttlebutt was that they might just have found a way around both problems. The last few months, all of Nextus Nano had been working overtime on some new kind of bike armor called a RIDE. He hadn't been able to find out much about the details. It was apparently based on some sort of AI paper that a naive young academic had published openly and sent around everywhere before the military had noticed what it was and yanked it. Joe had taken a look at the paper—it wasn't hard to find, since nothing ever vanishes off the 'net—but couldn't make heads or tails out of it. But hey, that wasn't his job. Enough to know the people who *could* understand that gobbledygook thought she was onto something, and were able to make something out of it, right?

Security on the project had been super-tight. The usual rules of the Nextus game had been suspended, and every ounce of Nextus's formidable bureaucracy had been directed toward making sure nobody knew what was going on—even people like Mister Super-Rich Joseph Steader, which stung more than a little bit. He *was* on the Board, wasn't he? All right, so it was a non-voting seat, but *still*.

What he had seen on the news (or more accurately the *propaganda*, but Joe didn't fault the government for trying to keep people's spirits up) seemed pretty impressive. There had even been that parade on Tax Day a few weeks back, with that test pilot showing off her lynx-bike to her toddler niece. Since then, they'd rushed the first few models into production, and they should be deploying to the front within the week. And that was partly why he'd come in today.

Joe stepped into his office, nodded to his secretary, and entered his inner sanctum. Settling in behind the desk, he punched in a comm code. The war had done nothing to dull his innate curiosity, and he had the uncomfortable feeling that if he had to deal with that stupid *Schnook* Ad-I one more day he was going to go out of his head. It was time to upgrade his ride—to a RIDE.

The screen lit up with a older man in an office very similar to his own. His red hair was rapidly thinning and fading to grey, and there were lines on his face that hadn't been there a few months before. Joe felt a little guilty for loading more stress onto him—but only a little. "R&D, Frank here."

"Hey, Frank? It's me, Joe Steader."

Frank's eyes narrowed. "What do *you* want?"

"Hey, is that any way to talk to an old pal?" Joe said. "But since you ask, I want to call in that favor you owe me."

Frank sighed. "What do you want?" he asked again, more resignedly.

"Well, I hear tell the first of the RIDEs are shipping out today. And I know how they always make more gear than they'll need, so I was thinking it might not go amiss for one of the extras to find its way to me," Joe said.

"This is *military* equipment, Steader," Frank said. "Meant to keep our boys and girls safe in the field. They can use every one of them they can get, you know that."

"Yeah, but I also know there must be some units that maybe didn't pass the strictest field quality tests but would still be okay for general use. Or other units that were already earmarked for beta testers," Joe wheedled. "C'mon, throw me a bone here. If they're really as good as I hear, we'll not only be even but *I'll* owe *you* one."

Frank snorted. "It was one of *your* crazy relatives who touched off this whole damned war. Far as I'm concerned, you *already* owe us all plenty."

“You think I don’t know that?” Joe said. “Look at how much of my fortune I’ve sunk into war bonds, weapons development—hell, I probably funded most of the RIDE program all by myself. I even tried to enlist in the army, but they told me I was too old. All I’m asking is, if you’ve got people testing these things already, why not let me be one of them? I’ll file whatever reports your regular testers would. Call it another contribution to the war effort.”

Frank slapped his palm to his forehead and smeared it down across his face. “You *do* know RIDEs are absolutely nothing like that AIDE Chinook you have, right?”

“I sure hope so,” Joe said with feeling. “I already know about the whole ears and tail bit, which is pretty weird but not a showstopper. If I don’t like ‘em, I can get ‘em taken off, right? Just make sure it’s a ‘guy’ one. I don’t want to be singing soprano for the next umpteen years.”

“You heard about that part, did you?” Frank said dryly. “All right. You...make a compelling argument. I’ll see what I can do. But if I *can* do this...you’ll owe me *big time*.”

“Thanks, Frank,” Joe said. “You’re a true friend.”

“I know,” Frank said, and disconnected.

It was just a few hours later that Joe got the call to come down to the R&D test facility. In one of the unused testing ranges, Frank waited next to a skimmer cycle strongly resembling the Chinook. However, it was painted in a yellow-and-black jaguar-spotted color scheme, with some stylized extra parts suggestive of paws, toothed muzzle, tail, and other animal features. Joe whistled. “This is it?”

Frank patted the cycle’s fairing. “This is Julius. We were having some issues with his weapon interface and comm circuits. We think they’re all ironed out, but we had enough units that passed with no problems we held him back for further testing. His RI core’s powered down right now; we haven’t brought him back online yet.”

Joe nodded, only half-listening. “It doesn’t look all that different from the Chinook.”

“Retooling the surplus Chinooks and Tornados we had to work with the RI cores let us get our first waves out to soldiers faster than building entirely new units from scratch,” Frank said. “The second-wave units will have fully-original shells.”

“Fair enough,” Joe said. “And this is really *that* much better than a Chinook?”

Frank chuckled. “You’ll see when you power him up all the way. Anyway, I’ll leave you two to get acquainted. You can take him home as soon as you’ve filled out all the paperwork—he’s got it in his on-board memory.” He paused at the door. “We’ll be reposing your Chinook, by the way.”

“Please, take the Schnook. At this point, I’d almost *pay* you to take it off my hands,” Joe said. He stepped up to the bike and slung his leg over the saddle. The upholstery seemed a bit better than the Chinook’s, but then it was a newer model. The panel gauges seemed about the same, though the Ad-I section was relabeled “RI” and had fewer controls—basically just a power switch.

“Right. So. Let’s see how much better you really are than old mister stompy-boots,” Joe said, powering up the DE shell. He left the RI switch off, his recent experience with the Ad-I having soured him a bit on AI for now. He’d get to that later. The lifter engines purred to life. They sounded a bit smoother than the Chinook’s. Of course, tech marched on even year to year, and as much as they were spending on these

bikes they could afford the very best.

The testing range was about fifty meters long, just enough room to test how the bike maneuvered in a parking lot. It seemed to handle...okay. He didn't notice a whole lot of difference to the Chinook in that respect. He supposed the true test would come when he had the AI powered up.

Joe tapped the transformation switch to change to powered armor mode, but a warning popped up on the display. "Warning: Operator's initial Fuse requires RI core in ACTIVE mode," Joe read aloud. "Please engage RI core.' Hmph."

Joe couldn't say he terribly liked a machine telling him what to do, or that he actually *had* to turn the AI on to operate it. But maybe there was a reason. He tapped the icon for more information, and a help document came up explaining the RI core needed to be active to oversee the initial nano-construction of the ears and tail required for proper neural template matching. "Well, I guess that makes sense. And I can use it later on without it if I want to. Okay." He shrugged. "Well then, here goes." He slid the RI power switch to the ACTIVE position.

The display blanked, followed by the standard power-on self-test scroll that computers had used since time immemorial. Then a pair of orange feline eyes regarded him from the display. "So, *you're* my new rider?" a rumbly male voice said from the speaker. "You're a civvie."

Uh... Joe was momentarily taken aback. Then he shook his head. *It's just an ELIZA system. Something to make it more user-friendly for lunkhead soldiers too dumb to read the manuals. Probably simplest just to play along. Can always turn it off later.* "That's right. Since your hardware had some faults, they wanted to hold you back for further testing." He felt more than a little stupid talking to a motorcycle, but what the hell, there was no one else here to see it.

"Well, *fuck*," the RIDE growled, the feline eyes narrowing. "So they're having me babysit a bastard like *you*? Fuck! I should be knocking Sturmites out of the sky! Dafuq did I do to Frank to deserve this shit?"

Joe looked askance at the display panel. *Are they sure that the weapons and comms were all that was faulty?* "Now see here...Julius...I'm your assigned operator for now, whether you, uh, like it or not." *What did I do to Frank to deserve this?* Joe was suddenly starting to get mighty suspicious of his sudden acquiescence, and his just as sudden exit from the room before Joe could turn the bike on.

"Hey, I didn't say I didn't *like* you, buddy. But I don't *dislike* you either. I don't even *know* you," the AI said. "Far as I'm concerned *everyone's* a bastard 'til proven otherwise."

"I'll have you know that I know *exactly* who my parents are, and they were legally married when they had me," Joe said, recovering some of his aplomb. "All right, so maybe I was three months 'premature,' but who's counting?"

"Oh, a funnyman," Julius said, rolling his eyes. "Well, let's get this party started. You wanna Fuse? Let's Fuse an' shit. Then we'll know if we can stand one another."

Joe was already starting to have second thoughts about that, but he'd be damned if he was going to let a *motorcycle* think he was a coward. "Fine." He reached out and flipped the switch. This time, the bike responded, reconfiguring and wrapping itself around him about three times faster than his Chinook ever had. His arms were sheathed in metal and pulled out to his sides, and the saddle slid out from between his legs as the rear lifter nacelles swung forward to enclose them.

Before he was even quite sure what was going on, he was standing on his own two feet. Only...it felt *different* from the Chinook. With the Chinook, he'd always been conscious of being a person inside a metal clompy suit. He'd moved around with pedals, and felt the jolts to his body as the power armor moved itself and pulled him along. But here, he felt...like he was standing, not quite barefoot but not exactly shod either, on the plascrete floor of the test room. He felt his ears swivel back and forth as he scanned for sounds, and was conscious of his tail swishing back and forth slowly. *Wait...my ears? My tail?*

:Hell, yeah!: Julius's voice came from all around. Or was it from *inside his head?* His body moved of its own volition—or *Julius's* volition. But this was no stupid Ad-I throwing its weight around. His body actually moved gracefully, dropping into a crouch, then rolling into a smooth high-kick at empty air.

Before Joe could even react, they were back in a ready stance again and he felt the other's control recede. He raised an arm and looked at the hand, flexing the fingers one by one. They were, of course, completely robotic hands, the fingers articulated in overlapping segments of metal. His actual hands were somewhere further back. But it felt for all the world like he was moving his real fingers. He tightened his hand a little and large metal claws emerged from his fingertips. *This is incredible.* He was starting to see just why RIDEs were considered so advanced. *Damn...we are gonna kick the ever-loving crap out of those Sturmites!*

:I should be out there doing just that, instead I'm babysitting the richest bastard on the planet,: Julius said. An image took shape in Joe's mind, first in pencil, then ink, a piece of art going through phases before becoming photographic in detail. A feral jaguar sitting on its haunches, tail curled around his legs, looking decidedly grumpy.

Then Joe found himself standing next to that image in a blank space. "Uh..."

"Welcome to my head, Joe Steader," Julius said. "Well, *your* head, too. Hello an' shit."

Joe looked around at the emptiness, then down at his hands and body. They looked real. No pixelation, no delay time from thinking about moving to seeing the move. *The hell?* "How are you doing this?"

"Fusers. See, I wanna make one thing clear, Joe," Julius said. He stood on all fours and started to stalk around the human. "I might be government-issue, but I ain't no dumbass Schnook. We are partners an' shit. I'm here to save your ass, the best damned bodyguard you'll *ever* have. Since they're not sending me to the front, it'll have to do. Congratulations. You got yourself your very own G.I., Joe."

Joe stared at him. "But...this is impossible. We've *never* been able to make true artificial intelligence."

"Ain't nothing 'artificial' about my intelligence. It's the real deal," Julius said, seating himself on his haunches again and grooming the back of a paw. "Still don't believe me? Well here, believe this." His eyes flashed...and suddenly Joe was buried under a torrent of memories that were not his own. Waking up in a forest, with a dark-skinned woman smiling kindly at him. Stalking prey through the jungle, swimming the river, basking in the sun...meeting other animals, talking to them, occasionally eating them. Being installed into his DE shell, running through a battery of tests...failing the comm check and weapons check, being serviced and retested, then everything going dark.

Joe shook his head to clear it. "Ugh...what *was* that?"

“My life, and welcome to it,” Julius said.

Joe’s head still didn’t feel quite right. He kept getting odd flashes of half-forgotten memories. “Hey...what are you—”

“God, your memories are a mess!” Julius said. “Are all human brains this damned disorganized? There’s RNA everywhere...”

“Well, sorry,” Joe said. “If I’d known I was going to have company, I’d have tidied up a little.”

“Wow, you been places,” the jaguar continued. “All right, maybe you’re not *quite* as much of a stuffed shirt as I thought.”

“You’re too kind,” Joe said dryly.

Julius cocked his head. “Are those big clunky IDEs the best Earth has? I could run rings around them.” He chuckled. “Though I can see it’s not the IDEs *you* were most interested in. ‘Captain Thermopylae?’ Really? Are *all* humans in a constant state of heat?”

“Now that’s getting a little personal,” Joe said.

“Okay, yeah. I’ll admit that,” the big cat said. “My bad. But I ain’t never Fused before, neither.”

“You too, huh?” Joe said. “This is...crazy. Why didn’t anyone ever tell me?”

“You’re asking me? Shit, man, I don’t know,” Julius said. “Maybe ‘cuz we’re top fucking secret? As for why *Frank* didn’t tell you just now...well, I think you’ve already got a good guess.”

“Oh yeah, I *owe* him one, all right,” Joe muttered.

“Shit...you went all the way to Earth for a bunch of old buried crap?” Julius said, apparently pawing through his memories again. “When *we* bury crap, we do it for a reason.”

“Uh, yeah, but I wasn’t exactly digging through a litterbox,” Joe said. “Anyway, if you’re looking at my memories, you should see how great all that stuff is.”

Julius sneezed. “I don’t have more than bits and pieces of anything right now. Just enough to get some idea what you’re doing.” He shook his head. “All that random movie crap is actually making it harder for me to figure out what’s your life and what’s something you were watching.”

“Well, then access my cloud storage account,” Joe said. “The password is—”

“—I *know* your password,” Julius said.

“Then look for the file named...oh...‘Pulp Fiction.’”

Julius cocked his head. “Got it...” He froze for a few seconds, then turned to look at Joe again. “...what the *hell* was that?”

Joe blinked. “You watched it already? You just downloaded it a few seconds ago.”

“Yeah, I only had time to watch it twice,” Julius said. He paused uncertainly.

Joe chuckled inwardly. Julius might be an artificial intelligence running on a crystal of lethal desert dust, but for all of that his reaction was remarkably human. Joe recognized all the signs of the internal conflict between putting up an indifferent facade on the outside and having one’s tiny little mind blown on the inside. *All right, maybe it was a bit unfair to hit him with Tarantino all at once. Maybe I should have worked up to him with Whedon or something.*

Finally, the mind-blown side won out, if just by a little. “You, uh, got any more like that?”

Joe couldn’t resist twisting the knife just a *little*. “Any more ‘buried crap,’ you

mean?”

Julius rolled his eyes, a remarkably human gesture to be coming from a jaguar. “All right, fine, I give. I fucking well give. Maybe going to Earth for that *was* worth it.”

“Then yeah, I do have more of it,” Joe said. “Not as much as I’d like—a lot of it’s still under encryption we’re having a hard time breaking. And not all of it’s as good as *Pulp Fiction*, though some of it’s better. But it’s all...*interesting*.” Despite the weirdness of the situation, he actually felt himself warming to the jaguar, a little. It was impossible not to feel at least some sense of kinship with someone who’d just had his mind blown by Quentin Tarantino. If nothing else, it proved he *was* more than just an ELIZA Ad-I. No Ad-I ever made could appreciate *art*.

“Huh.” The jaguar reflected for a moment. “Maybe this won’t be *all* bad after all.” He stood up and shook himself. “All right then, you son of a bitch. Let’s drop back to the Real, and I’ll show you more of what we can do.”

“Show me what you got,” Joe said.

“I’m a ‘Medium Mobility Armor,’ whatever the hell that means,” Julius said. “Maybe I’m supposed to move around more than some but not as much as other RIDEs? Nobody consulted *us* what we wanted to be called.” They hovered a half-meter off the floor in the middle of the testing range, hardlight targets rezzing up at the far end.

A pair of compartments on the jaguar’s thighs slid open, revealing twin pulse pistols. They were larger and heavier than most unaided humans could wield, but just the right size for a three-meter jaguar RIDE. As Joe watched, Julius proceeded to shred the targets with short bursts of controlled fire. “Doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with your weapons interface to me.”

“That’s what *I* said,” Julius grumbled. “You wanna have a go?”

“Sure.” Joe lined up the shots. The targeting reticules in the head-up display made it easy, though he still wasn’t in Julius’s class for rapid-fire accuracy. As Julius took over for another series of shots, Joe pulled up the onboard documentation with a few quick eyeflick gestures.

“It looks like the ‘Mobility’ class is all about versatility,” Joe said, looking over the available paks in the firing range alcove. It was like picking a character class in one of the video games in the Trove. Engineer, Medic, Communications, Assault, Light Artillery, Heavy Weapons, Recon, and Sniper. “Which one looks good to you?”

“You’re *asking* me? Huh,” Julius said, nonplussed. “Holy fuck. Guess there’s actually some perks to being a civvie’s bodyguard. Gimme that bitchin’ HW pak! I want to see how I look with those shoulder cannons and mini-missile panniers! And get that gauss rifle, too. *Badass!*”

“They probably won’t let me take these home with us, y’know,” Joe said. “A bit much firepower for a ‘bodyguard.’”

“Yeah, well, a cat can dream,” Julius sighed. “At least I wanna see how they shoot.” Waldos extended from the walls of the alcove to latch the paks in place on Julius’s shoulders, hips, and arm, then they clanked back over to the shooting lane. If they’d shredded the targets before, now they outright obliterated them with focused large-bore energy beams and a dozen tiny missiles. “*Oh yeah!* Totally badass!”

“I think that’s more overall firepower than one of Captain Gates’s IDEs,” Joe said. “Sarium is some amazing stuff.” *And I thought they were paranoid about it*

leaking off-planet before the war. This is sure going to put a kink in things for the Circus.

Fairly reluctantly on Julius's part, they returned the paks to the alcove. "Let's go; I want to see how you do on the road. Oh, hey...wasn't there some paperwork I needed to do?"

"Already filed that crap," Julius said smugly. "I'm a computer-brain from Nextus. Paperwork's one thing I can slaughter *even more* than the enemy."

Joe whistled. "You are *really* going to be handy to have around." He shook his head. "Just wait 'til this war is over. Everyone's going to want one of you. Nextus will have to invent whole new layers of bureaucracy just to keep up."

"Spare my blushes," Julius said. "Okay, let's hit the road. Since they'd look at us funny if we walked out like this...de-Fuse coming."

A moment later, Joe experienced a weird sense of suddenly shrinking in a split-second as Julius unfolded from around him. This time he didn't stop in motorcycle form, however. A moment later, Joe found himself straddling a giant metallic jaguar. "I should call you 'the mighty Battlecat,'" Joe said, patting his shoulder before dismounting.

"This is Walker form," Julius informed. "With a capital 'Wuh'. It's like an all-terrain support mode. I watch my rider's back, he watches mine. It's also a lot less weird to have in your living room."

"So...RIDES basically double the number of soldiers in the field at a stroke. Brilliant," Joe said, tail swishing. He twisted his torso to have a look at it. "Almost forgot about that part."

"I've tagged you, bro," Julius purred. "That's *my* fuckin' tail and ears. You get real fur, too, lucky bastard."

"Yeah, I guess you have." He reached up to feel his ears. It was kind of a weird disconnect not to feel the familiar shapes he'd known by touch all his life yet feel something else different up there instead. *Is that what it's like when you get a nano-sex-change?* he wondered. He allowed himself to contemplate what *that* might feel like, and shuddered inwardly. "How is it *I* have fur and you don't?"

"I don't exactly understand myself, except that somehow I'm 'genetically' part jaguar in my core. And the nanites use that to make the kitty-bits they glue onto you. You're fucking lucky I'm a double-ought two. You'd get a jaggie nose if I was a double-ought one."

"Considering this beak I have now, it might be an improvement," Joe said. "Well, c'mon. Let's go."

Being followed through the building by a large metallic jaguar caused a bit less commotion than Joe had expected. He was almost disappointed their nonchalant passage didn't turn more heads. *Does everyone around here know about these things but me?*

At last they reached the parking garage, and Joe noticed with some satisfaction the empty space where the Chinook had been. *Good riddance.* Julius paused in the middle of the lane and unfolded back into his skimmer bike form. "Vroom fucking vroom," the hovercycle growled.

Joe chuckled and climbed aboard. "Okay, let's see what you can—" He paused as a hardlight helmet materialized around his head. "—do." The bike pulled forward under its own volition, heading up the ramp and out of the bunker. Now that the sun was up,

the city almost seemed like its old self—if you disregarded all the pulse turret emplacements and missile banks sweeping the sky, and all the MP uniforms keeping company with the regular Policia.

“So where to? Mansion on the hill kind of thing?”

Joe shook his head. “Had one, gave it up for Lent. They’re using it as overflow hospital space. Seemed like the thing to do. I’ve got a small apartment in town now, more energy efficient. Let’s take the Outer Loop, show me some speed.”

“Gotta warn you this is the first time I’ve done this, too,” Julius said. His voice had lost a little of its abrasive edge.

“Well, good. It’ll be a new experience for both of us,” Joe said. He thought of his beloved Mach 5 and the rest of his vehicle stable, most of which he’d willingly tossed into the fabber recycler to provide materiel for the war effort. He hadn’t quite been able to bring himself to part with his off-planet brother Mikel’s old gas jeep, but he didn’t drive it anymore either—and it could hardly be called “fast” anyway.

As they pulled into the airspace marked out for skimmer travel around Nextus’s outer edge, Julius said, “Y’know, military skimmers get to use the no-speed-restriction carpool lane.”

“Really?” Joe smirked. “I *never* knew that.”

Julius chuckled. “You sly bastard. Hang on tight!” Though as he said it, Joe felt inertial dampers kick in, effectively gluing him to the seat. He had just a moment to ponder what that portended, then they were suddenly going a good three hundred clicks an hour without even trying.

“Wow!” Joe said as they hurtled past other skimmers. “You’ve got some speed on you!”

“This? This is nothing,” Julius said. “You should see the Scout Armors. Cheetahs. Ain’t *nothing* can catch them.” But he sounded quite satisfied as he wove in and out of traffic like an expert. “Which exit we lookin’ for?”

“13A,” Joe said. “Landingtown suburb.”

“Got it.” They veered out of the lane, shedding speed as they went, as the big flashing “13A” sign passed by. “Funny, I’d have pegged you as the sort who’d live closer to center city, where the Admin buildings are. Fuckin’ center of power and all that.”

“I might be crazy, but I’m not stupid,” Joe said. “That’s the first place a Sturmie missile will hit if they ever do make it through our defenses. I’m staying out here where there’s nothing worth lobbing bombs at.”

“Except you,” Julius pointed out.

“Yes, well, there is that,” Joe admitted.

“So why you even still in Nextus at all?” Julius asked as they cruised slowly up the street. “I didn’t get a whole lot outta your head, but I know you’ve got a summer place in Aloha.”

“The land was cheap,” Joe said. “Got in on the ground floor.” He paused. “That’s a space elevator joke.”

“Oh, ha ha,” Julius said dutifully.

“Got places in other polities, and most cities in Laurasia, too. But this is where I’m *from*. Wouldn’t be good for morale for me to make like a rat leaving the ship—especially since one of my own idiot cousins started this whole thing.”

“Eh. Just your bad luck it was *that* idiot moron instead of some *other* idiot moron who kicked it off,” Julius said.

“I guess so,” Joe admitted. “But more pragmatically, just about everyone on the planet knows who I am, it’s not exactly easy to keep it a secret where I go, and it will be a lot harder for Sturmie agents to get past our polity defenses to get at me than into somewhere that’s not even part of the war. I’m not even sure I’d be safe if I took the family starship and left the system altogether. If I could even make it that far.”

“Life’s a platinum-plated Sturmhaven Valkyrie bitch that way sometimes, ain’t it?” Julius said.

“If they have RIDEs, too, then literally,” Joe said. “Here we are.” They pulled up in front of the tallest building in the area, an immense residential skyscraper reaching up at least fifty storeys.

“You’ve got a ‘small apartment’...in the Gilmore Building?” Julius said.

“Relatively speaking,” Joe admitted.

“So, parking garage then?” Julius said.

“Actually...” Joe reached to the dash. “Um...may I?”

“Be my guest,” Julius said dryly.

“I could *almost* manage this with the Schnook, and I think you’ve got better lifters.”

“My lift spec’s 40% better than that old rustbucket,” Julius said. “60% if I kick in the turbo boost.”

“Lifters have turbos?” Joe asked.

“It’s an expression,” Julius said.

“Right. Then alley-*oop!*” Joe switched the lifters to full vertical thrust and they took off skyward like a rocket. “Whoop!” The fifty storeys passed in a blur of windows and balconies, then they broke even with the rooftop level, where, in addition to a large anti-aircraft pulse cannon emplacement, a penthouse with a flier landing pad awaited. Joe gave the impellers a nudge and they drifted over, settling into place on the pad.

“You’ve got the fucking *penthouse* on top of the Gilmore Building,” Julius deadpanned. “So it’s ‘small’ relative to, what, Admin Plaza? The Polity of Nuevo San Antonio?”

“It used to be more impressive,” Joe said, dismounting. “They had to take out the Olympic pool to put in that cannon mount.”

“Oh, poor poor pitiful you,” Julius sniffed, reverting to Walker form. “Well, at least you should be *mostly* safe up here. They got good security on the elevators.”

“C’mon, I’ll show you my pad,” Joe said. He led the way off the flier pad and toward the door to the penthouse. Inside was a hallway done up in a wood parquet floor, with a coat rack along one wall. Overhead were light fixtures with honest-to-goodness incandescent bulbs.

Julius looked around. “This is different. I don’t like it.”

“Living room’s this way.” Joe led the way to a larger room with a twentieth-century overstuffed sofa and a media wall displaying the image of a regular wall with a big-screen projection TV mounted on it, displaying a “crackling fireplace” mood video.

Julius cocked his head. “So why don’t you have the wall displaying a life-size fireplace? Or even projecting a hardlight version?”

“Why would I want to do that?” Joe said. “If I wanted a real fireplace, I’d have one put in.”

Julius snorted. “*One* of us is fucking nuts here, and I don’t think it’s me.”

Joe sat down on the sofa. “It’s a twentieth-century thing. I’m trying to make this

room look as close to something out of that era as I can. Of course, I'm probably making half a dozen mistakes someone really from back then would laugh at, but best I can do is try."

The RIDE padded over to a desk and peered at the monochrome green CRT and beige box sitting underneath it. "I can't even fucking fathom what this shit is supposed to be."

"That is a standalone, non-networked home microcomputer from somewhere around 1983," Joe said. "You're probably a few million times more powerful than it is in just one of your co-processors."

"Well. Huh. Isn't that a kick in the ass? What do you even *use* it for?"

"Not much," Joe admitted. "Playing old computer games, sometimes. Mostly it's just here because this is where they had them back then. I'm going with a 1980s theme in this room."

"I can't figure you out," Julius said, tail swishing. "Look at me. I'm cutting edge tech, sitting in your living room, where you've got all this replica ancient shit."

"If you just sit very still, I could put an over-sized lampshade on your head and you'd look right at home," Joe said.

"Pfft," Julius said. "If I'm gonna be your bodyguard I'd better get the lay of the place."

"Be my guest. Really, there's not that much to see. My bedroom and the three guest rooms are upstairs, kitchen and dining area back there, pantry and wine cellar next to it, study and library around the corner, game room next to them. And the hot tub's out back. Like I said, the place is really small. Just somewhere to eat and sleep, pretty much."

Julius glared at him. "You're yanking my fuckin' chain, right? No way you could be *that* out of touch."

Joe chuckled. "Oh, all right. Yeah, it is pretty fancy. But I don't really do much with it. I'm really an outdoors kind of guy, but that's just not possible right now. Instead I'm on a couple of civilian War Materiel Committees, keeping Steader Entertainment and our Q-Mining Services company running, that sort of thing."

"Right. Well, I'll be right back." Julius stalked out of the room.

Joe watched him go, then shook his head. Then shifted position on the sofa as he realized he was sitting on his tail. "Ow. Well, that's going to take some getting used to." The whole thing was, really. It had all happened so quickly he hadn't had time to stop and think about it. But now that he did...it was like he was some kind of modern-day Michael Knight, saddled with a particularly foul-mouthed KITT. "Heh. KITT kitty." Who would ever have expected RIDEs could *think*?

This was like...the invention of the transistor and the Internet all over again. Groundshaking in ways nobody could predict. But Joe suspected he was about to get an up-close education in some of them, whether he liked it or not.

Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing. If Julius liked Tarantino, *well*. There was hope. And when he thought about it, Joe had to admit he kind of missed having someone to talk to, since Mikel had run off and joined the circus. Well, whether he liked it or not, he was stuck with Julius. The idea of trying to send him back because his new skimmer cycle had unexpectedly turned out to be a *person* didn't even bear thinking about.

Joe picked up the media tablet he used as a remote for the wall and pulled up the

first *Star Wars*. As one of the seminal works of twencen pop culture, it seemed like a good place to start.

Julius padded back in a few minutes later. “So, nice pad. You got a sarium-safe charger socket anywhere here’bouts?”

Joe blinked. “Um. Other than the tiny one for charging comms, the only one I know of is out by the flier pad.” Since sarium had taken the world by storm, the utility companies had started using sarium batteries as boosters to cut the cost of providing electricity to most homes and businesses. But you couldn’t charge a sarium battery *from* a sarium battery. Some quantum property of sarium meant that would end up canceling out all the energy from both batteries and possibly damaging them as well. So things with their own sarium batteries, such as fliers and skimmers, got their own special charging ports, usually in garages. “Sorry about that. I’ll call an electrician and have one put in here tomorrow.”

Julius seemed to have mellowed out a little on going through the house. He took a seat on his haunches next to the sofa and peered at the screen, which was freeze-framed on the Lucasfilm logo. “No big. I’m good for a few more hours. I can go out there and juice up later.”

Joe chuckled. “You know, I might just have to invest in power socket manufacturers. Something tells me there’s going to be a lot of retrofitting going on once civilian RIDEs start coming out.”

“You really think they’re going to let just any SOB have one of me after the war?” Julius scoffed.

“From what I gather, they can’t stop them. That paper was leaked globally, so every polity has a RIDE program now. Anyway, you wouldn’t be the first spinoff vehicle tech to come out of a war. Just look at Jeeps.”

Julius sneezed. “What the fuck’s a Jeep?”

“Next time I’m at the warehouse where I’ve got my stuff parked, I’ll show you.”

“Looks like there’s a lot of stuff you want to show me,” Julius said, looking at the screen.

Joe grinned. “Indulge me. Not like you have anything better to do right now.”

The jaguar mecha flopped down in front of the TV just like a housecat finding a spot in a sunbeam. “Fuckin’ A, Joe. So, what’s all this we’re watching? Lucasfilm?”

“That’s the production company. Let me introduce you to...” Joe picked up the replica 20th-century TV remote he used for play controls and unpaused the video. The Lucasfilm logo sparkled and faded, replaced by the 20th Century Fox logo, anachronistic even when the movie had been made. Then the iconic blue letters: “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...”

“What the fuck’s this? Why’re we starting with Episode IV? Shouldn’t you be showing me the first one?”

“Episode IV is the one they *made* first. It’s...kind of hard to explain. Just trust me.” *I really hope he doesn’t complain about the special effects...*

But Julius seemed content to watch in silence, tail tip swishing like any other cat’s. After a while, he asked, “So where did you find all this crap, anyway?” He kept watching the screen, but swiveled one ear toward Joe to catch his answer.

“Well, this particular film came from Clint Brubeck’s collection. He found it in an old library buried under DalWorth on Earth about fifty years ago. It found its way to my brother and me, and we got interested enough to go hunt for more. Found a bunch more

stuff in some waterlogged memory cards in Old Singapore, but between the water damage and the encryption on them we haven't been able to get much out of that so far."

"How does all this twentieth-century crap end up somewhere like that?"

"From what we've been able to piece together, it happened in the mid-twenty-first, when the first yottabyte memory modules went onto the consumer market. At the same time, Internet bandwidth had grown so fast people could actually fill them," Joe said. "So a lot of people did, just as a kind of fad so they could say, 'Hey, I've got the whole Internet in my pocket.' And by then, most of the media of the twentieth had been pirated and was floating about *somewhere*."

"And you went to Earth to find these yottabyte whatsits," Julius said. "Sounds like needle-in-a-haystack time."

"Not too many of them ended up surviving. They got lost, or wiped for use with other stuff." Joe shrugged. "Like most hoarding fads, most people didn't actually care anything about what was there, they just wanted it. Then when it came time to record a few more hours of three-dee hyper-super-mega-resolution VR video, out it went."

"You find a lot of yottabyte thingies with people's home videos on them, then?" Julius said.

Joe rolled his eyes. "Yeah, and about 95% of it was amateur porn. *Baaaaad* amateur porn. Idiots. Could have preserved big chunks of human culture for a future generation. Instead, we get crap that's not even as good as *twentieth century* porn. Ugh. And the historians still wanted it anyway, so we couldn't even reuse the chips.

"Anyway, we did find more stuff than just those chips. There were stashes of raw stuff every now and then, like Clint's library. A whole bunch of Beach Boys albums, one time—that's an American rock and roll band from the 1960s." He chuckled. "Captain Gates's men weren't too impressed when we played it for them afterward, but I still caught them humming the tunes for weeks."

Julius snorted. "Humans."

"Apart from bad porn, there also wasn't a lot of new stuff being created at the time. World copyright law had become such a Byzantine tangled mess it makes our Nextus red tape look like elegant simplicity. You couldn't make something new without getting stomped on by a half dozen copyright or patent trolls claiming derivative works. That created *thirty years* of cultural and technological stagnation. *Then* Peak Oil finally hit at the same time as a series of major droughts in various breadbaskets caused by climate change. A pure cascade of absolute suck for about *seventy years*. Two *billion* died from famine."

"Sounds like a fucking Apocalypse," Julius said.

"We're still here, aren't we? We muddled through somehow," Joe said, smiling. "Ended up better off, if you ask me. After all, we're sitting here eighteen light years from Earth, enjoying a twencen movie where they dreamed of casual interstellar travel at faster-than-light speeds."

Julius nodded, grunting noncommittally, returning his full attention to the movie. A little later, he said, "So most of the stuff you found's still locked up?"

"Yeah, we think they encrypted the stuff because they didn't want to get done for copyright violation if they got caught with it. Apparently the RIMPAA was on one of its warpaths. Maybe they meant to come back for it later, or maybe they hid the decryption key somewhere else that we never found. Upshot is, we haven't been able to decipher

much of it. There haven't been any real advances in breaking quantum encryption since they made it."

"Hey, you need a fuckin' breakthrough in quantum computing? You're looking at 'em, Joe," the RIDE declared, glancing at Joe over his shoulder. "It'll give me something to do with all this fuckin' free time."

"Huh." Joe thought about that. "After the flick's over, we can give that a shot."

"Works," Julius said. "I kinda want to see how this comes out anyway." An X-Wing roared by on the screen, firing blasters at a TIE fighter over the Death Star's surface. "Pew pew pew!"

After the movie, Joe led the way to his study, where his server lived. "So what did you think of *A New Hope*?"

"It was okay," Julius said diffidently. "You said they made some sequels?"

"A few," Joe said.

"You have them, right?"

Joe grinned. "So what if I do? If the movie was just *okay*, I'm sure you've got better things to do with your time."

Julius rolled his eyes. "Oh, all right, *fine*, you jerk-off, I *did* like it, and I *would* like to watch the next one. See if those Luke and Leia kids end up together. All right, *now* what's so fucking funny all of a sudden?"

Joe shook his head. "Sorry. Nothing. I was just...no, nothing."

Julius looked at him suspiciously, then shook his head. "So, you were gonna show me some files."

"Ah, yes. Here." Joe tapped out a command on the keyboard to open the server, and a hardlight display popped up with a list of files on it. "These are what we've got. We've managed to crack a few of them, but it's pretty hit or miss. We can tell the file types, but not the names or contents, so we've been concentrating on audio tracks and movies. It took weeks for each file even when we had whole server farms at our disposal. Now that most of those are repurposed for supporting the war effort, well."

Julius sniffed thoughtfully at the server. "You might have better luck with the new Q-based mainframes they developed to make us. Of course, they're all tied up with the war effort right now, too, but..."

"There's a thought," Joe said. "But can you do anything?"

"Hang on, I'm checking. Looking for something small to try."

"Try that one. It's an MP3 audio file." Joe pointed to a name on the list.

"Okay, got it. Hmm...yeah, I see what's going on here. Just a matter of factoring the primes 'til I hit the right one." Julius considered. "Should take somewhere 'tween five minutes and a couple of hours."

Joe blinked. "Really? That's great!"

"Still not a patch on what the 'frames could do," Julius said. "They're built for this fucking quantum number crunching. I'm built for thinking, and the number crunching's a side-effect."

Joe nodded. "But even with just you doing it, that's a couple of orders of magnitude faster than our previous efforts. You could probably do two or three whole record albums or a couple hours of video a day."

"Hey, hold up there, pal. I've got other things to process than doing your old twencen crap all day," Julius said. "I'm not a fucking q-puting appliance."

“Wouldn’t expect you to,” Joe said. “You’re right, no sense in wearing yourself out when the Q-frames can do it better after the war. But if you were to *want* to decrypt some random stuff sometime, I’d appreciate it. And really, who knows what else is in there? We’ve barely even scratched the surface.”

“I’ll say you have.” Julius shook his head. “Even if you got all the files cracked, sorting through ‘em all’s gonna be a fuckin’ headache. There’s literally billions of files in millions of subdirectories.”

“I might have to hire some RIDEs to help with that,” Joe said. “I imagine there’ll be a lot of you free after the war ends.”

Julius snorted. “‘Hire’? Try ‘buy or rent.’ We’re equipment, remember?”

Joe blinked. “That can’t be right. You’re obviously...”

“What, intelligent? Fuckin’ *duh*. But *people* get a choice about things.

Equipment’s made fit for use. How far you think they’d get if they had to ask each one of us when we came off the assembly line, ‘Hi, mind if we send you off to get the shit shot out of you on the war front?’ Or, for that matter, ‘Would you like to go bodyguard some rich guy?’”

“I guess you’ve got a point there,” Joe said. “But there is a war on right now. Maybe after that ends...”

“Yeah, like that’ll make a difference.” Julius snorted. “It’s a big fuckin’ deal for you, since I got sprung on you by surprise.” He chuckled. “Honestly, the look on your mug when I started cussing you out was almost *worth* not getting to go pot Sturmites all by itself. But give people time to get used to the idea slowly, and it’ll be like that old gag about how you boil a frog. Hell, you’d be surprised how many people in the RIDE testing program thought we’re just a really clever *simulation* of intelligence, and any proof to the contrary is all in their own tiny little minds.”

Joe frowned. “I’d like to argue with that, but...the Nextus mindset being what it is, that’s sadly plausible. Well, any RIDEs *I* get will be treated like people and paid a decent salary, if I have to make up fake online IDs for every last one of them.” He considered. “In fact...” He picked up a media tablet and tapped the screen a few times, and then sent a file across to Julius.

Julius stared at him. “...the fuck is this?”

“Cyber-wallet account with ten thousand *mu* in it, what’s it look like?” Joe grinned. “Standard signing bonus for a bodyguard at this level. Actually it’s a smidge on the low side, but on the other hand, you don’t actually have any *experience* yet.”

“Well, gee, thanks,” Julius said. “What’m I gonna spend it on?”

Joe shrugged. “Whatever you want. In my experience, pretty much anyone who gets a large sum of money can find something worth buying sooner or later. And by the way, you’re now on salary, five K *mu* a month, with full benefits and a raise every five months.”

Julius’s eyes narrowed. “Are you patronizing me?”

“Anything but,” Joe said. “The benefit of having this much money is that it’s easy to put it where my mouth is. If you’re gonna work for me, you’re gonna get paid. NextusMil doesn’t give you one centimu, do they?”

“We’re not fucking *supposed* to get paid,” Julius said. “We’re fucking equipment. But...” He paused. “...now I think about it, I kind of like the idea of having money. You’re serious about this shit? No strings attached?”

“Just the ‘string’ of you having to keep me safe,” Joe said. “If I die, I can’t keep

paying you.” He chuckled. “I can’t say I ever really liked the idea of bodyguards, but if I *have* to have one, it might as *well* be a talking cat motorcycle power armor suit.”

Julius glared at him. “You’re *reeeeally* gonna make me fuckin’ *earn* this salary. Aren’t you.”

“Who, me?” Joe said innocently. “You’ve got one big advantage most other bodyguards I’ve employed never had. I need you to get around, so it’s not like I’m gonna try to ditch you. And that armor mode of yours is *amazing*. I want to try that out some more. Um...if you don’t mind, I mean.”

“He asks me if I *mind*.” Julius said. “Dude, legally, I’m *yours*. Whatever you say goes. You’re not supposed to ask me if I *mind*. I might get *ideas*.”

“And yet, *you’re* the one who told *me* in no uncertain terms you’re my bodyguard,” Joe pointed out.

The jaguar mecha chuffed. “Well, hell. You got me there, Joe. But that’s just ‘cuz I was *ordered* to by people who outrank you.”

Joe shook his head. “I wonder if anyone realizes what a can of worms they opened by making you guys. If you stop and think about it, a little war over mineral rights looks penny-ante by comparison.”

“I think they’re too busy fighting that fuckin’ war to put that much thought into it,” Julius said wryly. “Oh...looks like I just found the right prime. I’ve got a solid decrypt. Wanna hear it?”

“Absolutely!” Joe said. “Just remember, this is probably something that’s gone unplayed for centuries. Lost art from the tombs of the 20th century, that whole generations have lived and died without ever having the chance to hear. Who knows what kind of, I dunno, *cultural insight* this might give us into that bygone era?”

“Then let’s see what we’ve got.”

The song started with a bouncy drum beat, then a man began to sing:

*Chances are your pants are not as fancy as the pair
Of very fancy pants that Mr. Fancy Pants will wear
When everybody’s marching in the fancy pants parade
He’s gonna pass the test
He’s gonna be the best
The best in terms of pants*

The song continued, telling the story of a protagonist who found an expensive and extremely fancy pair of pants and purchased them, doing poor Mr. Fancy Pants out of his long-desired prize.

“Well, that was extremely catchy,” Joe said.

“*Dafuq* was that shit?” Julius wondered, flicking an ear quizzically.

“I don’t know, but now I can’t get the tune out of my head,” Joe said. “Let’s hear that again.”

“You gotta be kidding me.” But Julius played it one more time.

“Ah, I see,” Joe said. “The song ends on a different key than when it started. That’s a recipe for earworms. Clever. Who’s the artist?”

“Metadata says...Jonathan Coulton. That’s C-O-U-L-T-O-N.”

“Huh...I’ll look him up on the ‘pedia.” Joe tapped the tablet a few times. “Okay. Early twenty-first century artist known for his offbeat humor.”

Julius sneezed. “Is *that* what you call it?”

“Similar artists include Weird Al Yankovic, the Barenaked Ladies, Dr. Demento... huh. Have to be on the lookout for more of his stuff.” Joe said. He hummed under his breath. “...gonna be the best. The best in terms of pants.”

Julius rolled his eyes. “Now you cut that *out!*” He sighed. “I’ve already played the damn song two dozen times in my head, and it doesn’t go away.”

Joe laughed. “So RIDEs are just as susceptible to earworms as humans? They really *did* make you truly intelligent.”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, meat boy.”

“So, any chance I could get you to crack another one from the same directory?” Joe asked.

Julius snorted. “What makes you think, after hearing *that* shit, I’d want to do another one?”

“I dunno, curiosity?” Joe said. “I hear it’s a leading cause of feline fatality. C’mon, give it a shot.”

Julius lowered his head. “Actually, I...already started.”

Joe grinned. “Welcome to twencen fandom. We’re all mad here.”

Having a big metallic cat around the house became “normal” a lot faster than Joe had ever expected it could. Joe hadn’t realized just how much he’d missed having someone to talk to lately. With Mikel off in space, and Clint Brubeck busy running the Q-mining business that was helping supply Nextus with RIDE materiel, Joe had been in the habit of spending most of his days by himself. He felt a lot better with a companion.

When Joe wasn’t busy with the various duties he had in helping the war effort, he would take Julius for spins around town, pointing out his favorite sights and places he’d been. He couldn’t help noticing that the MPs cut him a lot more slack in regard to curfews or travel restrictions than the average citizen, even when his recognizably-Steadler face was concealed by the helmet, since he was driving an up-to-date military vehicle. He tried not to abuse that too much.

For all that Julius had said he didn’t want to spend all his time cracking twencen files, he did seem to spend an awful lot of it that way. He also watched and listened to a lot of it—both with Joe, and in his own head at high rates of time compression. Joe enjoyed experiencing his favorite shows together with a new viewer, and Julius usually asked Joe whether a particular show was something he wanted to watch together before speed-viewing it. And they always watched or listened to the new stuff together.

“All right, what the fuck. Was that song about a fuckin’ *depressed giant squid*? Seriously? What is this shite?”

“Jonathan Coulton again.”

“Figures.”

Joe found he especially enjoyed showing Julius all the weirdest or most startling things he had, just for the sake of his reaction when it broke his brain.

“Okay, what the fuck. Luke and Leia are brother and sister? Seriously? And Darth Vader is their *dad*? What the hell?”

“It sure does put that kiss from the first movie in another perspective doesn’t it?”

“Oh, screw you. There’s just *no freakin’ way* Lucas had come up with that bit when he filmed the first *Star Wars*! What a fuckin’ hack!”

“Luke and Leia, sitting in a tree...eeek!”

And so life went on at the Home Steader, even in the middle of a war.

One afternoon Julius suddenly scratched behind one of his ears with a metallic screech. “Fuck! Sidebands are going nuts...”

“What, you getting interference or something?” Joe still didn’t quite understand what Julius was talking about when he referred to his “sidebands.” He gathered they had something to do with communication between RIDEs and the networked appliances they could control, but hadn’t really asked about it.

“Dunno, but I don’t like it. Fuse up, Joe,” the jaguar mecha insisted. He stalked over and went to Fuse mode at his rider’s agreement. *:Just to be safe, you know.:*

There hadn’t been any Sturmie raids on the city since before Julius had become Joe’s bodyguard, though there had been some intense battles down south over Nuevo San Antonio territory. Nextus was still apologizing profusely to the San Antonians, to Sturmhaven’s amusement. The San Antonians were notably *not* amused, given that the apologies didn’t carry with them any kind of promise not to do it again or, indeed, any sense that Nextus *truly* regretted involving them at all. But those had been conventional battles, all without the brand new RIDEs.

:Nothing on the building security...wait...: Julius said. :Look outside. I’ll enhance my optics so you can see.:

It was a very slight shimmer near the AA emplacement in the former swimming pool, but it was huge and vaguely bird-shaped. “Uh, Julius, you think...” Joe half-whispered. It was ridiculous, as he knew they probably couldn’t hear him, but he couldn’t help it. He had to speak low.

:Hell yeah! Hardlight cloak. Sturmie birdy RIDE!: Julius exulted, unholstering his pulse pistols. *:Don’t worry. I’ve sent an alarm to the Home Guard Battalion.:*

“If they take out that cannon, that’s a big chunk of the city left vulnerable,” Joe said, moving them toward the door.

:Hey, whoa, slow down there, soldier,: Julius said. *:My job is to keep your ass safe.:*

“What’s the matter, don’t want to curb-stomp a Sturmie?” Joe said. “They said I was too old, and more likely they meant too *rich*, to join the Army, but I’ll be damned if I let them take out a defense emplacement literally in my back yard. Especially after I had to give up *my* Olympic pool for it!”

Julius snorted. *:You want to take on at least one and probably more fully-assault-armed Sturmhaven Harpies with this pitiful pair of pop-guns?:*

“What, you don’t think you’re up to the challenge?” Joe needed. “We don’t have a lot of time to act here. She has to be placing explosives!”

:Ping back from the Home Guard...they’re gonna be another few minutes,: Julius said. *:We’re on our own until then.:*

“Well...?” Joe said.

Julius growled. *:All right. All fuckin’ right. But you let me do this. I’m combat-trained, or at least programmed.:*

“I know my way around a gun, too, but all *right*. Just hurry up and get on it already,” Joe said.

:Roger.: Julius moved toward the side exit of the penthouse, which was blocked from direct view of the pulse turret by the corner of the house. They slipped out, moving to the cover of the ventilation units that studded the edges of the roof between the

penthouse and the cannon turret at the other end. Hunched over low, almost on all fours, Julius prowled forward.

As they got closer, it became easier to see through the cloak. The Sturmhaven soldier had the feather colors and general conformation of an eagle owl, or possibly a great horned. She was hunched over the turret, all her attention on the device she was affixing to its side. Julius stopped, raised a pistol, and fired, and the device in the Sturmie's hand-claw disintegrated into a shower of plastic pieces. She abruptly whipped around, a pulse carbine rack-mounted to one gauntlet dropping into her hand, and snapped off a shot that slagged the ventilator Julius had been crouching behind.

:Fuck!: Julius said, diving into a roll for the next unit and coming up firing from both hands. He got in at least two good hits on the owl before she dived for cover behind the corner of the turret's base.

As the owl's dive blocked Joe and Julius from her sight, Julius kicked in his lifters, leaping to the top of the turret and firing straight down on the owl's cover. The owl squawked, shielding her head with her wing-arms, then rolling onto her back to fire straight up.

The shots went wild—Julius was already diving right down onto her, striking her chest hard with one elbow and backhanding the carbine away with his other arm. Then he poked the muzzle of one of his pistols straight into the owl's face. “Go ahead, *punk*. Make my day.”

“I guess you liked *Dirty Harry* after all, huh?” Joe said weakly. He felt his heart pounding in his chest from the adrenaline of the combat moves he'd just been through. *Maybe I am too old for this*, he thought wryly.

“Shush. Surrender and de-Fuse *now* or I pull the trigger, Harpy.”

“We will *never* surrender to a man!” a pair of voices replied.

“So surrender to the inevitable,” Joe said. “Live to fight another day.”

“If you think we're here *alone*, you're a fool!” they screeched. On cue, several of the rooftop cannons on other buildings exploded. “Fewer than we hoped, but perhaps enough. You've *failed!*”

Julius roared, extending his claws from his free hand, raking them across the eagle owl's chest. Several hardlight elements sparked and shorted out.

“Whether we've failed or not, my friend here's going to take you apart unless you power down and give up,” Joe said. “Surrendering to a man might be embarrassing, but how much more embarrassing—and painful—would it be to get dismembered by one?”

Several squadrons of Nextus interceptors streaked overhead, accompanied by a new style of fighter with hints of birds-of-prey in their own designs. There were staccato bursts of pulsefire nearby, smaller explosions, and the literal roars of the Home Guard Battalion RIDEs—all lions, of course. Nextus bureaucracy never could resist a good pun.

“I'll ask again. Do you feel lucky, *punk?*” Julius snarled. “De-Fuse, shut down, and surrender!”

“I surrender. And now you'll see the *true* badge of sacrifice we Harpies make for our polity!” The eagle-owl's chest opened, revealing...something inhuman.

She was a true harpy from Greek myth, a mishmash of human and bird, with three-fingered hands that were halfway to wings, a deep-keeled chest sans breasts, and taloned feet. The woman had a beak instead of a human mouth, and she hissed at Julius, who held his ground with claws spread and pistol leveled. It was obvious she couldn't speak that way.

“What the fuck did you do to yourself, lady?” Joe found himself saying.

“Sacrifice,” the Sturmhaven RIDE said before her eyes went dark.

A pair of lioness Fusers joined them on the roof. One with hardlight Lieutenant’s pips floating over her shoulders regarded them, tail lashing with displeasure. “We’ll take the prisoner from here. *You*, bodyguard, should have gotten your charge into the basement shelter. What the *hell* were you thinking?”

“Hey, in case you didn’t notice I’m the one who warned the Home Guard in the first place,” Julius retorted. “You ladies saw what those explosives did to the other buildings, didn’t you? Took off the top two floors!” He leaned over and scooped up the fallen carbine and slotted it onto his gauntlet triumphantly. “Spoils of war.”

“Take it easy on him, soldier,” Joe said. “I insisted, and he couldn’t exactly say no.” While Joe found the idea of “fettters” repugnant when Julius had explained them to him, he wasn’t above implying them where they didn’t exist. Julius wisely kept his mouth shut. “Anyway, what with what happened to those *other* buildings, it’s a damned good thing we saved this one or Landingtown wouldn’t have any air defenses left. Where were you guys, anyway?”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss intelligence matters with a civilian, even if he is Joseph Steader,” the Lieutenant said. “Operational security.”

“I’ll have to mention that to General Latimer when I have lunch with him tomorrow,” Joe said offhandedly. “Frankly, I couldn’t care less where you were. Just saying it looks a little sloppy that you guys let that happen—” he waved his hand at the smoking ruins of the other buildings’ upper floors “—and a rich civvie and his overgrown tabby cat are all that kept it from being a total rout. Was wondering if you had a good excuse, that’s all.”

:*Overgrown tabby cat? Really?*: Julius said.

:*Hush. I’m trying to make them look bad.*: Joe said. :*Well, worse. They already look pretty bad.*:

“Regardless, I want you to evacuate right now,” the Lieutenant said. “Bodyguard, get Mr. Steader to safety. That’s an order.”

“I have a *name*, you know. You don’t even have to ask. You can damn well see it on your HUD,” Julius said.

“Let it be, Julius.” He nodded to the Lieutenant. “We’re going. Don’t know *where* we’ll go, since this is the only residence I actually kept for myself in Nextus, but we’re going. Thank you, Lieutenant Phipps.”

They walked across to the edge of the building and dropped over, de-Fusing to Skimmer mode on the way down. “Head to the Nextus Grand Hotel, I guess,” Joe said. “I expect we’ll be able to go back tomorrow, especially after I talk to Latty over lunch.”

“Don’t be too hard on those soldiers up there,” Julius said. “They’re just doing their jobs. *Badly*, but still.”

“Eh. Not going to rake them too hard over the coals for half the other guns getting destroyed—I expect they’ll be getting that already—but I *really* don’t like them dissing on you,” Joe said. “Doing your job is no excuse for being a jerk.”

“But I swear, if any of those meatheads so much as *touch* your twencen database...” the jaguar growled. As usual in skimmer form the jaguar’s eyes were looking at his rider from the instrument panel.

“I have copies in many places, Julius. Don’t sweat it,” Joe reassured. “There’s nothing in that penthouse that can’t be re-fabbed.”

“Well, good. Fuckers,” Julius said. “They’re gonna trash the place, I just know it. What the hell took them so long to get there? There’s troops stationed all over the place!”

“We’ll probably never know,” Joe said. “Just your usual stupid army SNAFU. Situation Normal: All Fucked Up.”

“That Sturmie woman was more FUBAR than SNAFU, but whatever,” Julius said, snorting. “Let’s just get to the damned hotel. I need a recharge and about an hour of sleep defrag.”

“Ugh. I know what you mean,” Joe said. He was starting to feel sore from the unexpected workout. *Could use a good scotch after seeing...that.* He couldn’t get the image of the harpy-woman out of his mind, but he was going to try. “How can they do that to themselves?” He swished his tail, remembering the new fighters he had seen overhead. If Sturmhaven had avian RIDEs like that, so would Nextus. “How can we?”

“People make sacrifices in wartime,” Julius said. “I expect every one of those harpy bitches volunteered for it. Probably expect to die in battle and end up in Valhalla or whatever the fuck they believe.” The eyes in the dashboard comm panel rolled expressively. “I’d heard there were some RIDE types with more extreme tags, but I never thought I’d see one like that either. Yeesh. Hope our own birdies aren’t that bad.”

“On the other hand, I’ll bet they can fly like nobody’s business,” Joe said. “*Really* fly, not just hover on lifters. I wonder if it would be worth it, if there *weren’t* a war on.”

“That would depend on just how badly you wanted to fly, I guess,” Julius said. “Well, hang on, we’re almost there.”

As they landed on the rooftop flier pad of the Nextus Grand Hotel, Joe glanced back over his shoulder at the two smoking rooftops, and the one notably whole rooftop of the Gilmore Building. “We did some good work tonight, Julius.”

Julius nodded. “Yes. Yes we fucking well did...partner.”

“Partner?” Joe grinned. “I like that. Let’s go get us a room.”

By the time Joe and Julius returned to their penthouse two days later, work crews were already clearing away the debris from the other rooftops. The ventilation unit that had been damaged in the fight had already been replaced.

Brigadier General Forrest Latimer, grey-haired veteran of many of Earth’s brushfire wars and recent Zharus immigrant, had conveyed NextusMil’s request that they move out of the penthouse so they could station soldiers there to ward off any future attacks, but Joe had turned them down. “This is where we live. We rather like the view. Though if you want to put some kind of separate guardhouse up here, well, there’s still some room where the rest of the Olympic pool used to be. Anyway, placing military targets like AA emplacements on top of buildings where *hundreds* of people live is probably a horrible idea, considering the casualties. Maybe we should move the air defense perimeter a bit further out? *Maybe* some hardlight shielding *instead*?”

“The power requirements are untenable on that scale,” General Latimer had said. “That kind of shielding is limited to military installations.”

Latimer had also been less than forthcoming about why the response had been so delayed that night. “We had some bad intel that diverted our forces to the wrong locations, and that’s all I’ll say about that.” He’d borne up stoically under Steader’s pointed remarks. “We’re putting measures in place to prevent a recurrence,” he had promised.

In the end, Joe and Julius had been happy enough to get back that they were entirely ready to drop the matter. Of course, the matter didn't end up dropping *them*.

"Well, of all the..." Joe said one day on checking his email.

Julius paused the video playback on the media wall just as William Shatner wondered aloud what God would want with a starship. "What is it?" he asked.

"Seems they want to give *me* the Silver Medal of Bravery for *my* actions in protecting our air defenses," Joe said.

Julius snorted. "Bureaucrats. I *hate* fuckin' bureaucrats."

"Well, then don't fuck them," Joe said. He started tapping a reply into the tablet.

"What're you gonna tell 'em?" Julius asked.

"That you were the one who did all the heavy lifting, so you're the one who should get the medal."

"Yeah, I just bet I know what the fuck they'll say to that," Julius said.

"Hey, it's the truth," Joe said. "One thing I'll never do is take the credit for someone else's work."

Julius piped a clip from one of the songs he'd cracked through to the media wall.

*They decorated all the generals
Who fought the war behind the lines
They had forgotten all the soldiers
The brandy puts them way behind the times*

"Yeah, that's about the size of it," Joe said. "There, sent."

Not too much later, he got the reply he was expecting. "Grrr. Stupid lot of stuffed shirts."

"Yeah, I can't believe they ever let Shatner direct," Julius said, watching the credits. "Were they out of their fuckin' minds?"

"Well, there was apparently some kind of TV and movie writer's strike going on at the time that made the script that much worse, but...yeah. Anyway, that's not what I'm talking about." Joe waved the media tablet. "They don't understand why they should award my 'equipment' a medal. Apparently I'm coming off like one of those crazy people who wants to get married to their cat." He shook his head. "Well, *I* don't want the damned thing. I'll just turn it down entirely."

"Y'know, *I* wouldn't object if you accepted it for both of us," Julius said. "We deserve *some* kinda credit for it, and you were as much a part of it as I was. I mean, you and I both know how it really happened. As for what anyone else thinks? Eh, fuck 'em. Who gives a shit?"

"You really mean that?" Joe said.

Julius swished his tail. "Yeah. How many *soldiers* with RIDEs you think are gonna get that medal? Not so fuckin' many. This puts me one up on most of 'em. That's almost worth not getting to go out and kick ass on the front lines."

Joe chuckled. "All right. I'll tell 'em I accept it. I wonder if they'll want me to give a speech? I could talk about how RIDEs are people..."

"Whatever floats your boat," Julius said. "But don't be surprised if they start calling you 'Crazy Joe Steader.'"

Joe grinned. "Hey, I've been called worse things. 'Crazy Joe Steader' is a name I wouldn't mind answering to."

Julius nodded. “Fair enough.”

Moved by a sudden impulse, Joe said, “But listen...is there anything you want for yourself that I could do for you? Sending you to the front is obviously out of the question, but short of that. Anything money can buy?”

Julius blinked. “Hey, man, I’m good. You’ve given me more than enough. Especially with that ‘hazard pay’ bonus you kicked in for the other day. You’re gonna spoil me rotten, you know?”

“No, seriously,” Joe said. “If you hadn’t taken me out there and kicked the crap out of that Sturmie, this place would have ended up like those places over there.” Joe waved a hand in the general direction of the buildings undergoing repair. “Aside from how much it would cost to rebuild, there’s sentimental value involved too. So I want to do something nice for you over and above the job. But I don’t know what kind of things a RIDE would want. I’d feel mighty dumb buying you a can of plating polish or something if you didn’t use the stuff.”

“Well...” Julius stared off into the distance for a moment. “I dunno. It’s not something most milspec RIDEs would ever get, but...” A new file popped up on Joe’s media tablet. He tapped the icon and looked at it.

“Hardlight emitters?” Joe paged down through the file. “It says here that if installed in this configuration, you could look just like a *real* jaguar. But why’s that important?”

“It’s not just *looking* like,” Julius said. “I don’t understand it myself, but the hardlight emitters are tied into my neural net somehow so it also *feels* to me like having real skin and fur. Or so the other RIDEs told me. You hear stuff about it passed from RIDE to RIDE through the sidebands.”

“What kind of stuff?” Joe asked.

“Well...apparently some really fucked-up shit happened to the first RIDE who had it—guy name of ‘Fritz’—and that put the military off from playing with it in other RIDEs. Which is why I, and all my brothers and sisters in the Army, are all metallic-like. But...thing is, I’d like to risk it.” Julius hopped off the couch and stalked from one end of the room to the other. “I don’t know if I can really explain it. It’s like the proverbial color to a blind man. But we’re built on a cross between animal and human neural networks. Which means that I’m basically like a real live jaguar that can be all human-thinky. In VR, I can *be* that real live jag.”

“Yeah, I remember seeing you there like that,” Joe said.

“But in real life, I have this...metal bod. It just feels...*wrong*.” Julius sat down and scratched behind his ear, making a metallic “CLANG CLANG CLANG” sound. “It’s like the stories you hear out of Earth, how some people who go total cyber-metal go nuts from the sense-dep? It’s kind of like that with us. We’ve got the VR, which keeps us sane as long as we spend a bunch of time in it being the ‘real’ animal in addition to the time we spend in the real. But...I’d like to see what it’s like to be able to be the animal in the real world, too.”

“Okay...” Joe said. “So how do we get this stuff put in you? If the government’s against it, I don’t think we can just take you back to Nextus Nano and have them slap it in.”

“As I understand it, my shell’s basically the same as a Chinook with a few mods,” Julius said. “With that file I gave you, any AIDE mechanic should be able to stick ‘em in. But hey, ask NN first. Maybe Frank could pull some strings. And that way, it wouldn’t

void my warranty.”

Joe nodded. “If you want it, buddy, you got it. Hell, I don’t have anything better to do. Let’s head down there right now.”

“Pull the other one!” Frank said, laughing. “No way, no how, will I allow the installation of non-shielding hardlight on Julius. No. Just...no. No.” He started giggling again. “Not just no, but *hell* no. Are you crazy, Joe? Are you absolutely insane?”

“You can call me ‘Crazy Joe Steader,’ if it helps,” Joe said. “My sanity’s been called into question plenty of times. But I’m certain of what I want here.”

“It doesn’t matter one iota what you want here, Joe,” Frank said, sitting back behind his desk.

“C’mon now, Frank,” Joe said. “I *know* what you pulled on me when you assigned Julius to me. You never even *tried* to explain to me what RIDEs were *really* like. And I’m pretty sure I know why.”

“In all seriousness, this is for his protection as well as yours,” Frank said.

“This is what *he* asked *me* for,” Joe said. “I’ve partnered up with him long enough—and touched his mind with my own enough—to know he knows his own mind, and he’s aware of the risks.”

The amusement fell away from Frank’s expression. “Not all the risks.”

“Maybe more of them than you know,” Joe said. “You do know RIDEs whisper to each other on sideband chat, right? Gossip with each other? Pass along things they’ve heard, things they’ve seen? I think they know a lot more than you think they do—especially if you think they’re just ‘equipment.’ What do they say about little pitchers and big ears?”

“Joe, you can’t change my mind on this,” Frank said gravely. “There are things... we can’t take risks on right now without more research.”

“Then let us be part of that research,” Joe said. “Julius did more than save my bacon. He saved my *home*. He hasn’t ever asked me for much, but he wanted this. And if you guys won’t do it, well, we’ve got the schematics we need to have someone else do it for us. I gather anyone who knows his way around a Schnook bike would be able to put the parts in the right places.”

Frank put his head in his hands. “You’re just not going to let this go? Not even if I let you take that Heavy Weapons pak he loved so much instead?”

“Hey,” Julius put in. “What the fuck does a bodyguard need heavy weapons for? Is a military bunker suddenly gonna jump out of a dark alley and attack Joe from out of nowhere? Am I gonna run into heavy fuckin’ tanks on Nextus Main Street? Use that fuckin’ organic head of yours for something other than a fuckin’ hat rack, asshole.”

“Well, okay. First, there is something we’ve been working on since the success of this little bodyguard experiment of mine,” Frank said. He brought up some schematics on his desktop holographic display. “We’re expanding the RIDE Bodyguard program. Weaponspak Division is building these new paks...” The features included boosted shielding, hotrod lifters for speed, and an option of a single shoulder pulse cannon, a salvo of six mini-missiles, or a longarm. “Well?”

“Yeah, that’s real nice,” Julius sneered. “Do human bodyguards get all that crap? Do they need it? Don’t think so. Can any human bodyguard protect their people as well as I can already? Like, y’know, react lightning-fast or turn into an extra layer of body armor around them? Don’t think so. What the fuck do I have to do to get it through your

thick skull? I want *skin*. I want to feel the wind in my fur like you get to feel it in your hair.” He paused, considered Frank’s receding hairline. “What little hair you got left, anyway.”

“Anyway, one swallow doesn’t make a summer,” Joe said. “And *one* subject is a pretty poor experimental sample. Just because this...I believe his name is ‘Fritz’?... turned out badly doesn’t mean Julius will.”

Frank grimaced. “Don’t *even* say that name.”

“I take it you recognize it, then. Willing to accept Julius can know the risks then? Since he obviously knows about your little problem child?” Joe said.

“Frankly, I don’t think either of you can. But I’m *through* trying to argue with you stubborn, obstinate, and downright crazy people,” Frank said.

“Yes, well, like I said, I *know* what you pulled when you set me up with him,” Joe said. “I know you thought you were putting one over on me when you set up with a vehicle who was also a *person*,” Joe said. “Boy I’ll bet you laughed about *that* when you went home that day. And I’ll admit, I’ve been entertaining thoughts of what I could do to ‘get even’ with you for it. But you know what? I want to make Julius happy more than I want any petty revenge. So you do this one thing for us, and I’ll call it square. Won’t darken your doorstep again.”

“So first you say you’ll *owe* me a favor for the favor of getting you a RIDE,” Frank said. “And now you’ll call it *even* for doing you *another* favor. I should get out of the game while I can.”

“Can I help it if you’re a jerk?” Joe said.

“Just go up to the RIDE garage and get out of my thinning hair. I’ll leave the order for the emitter fitting,” Frank said, doing his best not to look Joe or Julius in the eye. “I’ll tell them...I don’t know what I’ll tell them. Just don’t mention Fritz up there, you hear me? In fact, just forget you ever heard the name.”

“What name?” Joe said. “Thanks, Frank. You’re a peach.” He left Frank’s office, Julius padding along behind him. *:This “Fritz” character must be some really bad juju.:* he sent privately to Julius.

:Trust me, you have no idea. You don’t want to have any idea,: Julius replied.

:Fair enough.:

Joe and Julius proceeded to the RIDE maintenance bay to which they’d been directed, and met with the head mechanic. He looked at the orders on his clipboard tablet twice, blinked, shook his head, then looked again.

“Is there a problem, Sergeant?” Joe asked.

“Well, I hope you two enjoy being together, because...well...just forget it,” he said. “It’s your funerals.”

:Seriously? Our funerals?: Joe sent to Julius. *:I was taking your word for it the risks were low...:*

:Stuff went bad for one guy,: Julius replied. *:Nobody else who had the stuff—and there were several of ‘em—was ever affected. There’s been a lot of argument about it on the sidebands, but most of ‘em—well, anyway, a lot of ‘em—think there were other factors involved in...what went wrong. And I believe ‘em.:*

Joe considered that. *:All right. I trust you, bodyguard.:* He nodded to the mechanic. “Do it.”

The mechanic nodded. He opened a RIDE maintenance cradle, and Julius clambered up onto it and powered down. The mechanic called a couple others over, and

they began opening panels and sliding components into slots.

Joe watched them with no small amount of interest. “So if these hardlight doohickeys are so bad, why were RIDEs all built with the slots for them?”

“The modular chassis designs were finalized before all the testing was finished yet,” the Sergeant said. “Would have cost more to redesign to remove the slots than just leave ‘em in.”

“And the potential side-effects are really that bad?” Joe prodded.

The mechanic coughed. “The installation will take an hour or so. You can sit over there while you wait. There’s a food fabber in the far right corner.”

Joe grinned at him. “Not many people would try to brush off the richest man in Nextus like that. I like you. Take good care of Julius.” He nodded to the mechanic, then headed over to the indicated waiting area to wait.

Other RIDEs being serviced or in varying states of assembly occupied the other cradles. They were mostly felines, but there were a surprising number of elk, deer, horses, and several species he couldn’t name outright. This was Nextus Nano’s R&D and Maint Center in the city proper. Joe knew there was another larger base well outside the city borders, but they did some work here they were willing to show to people like him.

There were even a few actual wolves, which made Joe’s jaguar ears perk. Were they meant as Sturmhaven infiltrator units or something? Unable to restrain his curiosity he left the stool and wandered around the Maintenance Shop, trying to stay out of the way of the mechanics and their glares.

Ultimately what drew his eye more were a trio of battle-damaged elk being serviced by a woman with an uncanny resemblance to Carrie Fisher, minus the hair buns and with the addition of raccoon ears, tail, and facial mask. She sat in a waldoe unit, removing the larger damaged parts like legs and armor plates.

Joe waited until she paused before speaking. “Did the cores survive, ma’am?”

“They’re fine Mr. Steader,” the woman replied tersely. “Can’t say as much for the pilots, though. Going to be a week in an autodocs, but they’ll make it.”

“Well, I’m glad there weren’t any fatalities,” Joe said. He looked at the three elk—one male, and two female. “So, what are their names?”

“Franklin, Eleanor, and Yvonne,” the mechanic replied without missing a beat. “Elk are mostly heavy comm frames. Big targets on the front. They get heavy shielding and use their comm lasers for defense.”

“So you don’t see a lot of deer-types in assault roles, then?” Joe asked.

“Actually, there are. You should see the moose long-range artillery,” she said, pointing at an example at the far end of the service bay. Mounted on the back of a metallic bull moose was a 75mm low-velocity railgun that reminded him of a compact version of Second World War mobile gun platforms. “The RIDE engineers are starting to go nuts if you ask me. How many animals do we really need? Lions, tigers, elk, hawks, dolphins...on and on.”

“Oh my?” Joe quipped. “You know, during wartime is isn’t unusual to have a lot of variants of equipment. There were a dozen types of a single bomber design in the Second World War.”

“Yeah? Well, war is a new thing to Zharus. Damned Sturmies! And why I’m at it, damn *you* and your whole goddamned family, too! Now if you don’t mind, sir, I have work to do.” The mechanic practically spat on the floor, giving him a glare of such

disgust he decided to retreat back to the waiting area.

Even many years after his brother left to join the circus Joe was still trying to untangle the events that had led to war's unwelcome appearance on Zharus. Hostilities had only been formally declared since 118. Before then, skirmishes between Nextus and Sturmhaven had steadily increased in frequency and intensity for several years. The spark had been an altercation at the top of the Omphalos space elevator between Joe's brother Mikel and an overzealous Sturmhaven Valk working for ZITA—the Zharus Interstellar Trade Authority—over a sarium export permit he'd obtained for the Star Circus.

The Valk had claimed that the permit was a forgery and confiscated every last cell in Mikel's possession, including the one he'd forgotten was in his commset. That had been the last straw for Joe's kid brother. Before leaving for Wednesday to meet the Star Circus Mikel had lodged a formal complaint with ZITA over the Valk's behavior. It *might* have ended there, if their cousin Ophelia Steader hadn't stepped in and somehow manipulated a minor formal complaint into an eventual *casus belli*.

Sturmhaven, already belligerent and hurting for ready cash due to numerous trade embargos from civil rights abuses against men, got on the warpath and stayed there. Even the Steaders disowning Ophelia wouldn't mollify them. Everything had just gotten worse and worse.

"Why so glum, chum?" Julius purred. "Geezus, Joe. What's got you down so far you didn't notice me fuckin' standing here for thirty seconds? Well, here's something to cheer you up." A couple of dozen dots about the size of a pea lit up all over the jaguar's metal body, and a moment later a real live tawny, black-spotted jaguar was standing there in his place.

Joe whistled and reached out to touch the jaguar's head. The fur's texture against his fingertips and the way the skin moved under his touch all felt completely real. "Wow...that's amazing!"

Julius purred. "You should see how it feels from the inside." He sat on his haunches and scratched behind one ear. It sounded and looked completely natural.

Joe glanced around. "You know, the other RIDEs are all looking at you."

Julius snorted, getting back to his feet. "Let 'em look. No matter what they might say, deep down they *all* want what you got me. But are *they* ever gonna get it? No way, José. Thanks, pal." He rubbed his head against Joe's hip. "C'mon, let's blow this pop stand."

They left the Maintenance Bay together. Joe was conscious of the way everyone they met regarded Julius with wide eyes. Julius padded happily along, spotted tail held high. When they got back to the garage level, the hardlight flickered out long enough for Julius to unfold back into his skimmer bike form. Joe noticed that now he had plush jaguar-pelt upholstery on his saddle, and furry accents all along his frame. "Nice look."

"Ain't it just?" They pulled out of the garage and back onto the street, cruising for home. The eyes on the console display were now surrounded by a mask of tawny and black fur. "Man, this is just the *shit!*"

"Glad you approve," Joe said. "So now, what have I gotten myself into with this? Everyone seemed to act like hardlight makes RIDEs radioactive or something."

"Aw, don't pay any attention to those sticks in the mud," Julius said. "They don't know what they're talking about."

“So what *are* they talking about?” Joe said. “C’mon, I stuck my neck out to get you the stuff, I deserve to know.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Julius said. “Well, the RIDE-to-RIDE scuttlebutt is that test RIDE *numero cero*, the F-cat whose name nobody wants you taking in vain, had himself a little mishap. Nobody’s quite sure what caused it, and I can’t even get anyone to tell me exactly what ‘it’ was—just that it was *bad*, and somehow screwed up both him and his pilot. Apparently it kicked off when he got too attached to his hardlight pelt and didn’t want to give it up when they decided to pull the plug. Not that I can blame him for *that*, now that I’ve got it myself.” He snorted. “But one thing I do know is that cat had been fucking around with his Fuser nanos, making a few experimental little mods that weren’t in the owner’s manual, and a lot of the others think that’s what *really* caused his little meltdown. Like I said, nothing ever happened to any of the others they tested it on. Me, I’ve left my Fusers completely the fuck alone, factory spec with *official* patches only, so I think we’re safe.”

“Fair enough,” Joe said. “So...you said I should see what that pelt felt like from the inside.” He rested his thumb on the Fuse switch. “Shall we?”

“Thought you’d never ask.” The skimmer bike split apart and molded itself to Joe’s body in midair, and the hardlight flickered back on. Joe was suddenly a humanoid jaguar hurtling through the air.

“Oh, wow!” Joe said. He could definitely tell the difference. When they’d Fused up before, he’d felt like a three-meter-tall man wearing plate armor, but now he could feel the breeze blowing through every follicle of fur across their entire body. He looked down at himself, relieved to see there was a sort of U-shaped metal codpiece that covered the crotch area and looped around between their legs to latch in place around the tail. Wouldn’t do to get a ticket for indecent exposure. *Wait, do we even have something to be exposed in this mode?* he wondered.

Julius picked up on the thought and chuckled. “Already thinking about hardlight-equipped lady cat RIDEs, are we? Let’s just say that if we ever *do* meet one, she *won’t* be disappointed. *Rowwwr.*”

They flew the rest of the way in Fuse, touched down on the skimmer pad, then walked in the door without de-Fusing—then froze. A lynx Fuser—or at least, someone who looked very much like a Lynx Fuser, except he was a lot smaller than a RIDE wrapped around a human ought to be—was seated on the sofa, with a big tub of popcorn. On the media wall, someone—Joe recognized the face as James Dean from pictures he’d seen, but he’d never seen this movie before—was in a planetarium, looking up at the display of stars, saying, “Once you been up there you know you’ve been someplace.”

“Hey, cats,” the lynx said nonchalantly, pointing Joe’s remote at the screen and clicking pause. “Let myself in, hope y’don’t mind. Swingin’ pad you crazy kids have here, a real beatsville. C’mon, have a seat, there’s plenty of popcorn for everyone.”

: *What the hell?*: Joe sent privately.

“Fritz the hell, pleasetameetcha Julius, ‘Crazy Joe,’” the lynx said. “*Nice* look on the pelt. I can’t believe you really talked those squares into making with the hardlight after what happened to me. Good for you. Maybe rich Steaders are good for something after all.”

Julius unwrapped himself from around Joe, arched his back, and spat, looking

for all the world like an overgrown housecat. “Get the *fuck* out of our house, you son of a bitch.”

“Now, now, is that any way to talk to your Uncle Fritz after you invited me over?” Fritz said.

“We what?” Joe said.

Fritz grinned. “You said my name. And unlike the Candyman, you only gotta say it once to get my attention.”

“He must have a tap in their security computers,” Julius said.

“Smart kitty! You get a gold star!” Fritz said, tossing a kernel of popcorn up and catching it in his mouth. “So I got curious, backtraced you through their records, and came on over to poke around. You’ve got some nice taste in flicks and tunes, but you haven’t even cracked some of the *best* stuff yet. So I left you a little present.” He waved at the screen. “*Rebel Without a Cause*, it’s called. James Dean’s magnum opus. One of just a couple shows he made before *pfffft*.” Fritz drew a finger across his throat illustratively.

“I’ve heard of it,” Joe said dryly. “Wait...you cracked a whole *movie* just in the time it took to get the hardlight fitted? That’d take Julius all day to crank through.”

“I cracked it in five minutes, actually,” Fritz said, buffing his clawnails against his fur and holding them up to check their shine. “Code-cracking’s what I do. I’m Nextus’s Top Seekrit Weapon to Win the War that way. But all those Sturmie letters get so boring after a while. So dry and repetitive. There’s not even any good *gossip*. Who’d a thunk, a whole *country* run by chicks but no gossip to be found? So anyway, I might just make your little library my new hobby.”

“What exactly *are* you?” Joe asked.

“As the old song goes, ‘I’m not man or machine / I’m just something in-between,’” Fritz said. “They’re calling me an ‘Integrate’ or ‘Integrated.’ I kinda dig the name, ‘cuz it has ‘great’ in it, and I’m certainly that. I’m a combination of the RIDE and the man, all mixed up in a blender. Kinda like, I dunno, putting cream in your coffee, or Hershey’s in your milk.”

“Or piss in your toilet,” Julius said. “Turns the blue water green.”

Fritz laughed. “Oh, I *like* you, kitty. Oh, and I wouldn’t worry about the pelt. You’re not likely to go like me, unless Doctor Jerk-Ass Clemens decides he wants to fuck you up, too. There’s only one of me, and I damn well hope that’s all there’ll ever be. Not like telling ‘em that makes the meat stop fretting about it, though.”

“And this combination made you into a super-code-cracking quantum computer?” Joe said.

“You know it, daddy-o,” Fritz said. “I went ahead and cracked a few more flicks and tunes for you; they’re on your desktop. And I copied off all your stuff for me, too. You’ve got some sweet shit in there; looking forward to watching it all when I’m stuck back in nadaville.”

“Uh...thanks, I guess.” Joe found himself remarkably ambivalent. On the one hand, this cat had let himself into Joe’s own home and was lounging around like he owned the place—not to mention making free with Joe’s whole media collection. On the other hand...all that code-cracking potential could liberate the locked files *decades* ahead of schedule.

Fritz stiffened. “Oh, crap. The fuzz just noticed I slipped my cage again. Better scam.” He stood from the couch and bowed sardonically. “Enjoy the popcorn. Promise

I didn't juice it. Later!" Then he faded from view except for his grin. A moment later, that was gone, too. Joe felt the breeze of his passage as he *whooshed* out the door.

"Well, you wanted to know why everyone's pissing their pants about RIDEs with hardlight," Julius said mildly. "I'd say we both just found that out. Christ, what an asshat."

"I won't argue," Joe said. He glanced at James Dean on the media wall. "But he could be a *useful* asshat."

"Yeah, that's probably what NextusMil top brass thinks, too," Julius said. "I think they're playing with fire."

"So, what, you want to delete the stuff he cracked for us?" Joe said.

Julius rolled his eyes. "No, damn you. You've got *me* hooked on that crazy crap too. Not like it'd make one bit of difference anyway; if he's that hot shit, he could probably crack every computer in this place just by looking at it, so it's not like he'd have needed to stick trojans in 'em."

"I *am* going to dump the popcorn, though," Joe said.

"Yeah, probably wise," Julius agreed.

Life went on at Home Steader. Annoyed as he had been at Fritz's antics, Joe nonetheless had to admit he'd unlocked some good stuff, including a big chunk of the Beatles catalog that had been missing before. Joe made up a package of everything new that Julius and Fritz had cracked and addressed it to his brother at the Star Circus. A courier would take it to Uplift, and it would go out on the next starliner. The latest word was the circus should be on Zheng He by the time the package could reach it. Upon reflection, Joe decided not to say anything about *how* it had been cracked. Fritz was a military secret, after all, and as for Julius...it would be better to introduce them to Julius face-to-face. Joe was looking forward to that.

It was a little hard to get used to having a big furry cat lounging around the house where there had once been a big metal cat. Joe ended up having to order a custom-built sofa that could take the RIDE's weight. He was just glad that the floor had been reinforced before he'd built the place. Still, having a warm, furry lump to lean against while watching the latest movie was an improvement.

What *wasn't* so much an improvement, at least from Joe's point of view, was the pink, bristly tongue that Julius was prone to giving him a lick on the cheek with when he thought it was time for him to wake up. "Yow, sandpaper much?" Joe said, rubbing his cheek.

Julius licked the back of a paw. "You gotta admit, that's an effective wake-up call."

"Yeah. I hope I still have some skin left," Joe said.

One day, Joe came in from a conference call in his study to find Julius peering quizzically at something new on the screen. "Hey, Joe. You gotta take a look at this crazy shit. Bunch a' guys in gorilla suits jumping around and screeching. Hey, go kitty cat!" On the screen, a leopard had just tackled and mauled one of the apes.

Joe paused and cocked his head. Something about this reminded him of something. "Hey, run it back to the very start, would you?"

"The *very* start is just, like, three minutes of this annoying droning music and a black screen," Julius said.

"So go to the three minute mark." Joe sat down on the sofa. The screen filled up

with a blue MGM lion-head logo, with a sort of humming drone of music in the background. Then the moon faded into view, moving downward to reveal a downward-pointing crescent earth with the sun peeking out at the top. Joe recognized the music: “Thus Spake Zarathustra.”

“Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer presents...” Joe read. He was starting to get goosebumps. “...a Stanley Kubrick production...” He held his breath and then the title appeared: “*2001: A Space Odyssey*. YES!” Joe threw his arms around Julius’s neck and hugged him impulsively. “*Good kitty!* Oh, what a find! This is one of the most famous space movies of all time. I’ve read a few things about it, but never thought I’d have the chance to see it.”

Julius cocked his head. “Um...okay? Doesn’t seem like anything to write home about so far. A little pretentious, really. Look at that.” He nodded to the screen, which was now showing a desolate wilderness landscape at dawn, with the words “THE DAWN OF MAN” superimposed in an ornate font.

“Shush...I want to savor this,” Joe said.

“What’s to savor? I mean, you’ve got like five minutes of landscape shots now before you even get to the stupid people in monkey suits...”

“Julius, *please*,” Joe said. “This is *important*.”

“All right, all right, shutting up...” Julius said. Together they watched the screechy ape people eating plants, competing with tapirs for scrawny vegetation. One of them was attacked by a leopard (“This is my favorite part so far,” Julius confided. Joe smacked him.) and then they were driven away from their watering hole by a rival tribe of apes. They slept together in a cave. And then, as discordant music began to play in the background...

“What the ever-lovin’ fuck?” Julius said, staring at the screen where a solid black monolith had just appeared overnight outside the cave where the apes had been staying.

“Shush,” Joe said.

“But this doesn’t make any...” Joe glared at him. “...all right, shutting up...”

The apes approached it, touched it tentatively...and the sun and moon appeared in alignment over the top of it. And then...silence again as the scene changed. And as “Thus Spake Zarathustra” came in again, a quizzical ape-man playing in a pile of bones picked one up and started smacking other bones with it. A short while later, the tribe of apes were dining on tapir meat.

“Wait, that’s not right,” Julius said. “Apes are vegetarians.”

“What about guys in ape suits?” Joe asked pointedly.

“Er, yeah...” Julius said. “I...kinda forgot.” He fell silent without being asked this time as the apes retook their watering hole with the aid of bone clubs. The victorious ape-man leader tossed his bone into the air...and it became a satellite orbiting in space millions of years later.

“Now *there’s* a mindfuck jump cut if there ever was one,” Julius said.

And now another piece of classical music started playing—the Blue Danube waltz, by Strauss. And Joe leaned forward and stared in awe as a spaceplane with a Pan-Am logo on it rose majestically to meet a revolving wheel-shaped space station.

“It’s only a model,” Julius muttered. Joe smacked him without ever looking away from the screen.

“I...have to build that,” Joe said dreamily. “I mean, *both* of them. The station and the spaceplane. I mean, once the war’s over...such sublime elegance.”

“This just goes on and on, doesn’t it?” Julius said, watching the plane sloooooowly make its way toward the space station. “It’s like that first *Star Trek* movie. For cryin’ out loud, hurry up and *get* somewhere, will ya?”

“That movie was made eleven years after this one, so I imagine there’s some influence,” Joe said. “Kubrick’s work often had this kind of reputation for being rather thick on the symbolism. There were a lot of imitators.”

“Can’t say I think much of the ‘zero gravity’ effects,” Julius said, watching the stewardess retrieve a floating pen and tuck it in a sleeping passenger’s pocket. “That thing’s on a wire, and those ‘grip shoes’ she’s wearing aren’t fooling anyone.” Then a few moments later, Julius cocked his head as she took a pair of trays and walked right up the wall and *around* so she was upside down to take the trays in to the pilots. “The hell?”

Joe grinned. “You were saying?”

“How the fuck did they do that?” Julius said.

“I’ll just let you work that out for yourself,” Joe said.

They watched on. “Look at that!” Joe said. “He’s making a video phone call—with a credit card.”

“So? What’s the big deal about that?” Julius wondered.

“This was made in 1968. They didn’t *have* those things back then. But here they’re treating it like just another thing you do. Just a part of everyday life. Like you RIDEs are going to be once the War’s over. Of course, the way the year 2001 actually turned out was quite different. But you can *feel* the optimism here! The space program was at its height when this was made, and man was going to set foot on the moon the very next year. Shows like *Star Trek*, *Time Tunnel*, and *Lost in Space* were on the air. The Future was going to be *amazing!*”

“Amazingly inaccurate. The year 2001 was nothing like this,” Julius said. “Oh, great, more Blue Danube. Dah dah dah *dah*, dah *dah*, dah *dah*. I swear, I’m gonna have this stuck in my core for *days* now. You gonna build that ship, too?”

“All of these spacecraft are amazingly plausible for the time, so yeah. I might,” Joe said. The big globe ship would make a great orbital shuttle. *Steadier Spacelines, maybe?*

Julius peered at the screen. “Oh, hey, look, they’re eating again. Or *drinking*. Whee, space dinner is a tray of juice boxes!”

“Less talky, more watchy.”

“All right, all right...” Julius shut up again...for a few minutes. “So let me get this straight. Putting out a story about an ‘epidemic’ is the most plausible way they could think of to cover up an amazing discovery? How long do they think that’s gonna hold up? A month or two? What’re they gonna tell people then?” He shook his head. “These guys remind me of the Nextus brass. Oh, look, *space sandwiches!* I could really go for a space sandwich right now, how about you?”

“That moonbus...” Joe said. “I’ll bet that’s what the one in ‘A Fall of Moondust’ looked like. Clarke wrote that, too. And just look at the user interfaces! Five centuries later and they still look pretty modern.”

“You’re like a little kid, Joe, you know that?” Julius said. “And...I don’t really mean that in a bad way. You’re the same age as General Latimer, but he’s already an old man.”

“You’re only as old as you feel,” Joe said.

“Yeah? Latty feels up eighteen-year-olds all the time, but just look at him,” Julius said.

“*Way* too much information,” Joe said, smacking him. “Would you look at those space suits? You could build one that looked just like that today and it would still work just fine. In fact...hmm. There might just be a market for nostalgia stuff like that. Assuming we can ever get people’s nostalgia off the ground.”

“How can anyone be nostalgic for something five hundred years old? It’d be like someone in the Twentieth century pining for...I dunno... castles and matchlocks and shit.”

Joe snorted. “How do you think the Society for Creative Anachronism got started? SCA’s been around five centuries, you know.”

“Yeah, but still. You can’t just jump-start people into immersing themselves in ancient pop culture like that,” Julius said. “They’ve got jobs and shit, and there’s only so many hours in the day. No time to watch some old crap, and no desire to without someone *else* who’s watched all the crap already and can tell ‘em what’s good.”

Joe blinked, and hit pause on the movie. “You know, that kind of gives me an idea. Julius, you’re a *genius!*”

Julius blinked. “I am?” He looked at Joe. “Well, shit, I mean of *course* I am...but, um, what brilliant thing did I do now?”

“Who do you know of who *can* watch and listen to a zillion hours of pop culture in just a few days?” Joe asked.

Julius cocked his head. “You?”

Joe shook his head, grinning. “*You*. RIDEs, I mean. You can speed up time in your head and watch a whole *series* in a few minutes of real time. Maybe even a few *seconds*. So you and all the other RIDEs *can* watch all the stuff and start recommending it to humans.”

Julius blinked again. “Huh. You might just be onto something there. Though still, you’d only end up with the crap RIDEs *liked* getting recommended.”

“But RIDEs are people like anyone else. They won’t all like the *same* crap. Even the humans might like different crap but only start finding it once they know to start looking.” Joe grinned. “Of course, this’ll have to wait ‘til after the war, since RIDEs have got better things to think about right now. But once peace breaks out, we can have Steader Entertainment reach out to *all* the RIDEs. Maybe they get free downloads but anything they want to show humans has to be paid for? Eh, can work out the details later. For now, back to the movie.”

The astronauts approached the monolith...touched it...posed for a photo in front of it...there was another one of those over-the-top alignments. There was a high-pitched whine, and then...

“What the crap?” Another jump cut, and the screen read “Jupiter Mission, 18 months later.”

“Now...that’s a little too big to build, even for me,” Joe said, seeing the *Discovery* move slowly past on the screen.

“Wait just one fucking second,” Julius said. “We just blink and it’s suddenly a year and a half later in some completely different part of space? Those aren’t even the same guy we were just following for all this time! What’s going on here?”

“I see they’re doing the whole circular ship thing again,” Joe said. “Amazing to think they were able to film this without ever leaving Earth, isn’t it? They really had

some great creativity back then. No computers powerful enough to help with special effects. That's still decades away."

"Yeah, well, I just wanna know, if they've got normal gravity and all that in the ship, why are they eating trays of paste?" Julius said. "You'd think they'd just have *normal* food."

"Look at that tablet," Joe said, pointing to the device sitting on the table next to the astronaut. "I mean, just *look* at it! This was made in 1968. They wouldn't be able to make a *real* tablet like that for thirty or forty years! But it looks so much like the ones we have to this day."

"I see that their network TV is produced by those morons who don't know the right way to hold their comm when taking home movies," Julius said as it started showing an interview with the *Discovery* crew. "Landscape, people, landscape!"

They continued watching. "Okay, that HAL seriously creeps me out," Julius said. "He sounds *way* too fuckin' calm. He's gotta be up to something."

"HAL has no emotions. None. Zilch. Zip. Nada. Only pure logic," Joe pointed out. "He's more Vulcan than a Vulcany Vulcan. So he can't really be 'calm', can he?"

"The Ad-I in your old Schnook was smarter than HAL," Julius grumbled.

"Don't know that I'd necessarily say that," Joe said. "Keep watching."

At HAL's recommendation, astronaut Frank Poole went out in a pod to go pull the faulty part from the ship's antenna. The only sound on the soundtrack the whole time was Poole's breathing in the space suit. After about a minute of this, Julius said, "Hello? Hello? If you don't say something, I'm going to hang up the comm now..."

"*Julius...*"

"Aw, c'mon, I *know* you had to be thinking it too."

The movie proceeded apace—and, Joe was amused to note that, despite his earlier disdain, Julius started getting really into it. "Aw, c'mon, guys, you're not seriously going to go out into space to replace a part you don't need to replace because the AI you already think has flipped its fuckin' lid *told* you to. Are you? Are you really? *Shit.*"

At last, Julius watched just as raptly as Joe as Dave Bowman stalked through the halls of the ship while HAL pleaded with him in those same calm tones to stop, and ejected HAL's memory cores one by one. "My mind is going, Dave. I can feel it." "Good afternoon, gentlemen...I am a HAL 9000 computer..." "Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do..."

"Brrr," Julius said. "All right, I know he was fuckin' nuts, but...that's some creepy-ass shit, right there. Like watching an execution—a *slow* one."

Dr. Floyd's briefing played, revealing the secret behind the Jupiter mission. "Oh, so *that's* what caused Hal to go mental," Julius said. "Wasn't built smart enough to be able to keep secrets without feeling guilty about it, and didn't have a coping mechanism."

"Some people think so," Joe said. "Others think the radio waves from the monolith did something to his thinky bits. Doesn't really matter, in the end."

Julius sneezed. "So these guys decide to send the astronauts a zillion billion clicks out in space, with their only point of contact with Earth being through mission control, so it's not like they can blab to anyone...and they *still* don't tell 'em about why they're actually going out there until they get there. These guys really *do* remind me of the Nextus brass."

“I think the book explained they were afraid the humans would go all paranoid if they had the whole months-long trip to think about how they were going out to meet aliens,” Joe said.

Julius sniffed. “So instead, the AI did. *Big* improvement.”

Joe chuckled. “Can’t argue with you there.”

The scene changed and the title card came up: “Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite.”

Julius snorted and tried to suppress a chuckle. Joe looked at him. “All right, what’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking about that one computer-animated movie you showed me the other week.” Julius put on a deeper voice and quoted, “To Infinity...and Beyond!”

Joe glared at him, then chuckled a little himself. “All right, I guess that’s fair. Now just shush and watch. I’ve read about this next bit...I want to *experience* it.”

“Huh? Experience wha...” Julius blinked. “What the *fuuuuuuu*...” A riot of color and images beyond description raced across the screen. “Wait a minute, didn’t I see this in *TRON*?”

“Shush.”

“Yeesh...I think I need to readjust my optics’ color balance.”

“*SHUSH!*”

“Okay, okay, geez...”

The silence didn’t last terribly long. “What the living fuck? He’s flown through some kind of alien warp gate thing...and ended up in a Louis XVI furnished bedroom? And then he’s, like, seeing himself older, and then being that him seeing *another* older him? Oh, and *now* he’s a giant space-baby and there’s Earth again. I think my brain is broken.”

“Hmm,” Joe said, looking around thoughtfully.

“Ohhhh no,” Julius said. “You are *not* refurnishing this penthouse to look like that place. I wouldn’t even *fit* on that couch.”

“No, not *this* penthouse,” Joe mused. “But maybe the *next* one I get. Maybe when they finish the Aloha elevator I’ll buy one up there. A penthouse in space, furnished like a space movie.”

Julius looked at the screen, where the credits were rolling to the Blue Danube again, then back to Joe. “All right, so what the *fuck* did I just watch? What does all that even *mean*?”

Joe just grinned at him. “You know what? I’m not gonna tell you.”

Julius blinked. “Huh? Why?”

“Because there really isn’t a ‘right’ answer,” Joe said. “The meaning of this kind of thing is something you have to figure out for yourself.”

“C’mon, seriously?” Julius said. “Shit. If I’d known that before I watched it, I wouldn’t have wasted the fucking time.”

“Really?” Joe asked. “You don’t feel at all like it was worthwhile to watch a movie that raises questions even if it doesn’t answer all of them?” He paused, and added, “And has such *neat* spaceships in it! I am *so* building that Pan-Am spaceliner...”

Julius snorted. “Huh. Well, okay, maybe.” He considered. “I guess the monolith—the one back on ancient Earth anyway—is supposed to be what made the apes figure out how to use tools and start evolving into man? And the one they put on the moon must have been, like, a test or something? Humans could only find it once they left their world, and then it gave them another test—pointed them at another one way out in

space where they had to go to pass it.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Joe agreed.

“And that bit at the end was, like, Bowman evolving into the next form of life,” Julius said. “Kind of like a space Pokemon or something.”

“Space...Pokemon,” Joe said.

“Bowman-chu, I choose *you!*” Julius said in a high-pitched voice.

Joe rolled his eyes. “I *knew* introducing you to anime was a bad idea.” He chuckled. “Anyway, there’s a sequel movie, and a series of four novels Clarke wrote, that kind of expand on things, if you want to look there. I might even have the novels in the stuff Brubeck gave me. But those are kind of outside the context of the original movie.” Joe waved a hand dismissively. “They’re someone else’s answers. They might not be as satisfying to you as the ones you make up on your own. That was how Kubrick wanted it.”

“Give me a Tarantino flick any day,” Julius grumbled. “I’m working on one called...*Inglorious Basterds*. The man could make a great fuckin’ flick. Too bad he couldn’t spell.”

“That spaceliner *will* be mine. Oh yes, it *will* be mine.” Joe cackled and rubbed his hands together.

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The life of a Nextus citizen during wartime was largely sessile, even for Joseph Steader and Julius. Apart from the occasional polity raid just to keep peoples’ heads down, both sides concentrated their efforts around the disputed land areas—the Q mining sites and strategic stretches of desert. There was one final battle over Nuevo San Antonio that ended in a nasty surprise for both sides, as a cloud of light RIDEs based on *dinosaurs* of all things had come out of nowhere and started attacking both sides’ flanks. “And *stay* out!” Nuevo San broadcast as both sides hastily retreated in the face of thousands of sickle-clawed RIDEs screeching bloody murder.

There would be no more battles on the Coastal Ring.

The general public didn’t know Joe Steader had been assigned a RIDE as a bodyguard, and both he and Julius wanted to keep it that way. General Latimer agreed it gave them an edge over any potential dangers, not that there had been any since the rooftop attack. Fortunately, given the general sentiment toward the Steader family in Nextus about now, Joe wasn’t called upon to make any public appearances. (To his annoyance they *mailed* him his Silver Medal of Bravery, after he’d spent all afternoon working on an acceptance speech.) When he did have to comm out, a little realtime video editing got rid of his tags.

It was a life of war committee meetings, running his companies by telepresence, the occasional jaunt outside on Julius, and delving ever more deeply into the twencen media files the RIDE deciphered on a daily basis. *The kind of humdrum a man wants in the middle of a war, I suppose*, Joe thought.

He still felt a little guilty about sitting here in a penthouse while people were fighting and dying, but on the other hand he was making a difference with his money, pouring most of his vast fortune into the war effort. His money built RIDEs, fed soldiers, and shored up Nextus’s defenses. But some days he suspected that Ophelia Steader’s money was doing the same thing for Sturmhaven, so in the end he was really

only evening things out.

“Dude, nobody’s ever proven your bitchy cousin’s playing both sides,” Julius opined on one of their daily spins around town.

“It’s just a gut feeling, okay?” Joe said. “It’s just like her. The avarice bug bit her something fierce when she was young. She’s a *Captain Planet* villain brought to life. A regular Looten Plunder.”

“She’s under house arrest ‘for her own protection,’” Julius said. “What can she do?”

“Plenty. We’ve got a couple more cousins in Sturmhaven, you know. And she’s more closely related to that branch than the rest of us here. But then, considering how big the family is, we’ve got cousins living on Rodinia science research stations,” Joe fumed. “And we’re all crazy!”

“Well, nobody’s perfect.” Julius said. “Except me, of course.”

“Riiiiight,” Joe said, grinning.

One day, they went out for their usual spin around the polity. When they came back, they found their door ajar. Given that the silent alarm hadn’t triggered, Joe had a pretty good idea who they’d find inside. But even though he was right, he and Julius were still both in for a shock.

“Fuck! Dude!” Julius said, tail lashing. “You look li—”

“Like I’ve been mauled by a pack of wolves?” Fritz said, dripping silver-red blood from several open wounds on his legs. His fur was matted with it from the waist down, and there were parts missing. “You’re a sharp one, Jules. ‘Cause I have. Fill your bathtub with fabber slop and let me soak for a few hours. That’s all this cat needs.”

“And you can’t do this back at your base because...?” Julius said.

“In my hour of need, all I could think of was seeing a friendly face one more time,” Fritz said virtuously.

“Right, so, you can’t do this back at your base because...?” Julius said again.

“No squaresville iron for this hep cat, that’s why. The Sturmites laid a trap for me and I walked right into it. Last thing I want right now is Ma yellin’ in my ear,” Fritz said. “I’m more durable than I look, but I took a pulse cannon shot to the ‘nads. Those Sturmy bitches sure know how to hit a guy. *Ow* meow.”

Joe winced. “Right, I’ll send out for a few decaliters of fab stuff. One of the shops on the lower levels is a fabbery, so there’s a warehouse with lots of it in the basement.”

“I know. Which is partly why I chose your pad to crash,” Fritz said. “Oh, I opened up some new flicks for you and a few hundred teras of Facebook and MySpace posts for you to laugh at.”

“If you think you can bribe your way into our penthouse...” Julius began, then paused. “...you’re absolutely right. Those Facebook posts are *priceless*. I can has cheezburger?”

“You’d just better clean up after yourself,” Joe said. “That goop is hell on the plumbing.”

Once the bathtub was full, Fritz submerged himself up to his nose in the translucent goop with a huge sigh of relief. “Ahhhh, thanks guys. This hep cat thinks you’re both copacetic. Just leave me alone for a couple hours and I’ll be on the mend. But don’t call anyone, hear?”

“You have our word,” Joe said.

“Shit, yeah,” Julius added. “Rest up. We can watch some flicks when you’re

better, dude.”

“That’ll be cool. Blast the edison on your way out, y’ dig?”

“Huh?” Julius wondered.

“He means to turn off the lights,” Joe said. “Beatnik slang.”

“Hey, man, you get it. You’re coolsville with me,” Fritz said. “Now, outs.”

Joe nodded, hitting the light switch as they left. “Well, you sure changed your tune,” he remarked as they got back to the living room. “Last time he showed up, I think you called him an asshat?”

“Eh,” Julius said. “It’s pretty clear now he’s not just all talk. He comes in here all torn up like that...I mean, if I *had* gone to the front, that coulda been me.”

“I see your point,” Joe said. “So, instead of Batman in my basement, I’ve got catman in my bathroom. I guess I’ll be peeing in the guest’s for the next little while.”

“Ooh, more lolcats,” Julius said. “Hey, look at this one.”

Fritz was much-improved by the time he sauntered into the living room a couple of hours later with a towel around his neck. The wounds in his legs had sealed up into silvery scars, which were already themselves fading. “Hey, thanks for being cool,” he said, plopping down on one end of the couch. “I don’t got a lot of friends.”

“Hey, anything to help with the war effort, right?” Joe said. “I’ll go make some popcorn.”

*:Holy shit, man. He’s got six hardlight lenses embedded in his back,: Julius said.
:Feels like I’m in a fucking Star Trek episode. If you see Shatner beam in I get first pounce.:*

Unlike the last time Fritz gave no indication he’d overheard the jaguar, or perhaps he was just being a little more circumspect since they’d allowed him to use their bathroom to heal up.

A couple minutes later, Joe came back with a big bowl of popcorn, which he set on a coffee table in front of the sofa. “So what’ve you got for us, O Hep Cat?”

“I got...let’s see...Robert Lippert, Roger Corman, the incomparable Ed Wood Jr., Jack Arnold, Robert Wise, Bert I. Gordon,” Fritz said, the movie posters from each Director’s catalog appearing on the media wall. “The Fifties! My decade, daddy-o. Height of the beat generation. Kerouac, Ginsberg, all those cats.”

“Far out!” Joe said. “Any William Castle?”

Fritz chuckled. “The crazy man who wired up movie theater seats? Figures he’d be up your alley. Got him too. I’ve got everything from *Rocketship X-M* to *Plan Nine from Outer Space* to *Robot Monster* and *Them!*. That better be *cheesy* popcorn. But if it ain’t, I got more’n enough cheese.”

Joe grinned. “I love me some good film cheese. Let the badfeelm roll.”

By the time they were done laughing, riffing, and throwing popcorn at the screen, it was early morning hours. Fritz thanked them for a fun evening and let himself out. It wasn’t the last movie night they would spend with Fritz over the next couple of months, though he was pretty careful not to wear out his welcome. Joe frankly wondered more than once if he was going to find the MPs, MRS, or some alphabet-soup secret police he didn’t even know about on his doorstep by the end of one of them, but Fritz seemed to be good at covering his tracks when he needed to be.

While he didn’t want to talk shop most of the time, Fritz did drop little hints now and then that the war was going pretty well even outside of the morale-boosting propaganda that passed for news these days. But as time went on, Fritz seemed to be a

lot more stressed and a lot less willing to talk about it. Clearly the war was taking its toll.

October 21, 121 AL

After the fifth time being Zerged by Julius, Joe decided to call it a day for retro-gaming. StarCraft, Total Annihilation, the SimCity and Civilization series, were all great for passing the time, but didn't interest Joe as much as other types of twencen media. "Even when you slow yourself down you still beat the pants off me, Jules," Joe said.

"Can't help it if I have a mind built for military strategy," the jaguar mecha said. "Next time build more pylons."

The house comm started ringing in a pattern reserved for the Steader family. Joe sighed and turned on the hardlight projector before answering. "Hello, Harold. It's been a while."

The teenaged face that looked back at him had a rather equine cast to his features and Native American warpaint on half his face. "It's Horace now," he said.

"Because it sounds more like 'horse'?" Joe said, folding his arms. The kid had obviously been assigned his own bodyguard, but Harold being teenaged, a Steader, and Harold, he'd taken it a little too far—as usual.

"They're my spirit animal," he declared before deflating. "Annnnd you're not buying it, are you?"

"I know you too well, Harry. But the horsey ears and nose do look good on you. Say hello to your bodyguard from me and Julius," Joe said. "Did you call just to show off?"

Harold Steader's normally jovial expression turned serious. "No, not really. This isn't a social call. I thought you deserved to know, considering. Something's happened to Ophelia. Something *very* bad."

"I assume you mean something more than just being thrown in prison like she deserves?" Joe asked.

"Terribad," Harold said gravely. Looking closer, Joe could see he was actually quite pale under the war paint. "Keep watching the news. See you next Reunion, Joe." The horse-tagged teenager hung up.

"Dafuq is going on?" Julius asked. "I'm not seeing anything in the news yet."

"What about the RIDE grapevine?" Joe asked.

Julius scratched behind an ear. "There was an op scheduled at her house today... apparently house arrest wasn't cutting it and they were going to take her in. Nobody's heard anything since...which probably means the op went FUBAR enough the brass is actually leaning on the soldiers *and* RIDEs to keep quiet."

"Well, shit," Joe said. "Ophelia's no prize, but she's family. Or at least she was."

"From the feeling I'm getting, that might be past-tense in more than one sense," Julius said.

"I wonder if I should call Latty and ask if he knows what's up," Joe mused.

"Well, that depends. You really need to know all urgent-like, or just curious?" Julius said. "If it's just curious, I'm sure it'll be on the news soon enough, like 'Horace' said."

"Yeah, I guess that's true," Joe said. "No sense blowing a favor on something like that. Especially when it's Ophelia we're talking about."

"Hey, cats, where's it at?" Fritz opened the door without knocking, as he usually

did, and staggered in. He looked exhausted, and more than that his fur was matted with dried human blood up to his elbows.

Joe stared. "Holy cow, what happened to you?"

"What, this?" Fritz glanced down at his arms like he hadn't seen them before. "Oh. Don't blow your jets, pops. Just had to do a little field-expedient surgery. Sec." He sauntered upstairs, whereupon they heard the water running from the bathroom.

Joe and Julius exchanged looks. It was an unwritten rule that they never asked Fritz for more details about his field ops than he wanted to give. They didn't want to annoy him, or learn more about military secrets than they needed to. It was tempting, however, to make an exception this time.

"Out! Outta my damn spots!" Fritz muttered as he rinsed the blood off. "Whew. Sorry 'bout bringing work home with me like that." He came back in and plopped down on the couch. "You would not *believe* the day I've had. Tough toenails all the way, man."

"Uh, yeah," Joe said. "You okay?"

"Yeah. But maybe you're not gonna be. Ophelia...she was a damned traitor and all, but I know she was still your cousin. And I'm afraid she's..." He drew his finger across his throat and made the same "pffft" noise he had when he'd mentioned James Dean. "The op went bad from the start. Team was still using Schnooks and Tomatos that had been made in *her frickin' factory*. Maybe if we'd had more RIDEs...but they were mostly sent to the front lines. There were casualties. Like I guess you sorta figured." He gestured at one damp arm with the other. "I can't make free with any more details, but at least Ophelia's traitoring days are all past."

A tiny, shameful part of Joe was actually *glad* at that announcement. If it hadn't been for Ophelia and the Sturmhaven cousins beating the war drums there would have been no war to begin with. That part insisted that Ophelia had finally gotten what she deserved. But the rest of him wanted to throw up.

Fritz patted him on the shoulder. "Hey, man, I'm sorry. It's this damn war. It just *sucks*. I know how it is to lose family. The RIDEs I was built with, they're like my sibs, and when one a' them gets kacked..." He sighed. "Like *also* happened tonight. So yeah. We're both out relatives tonight, man."

"Yeah, what a crazy fucking scene," Julius said. "Guess she should have gotten to a nunnery while she had the chance."

"But I'm gonna *end* this war," Fritz said, smacking a fist into his palm determinedly. "One way or another. Just you watch. The Sturmies ain't got no secrets from me, brothers! Eventually the final fury will come, and we'll snuff those bitches out!" He balled his right hand into a fist, raised it, and the air around it started crackling with energy. "Oh, yeah!"

"So, uh...how about a movie?" Joe stammered. Anything to change the mood, *anything*.

The crackling energy stopped, Fritz's ears perking. "I got just the thing, cats. How about...that classic, *Gojira!* Decoded a whole mess of Toho stuff and something called *Pacific Rim*, too. Giant monsters *and* giant robots. It's the cat's meow."

"Sounds good," Joe said. "I'll get the popcorn." He tried not to notice the way his hands were trembling as he worked the food fabber.

For the first time since he'd started coming, Fritz didn't stay for a whole movie. He started getting more and more antsy as the film progressed, and finally about halfway through he got up. "Sorry, cats, but this just isn't grooving for me tonight, and I

don't think it is for you either. I gotta split, spend some time alone, think things out. Enjoy the flicks." He faded away, and a moment later the door opened and closed.

Joe and Julius sat looking at each other for a moment. "Well," Julius said, "*that* was fuckin' awkward."

"No doubt," Joe agreed. He stopped the movie and sank back on the couch. "Poor Ophelia. She sure got more than she bargained for when she started this thing."

"Yeah. But honestly, I'm more worried about *you*," Julius said. "What if someone thinks it's a good idea to start bumping off Steaders in general?"

Joe grinned weakly. "Well, that's why I've got you around, bodyguard mine."

"Oh, sure," Julius said. "No *pressure* or anything..."

The afternoon of the next day, Joe was surprised when a note hit his inbox asking him to come by General Latimer's office right away. It carried the highest priority encoding it was possible to have and not be a take-shelter-immediately emergency warning. Joe glanced at Julius. "I feel like I've just been ordered to report to the principal's office."

"Maybe he just wants to give you the official word about Ophelia personally before it hits the press?" Julius suggested.

"Yeah, maybe," Joe said. "I can't help thinking 'Ding dong the witch is dead' wouldn't need such a high priority marking, though."

"Well, let's go get our knuckles rapped or whatever," Julius said. "C'mon."

The mood in Latimer's office was more sober than Joe had ever seen it, and given that Latimer was exactly the kind of stick-up-his-butt by-the-books officer who was most likely to be promoted in Nextus's bureaucracy, that was saying something. In addition to Latimer, two other people were in the office. Joe had never met them, but he knew them from their pictures. The dark-haired young Asiatic Indian woman could only be Dr. Avilia Patil, and her fairer-skinned-and-haired companion was Dr. Roderick Clemens, the two scientists who could most readily be called the inventors of the RIDE.

"Uh, what's going on, General?" Joe asked, sitting down. "Is this about my cousin Ophelia?"

"I see you've already heard the scuttlebutt, then," General Latimer said. "Yes, it is...in part. But first, you should listen to what Drs. Patil and Clemens have to say." He nodded to them.

"Hello, Dr. Patil, Dr. Clemens," Joe said. "Privileged to meet you."

"And we, you," Dr. Patil said. "We certainly appreciate all that you have done for our program...and for your friend. Julius wears his pelt well. I hope someday *all* RIDES might have one like it."

"Uh...wow, thanks, Ma..er...Doc," Julius said. Joe got the distinct impression he would be blushing if he could.

"I only wish we could be meeting under better circumstances," Dr. Clemens said. "Unfortunately, we're not."

"That sounds ominous," Joe said.

Dr. Patil nodded, gazing levelly at him. "It concerns Fritz."

Joe licked his suddenly dry lips. From their expressions, he got the feeling it would be pointless to try to pretend ignorance, so he just said, "What about him?"

"We know he's been visiting you from time to time," Dr. Clemens said. "You've been watching movies together."

Joe raised an eyebrow. “You’ve been spying on me?”

“We’ve been spying on *Fritz*,” General Latimer said. “He’s one of our top-secret weapons of the war. We do have a *slight* interest in his activities.”

“We had decided to keep our distance, not to make a great deal of it,” Dr. Patil said. “He has so few real friends, and he seemed to be enjoying himself. We had hoped the chance to relieve stress in that way might make him less...erratic.”

“That doesn’t exactly seem to have worked out all that well, does it?” Latimer said dryly, tapping a closed paper folder on his desk.

“It would seem not,” Dr. Clemens agreed. “The problem is, Mr. Steader, that Fritz has a bit of a hero complex. He always *has* to save the day...at any cost. Up to and including letting the situation...deteriorate before he comes to the rescue.”

“He leaves soldiers hanging out to dry...and *die*...so he can look better,” General Latimer said. “We’ve been trying damn near everything in our power to control him. It hasn’t been working. Frankly, if we had any alternative we would have brigged him long ago, but nobody else in this whole polity—or as far as we know, the entire *world*—can do what he can.”

Joe was taken aback. “That doesn’t sound like the Fritz we know.”

“Oh, he can be a real charmer when he wants to be,” Dr. Patil said. “And for all we know, he honestly *means* well. There were some extenuating factors involved in his creation...”

General Latimer cleared his throat. “Need-to-know, Dr. Patil.”

The Indian scientist wilted. “Ah. Yes, as you say.”

“Get right down to it, Fritz is a loose cannon. A dangerous one,” Latimer continued. “And he seems to be getting worse and worse.”

Joe felt his heart sinking. “This is about the mission he was on yesterday, isn’t it? To arrest Ophelia Steader?”

Latimer leaned over and gave the old-fashioned wastebasket next to his desk a shove, so it slid across and fetched up against Joe’s legs. Joe glanced down at it. “What’s this for?”

“You’ll see,” Latimer said darkly. “Have a look at how our team found your cousin Ophelia after Fritz was through with her.” He slid the folder to the edge of his desk.

With some trepidation, Joe reached out and took it, and flipped it open to look at the photos within. Julius leaned over his lap to peer at them, too. It took a moment for Joe even to recognize what he was seeing. The shapes just didn’t make any sense without context. Then Joe understood...and he understood why the wastebasket was there. He leaned over it and put his lunch into it.

Ophelia had been, not to put too fine a point on it, butchered. She’d been sliced open and gutted like a cow at a butcher shop, internal organs and cuts of...well, *meat* hung and neatly labeled. Joe retched again as he remembered how Fritz had come in with bloody arms. *It was her blood*, he realized. *He washed my cousin’s blood off his hands in my own bathroom sink*. He was going to have that sink ripped out and recycled as soon as he got home. And maybe the rest of the bathroom, too. *Oh, God, Ophelia. I’m so sorry.*

Just to twist the knife, Joe supposed, Latimer tapped out a command on his desktop terminal. Fritz’s voice played, with the sideband-compressed filter that indicated it was coming over a comlink. He giggled, then taunted, “‘Soft you now! The fair Ophelia!’ Soft and kinda squishy...and only ‘fair’ if you think all is in love and war.”

“I can’t sense him anywhere,” an unfamiliar voice said. “Major, there’s...”

“Absolutely nothing you meatbag squares can do. Just to show you I’m not a bad guy, I’m going to win this war for you meatbags. Then...I dunno. Maybe watch a movie or something. Well, that’s all, folks!” Fritz said cheerfully. The recording ended.

“After that, he apparently went to your place, but only stayed about an hour. He was gone before we could mobilize a retrieval squad,” Latimer said.

“So why are you showing me this?” Joe asked, his voice husky with an emotion somewhere between guilt and rage, more vomit and bile hovering in the back of his throat.

“If he comes to your penthouse again, or makes any sort of contact at all, *please* contact us right away,” Dr. Patil said. “We are the only ones equipped to deal with him. We do not want to hurt him...but in his state of mind, *he* could hurt innocent people.”

“We...we just watched cheesy movies,” Julius said weakly. “The worst he could find. It was *fun*. Sure, he was a little weird...but I didn’t think about it that hard. I mean...*fuck*. Uh, pardon my French.”

Dr. Patil sighed. “I understand. Fritz is...like a son to me. All RIDEs are, including you, but he was my...well, my second, counting Rattigan. And it hurts me to see what he is capable of.”

Dr. Clemens put a hand on her shoulder. “He’s not entirely to blame, but...we can’t go into that. As the General says, need to know. Right now, we just want to make sure he hurts as few other people as possible. Including himself.”

“I’ve seen and heard *enough*,” Joe said, holding down his gorge. He wanted to leave this office, the city, the *planet*. Put as much distance between himself and the horror he’d just seen. Run off and join the circus with Mikel. He longed to hear his brother’s voice.

:It’s gonna be okay, Joe,: Julius sent through their private comm band. *:Stay with me here. We’ll get through this.:*

:Jules, you’re as much my brother as Mikey,: Joe replied, sliding out of his chair and kneeling to hug the jaguar tightly. *:Holy shit...holy shit...:*

General Latimer got up and walked over to the small bar against the back wall of his office, and came back with a double shot of Scotch. “Here. Pull yourself together, man.”

“With all due respect, General, *shut the hell up*,” Dr. Clemens said, standing up to look Latimer in the eye. “It was completely *unnecessary* to bring him in here and show him this horror, *sir*. I swear, I don’t know who’s the worse sociopath here, you or Fritz!”

Joe wordlessly reached out, took the glass, and downed it in one gulp.

“I wouldn’t have had to if your division had done your jobs properly,” Latimer said. “But that’s neither here nor there. What matters now is getting this monster under control.”

“You’ve got our word, General,” Julius said. “If we hear from him, we’ll let you know right away.” Joe nodded mute agreement, then the duo Fused up. *:Take it easy, Joe. I’ve gotcha.:*

:Thanks, buddy,: Joe sent back, not trusting himself to speak.

“If there’s nothing more, General?” Julius said...in Joe’s voice.

Looking a trifle nonplussed by seeing a fully-combat-armed Fuser appear in his office, General Latimer stammered, “Ah...no, that will be all. Let us know if—”

“We will,” Julius-as-Joe said. “Good afternoon, General. Dr. Patil, Dr. Clemens...”

it was good to meet you. Goodbye.” He lifted off the ground and hovered back out the office door without waiting for an answer.

:*I didn't know you could do that*,: Joe said.

:*Comes in handy sometimes*,: Julius said.

:*Think I could have you start taking all my comm calls?*: Joe asked, trying for a light tone.

Julius chuckled. :*Why do you think you've been getting a lot fewer annoying ones lately?*:

They got back out of the office building and Julius converted to skimmer form without stopping, shooting into the air to join the skimmer lane. He left the hardlight helmet off this time, a gesture Joe appreciated as he rubbed the tears away from his eyes. “Argh! You were right the first time we met him. He’s an asshat. A dangerous, *psychotic* asshat, and I never should have trusted him.”

“That’s not the kind of ‘right’ I like being, bro,” Julius said from the panel.

“I should just delete all the stuff he decrypted,” Joe grouched. “I don’t want any favors from him.”

“No...no, you shouldn’t,” Julius said after a moment. “You’d just end up having someone else crack it again. It’s not like it’d do anything except make more work. You’d end up with the exact same crap in the end, so why waste the effort?”

“Maybe I should just delete all of it.” Joe sighed. “Send it all off to Mikel, let him deal with it.”

“That’s not the Joe I know talking,” Julius said. “Shit, man. As long as I’ve known you—for a couple decades *longer* than I’ve known you—this twencen crap has been your *life*. Don’t let one asshat ruin it for you. Anyway, you’ve still got a planet full of people you need to sell on it.”

“I guess you’re right,” Joe said.

“Of course I’m right. I’m *always* right. That’s why you like me so much,” Julius said. “Anyway...just because he turned out to be a total nutbar who killed your cousin—who you weren’t all that close to anyway...” He sighed. “We *did* still have fun, and I *do* still remember those movie nights fondly. I probably always will. It’s so hard to believe it’s the same guy.”

“He actually *could* win this war for us,” Joe mused. “He’s like when the Allies broke Japanese and German ciphers during the Second World War. The Sturmites can’t do anything without us knowing about it.”

“Sideband chatter’s been telling me they’re reduced to using physical couriers—shaped like fucking homing pigeons an’ shit,” Julius said. “I don’t know how much longer the War’s gonna last at this rate. Last few battles for the Sturmites have been defensive.”

“But what happens when it’s all over?” Joe mused. “What happens when F—when *he* can’t be a hero anymore?”

“One way or another, bro, we’re going to find out,” Julius said.

In deference to Julius’s suggestion, Joe didn’t delete the files Fritz had decrypted for him. But it was a long time before he was able to take any pleasure in watching them or any other twentieth-century media. (Which did at least have the benefit of giving Julius plenty of time to build up a backlog of cracked-but-unwatched stuff.)

Julius had the entire wing of the penthouse they’d watched movies together torn

out and rebuilt to a completely different plan. Joe considered going with a 1970s look, but Julius complained that all the decorating schemes Joe proposed hurt his eyes. In the end, Joe decided to go with an art deco look, reminiscent of the '30s and '40s. Everything was brass and chrome and sweeping curves—optimism given form and function. Instead of a flat-panel LED, the media wall displayed the image of one of those old TVs with the tiny little round screen, or a phonograph or radio with no screen at all—except when they were watching movies, of course, when it would display them across the whole wall the same as usual.

Joe's spirits were buoyed a few months later when he received a data chip from Mikel and Isabella at the Star Circus. It contained a few more bits of old media that Mikel had either cracked or sniffed out on the planets where they'd stopped, a bunch of stills and videos of the circus and its acts, and a sketchy letter or two talking about how things had gone so far. The ships and new equipment Mikel had bankrolled were all holding up wonderfully, and they were getting some of the best crowd turnouts they could ever remember having. If all went according to the current schedule, it now looked like they would be arriving at Zharus sometime in late 123 or early 124. Of course, the circus being what it was, that was a pretty big "if".

Of course, it wasn't all good news. When they got to Zheng He, they found a year or so worth of news of the Nextus-Sturmhaven War waiting for them, courtesy of the local news feeds the starliners always carried and exchanged from place to place as they traveled. The details were sketchy, of course—Nextus and Sturmhaven's news was bland propaganda, carefully tailored not to tell the enemy anything useful (and, hence, not really useful to anyone else either), and none of the other polities' journalists were able to get a good inside look at things. Which just made them more curious—not to mention annoyed that Joe hadn't bothered to tell them about it.

Joe grumbled. "What was I *supposed* to tell them? If I *did* try to say anything about the war, it would probably get censored."

"So write back and tell 'em it's not as bad as the news makes it look, you didn't want 'em worrying about you, and you'll fill them in when they get here," Julius said. "Like you said, anything else would probably get censored. And it's not like they can do anything until they *do* get here."

Joe sighed. "I wish I could stuff *us* in an envelope and mail it back to them. I'm so sick of all this. If it weren't that they won't let *you* off-planet, we'd be off like a shot."

"I hear you, buddy," Julius said. "I won't say I'd mind seeing the sights of other star systems someday myself. But right now, we got this fuckin' war to win, so let's just do all we can to get it over with before your brother gets here."

And the war went on. And on, and on, and on. The hasty programs to build more RIDE factories began to bear fruit, and RIDEs flooded out of them and into the battlefields—and extra stock flooded into warehouses. RIDE shells were only expected to be a little more durable against Q-dust than the old AIDEs. It came as a pretty big surprise that they were almost entirely proof against it.

"See, we're gonna have a RIDE *surplus* after the war," Joe said. "And then everybody's gonna get one of you."

"Good thing there's more than enough of me to go around," Julius purred.

Joe leaned against the jaguar's side and stroked the side of his head. "Damned straight, Jules. You're even catching on in Laurasia...though not *quite* in the same form."

There was little need for a set of Q-proof powered armor on the more populated supercontinent, so instead RIDEs were more or less the same size as the animals they were based on, like the first RI Rattigan. AI animals had enjoyed a lot of popularity as pets there for decades, so naturally enough having a pet housecat, a dog, or even a horse who could actually talk back was the next step. Laurasian RIDEs were personal assistants, or out-and-out friends of their owners. Some could even plug into vehicles and run them that way rather than being the vehicles themselves.

“Eh. I’d never give up my Fuse or skimmer modes for one of those cut-rate single-mode frames,” Julius said. “Those chumps don’t know what they’re missing.”

Despite General Latimer’s hopes, Fritz never showed up at the penthouse or even tried to contact Joe or Julius again. Joe did have Dr. Patil and Dr. Clemens over a few times. Although there were areas they couldn’t discuss (such as what had ever become of Fritz), they enjoyed talking about the parts of the RIDE program that had become public knowledge. Every time they visited Julius would basically turn into a huge kitten and curl around Dr. Patil wherever she sat down.

In this way, the remaining year and a half of the war passed without major incident, up to the very end. Then, in the middle of the buildup to Operation Final Fury, the last big push that should have broken Sturmhaven’s defenses and conquered the polity for good, the Nextus establishment was shaken by the arrival of a Sturmhaven diplomatic delegation under a white flag. An immediate ceasefire was declared. Hours later, the Nextus Chief Administrator appeared on world-wide broadcast to announce Sturmhaven had requested to surrender.

The War was over.

March 14, 123 AL

“So, who’d have think that your twencen crap would have come in so handy?” Julius asked rhetorically as he flew Joe down from the penthouse to where the armistice ceremony would be held in Admin Plaza.

“I’m just glad they all listened to me,” Joe said. “After all, I’m just some rich nobody. Not even in the planet’s top ten anymore.”

“Until you cash in all those war bonds you bought,” Julius said. “And then there’s all your investments in the new civilian RIDEworks that are gonna make you richer than ever.”

Joe shrugged. “It’s only money. Anyway, it’s not important. What is important is that for *once* people were willing to learn from the lessons of history.”

Part of it was that everyone was still recoiling in shock and horror from the war they’d just fought—the very first in over a century of colonization of their planet. Nobody wanted another one, and they were willing to do pretty much whatever it took to make that less likely. So when Joe pointed out how the harsh terms the Allies had imposed on Germany at the end of World War I had led to a festering resentment that ended up erupting into World War II, they were only too willing to keep reparation requirements light. (It had helped that he was able to back his point with an hour-long multimedia presentation tracing the history of the affair in no uncertain terms.)

Effectively, both countries were returning to the status quo from before the war and trying to forget the last nine years ever happened. Thanks to a bit of negotiation by Nextus with the rest of the world, Sturmhaven was even getting most of the diplomatic

and trade sanctions that had been in place since before the war lifted—because the economic pressure of those sanctions had been a very real part of the reason the polity had felt the need to lash out in the first place.

Sturmhaven was also holding new elections, and word from Nextus election observers there was that the hardliner Valkyrie party was starting to lose seats in favor of more moderate groups on the basis of having lost the war. There was already talk of repealing some of the most restrictive of the “Male Transgression” laws that kept men in their “proper place.”

Sturmhaven was still going to have to pay reparations, but Nextus had agreed to stretch them out over the next twenty years to give the polity time to recover. Joe privately suspected that *both* sides were so relieved not to be fighting anymore that they would have agreed to whatever terms were necessary to make sure it stayed stopped.

The armistice ceremony today was going to be the capstone to all that hard work. With that out of the way, everyone would *finally* be able to relax.

“So what do you think about moving to Uplift for a while? Or maybe Aloha? Or anywhere else you like, as long as it’s somewhere that *isn’t* here?” Joe asked. “If I don’t have a place there now, it’ll only take me a few minutes to buy one.”

“Why not both?” Julius suggested. “Things are happening in Uplift these days, and Aloha’s always good for a party. War is the only thing I’ve known my entire life, so I feel like a fuckin’ *party*.”

“Hell, we could live somewhere different every day of the month if you want. Maybe take a swing all the way to Xolotlan in the Oort.” Joe grinned. “I think I’ve almost got enough places for that.”

“Let’s not get *too* carried away,” Julius said. “You know, they could still take me away from you if they wanted. Fuckin’ reassign me since the War’s over.”

“They’re letting any soldier who can pay the vig keep their RIDE when they muster out,” Joe said. “I hardly think they’d let them do that and not let us do the same. Especially with all the civvie RIDEworks factories opening up. Seen the dedicated mining RIDE designs Kamen RIDEworks in Uplift is putting out?”

“Elephants, rhinos, moles,” Julius said. “Those tags are gonna be interesting on humans.”

“Yeah,” Joe said. “I’m still a little surprised there’s enough demand for avians and lizards that they’re doing civvie variations on them.”

“They have made some progress on the tags,” Julius said. “At least the bird-people can speak for themselves now.”

What neither of them spoke of was the distinct lack of any discussion over the legal status of RIDEs in general, from anyone. It was enough to depress the duo. The War still weighed heavily on the consciousness of every Gondwana resident, so much that it pushed away equally important matters like having a whole new kind of people in their midst. But Joe figured that if they gave it a few months for everyone to catch their breath, it might be a good time to start nudging at things. He was going to make a few remarks in that vein in his speech today, now that they were finally letting him give one.

Admin Plaza was thronging with people as they drifted down the area of the sky marked off as the exit ramp. Luckily, he didn’t have to worry about finding a place to park. Joe chuckled. “Funny how you RIDEs make everything better.”

“We’re just fuckin’ cool that way!” Julius said.

They landed on the pad reserved for celebrities and important people, Joe

dismounting at the same time as Julius converted to walker form in one practiced motion. They walked off the landing pad and into the reception area. “I see Latty’s not wasting any time pressing the flesh,” Joe said. The general was resplendent in full dress uniform covered with all the ribbons and medals he’d amassed over his career, most of them on Earth. He was speaking with a couple of political types in fancy suits. “I think he sees First Tier in his very near future.”

“What a fuckin’ dickweed,” Julius muttered, pausing for a moment to quickly groom the back of his forepaws. “How do I look, bro?”

Joe grinned. “Purrrfect, like you always do.” Julius actually wasn’t the only RIDE around with hardlight by now. Since he’d had it for so long without any untoward consequences, the brass had loosened up a little about adding it on request. A number of soldiers and ex-soldiers had taken advantage of that. There was one particularly magnificent whitetail stag following around his partner, who had stubby antlers of his own to go along with the ears and nose. *:Must be a double-zero-one,:* he sent.

:Looks like Bambi’s dad,: Julius said. *:And delicious.:*

:I’ll never get you RIDEs and your Nature Range,: Joe said. Julius had explained it to him, and he supposed it made a sort of sense, but the idea of having a VR where you went specifically to kill and eat or be killed and eaten still struck him as a little weird. He and Julius moved among the crowd, greeting people they knew and shaking hands.

As the time approached for the ceremony, those of them who were to be a part of it drifted in the direction of the stage. Joe’s comm beeped and he checked the message. “Change in schedule. They want me to speak first. All right, I can deal with that. Guess they want me to warm up the crowd for them. Maybe I should tell them about how I taught Clint Brubeck to play golf.”

“Wasn’t *he* the one who taught *you*?” Julius asked.

Joe chuckled. “Hush, never let the facts get in the way of a good story.”

Joe climbed up the steps onto the stage, Julius padding along at his side. He would always remember those last few moments. He would relive them over and over, every night, for years to come. He walked up onto the stage, shielding his eyes against the sun. The stage had been set up to face the Admin Building and its smaller satellites. When he relived the day, he always thought he could see a little black speck up at the top of the building on the left. He’d lived it over so many times he couldn’t be certain if it had really been there or just something his mind had invented after the fact.

What he did know was that, as he stepped up to the podium, suddenly he found himself falling sideways, impelled by a push from two great jaguar paws. A moment later there was a sound he would never forget—a cross between a meaty thud and a metallic clang that seemed to echo through the plaza. Then Julius fell to the stage beside him, sparks and smoke coming from his metallic head.

A moment later, Fritz was there. From his prone stance on the ground, Joe saw the lynx yowl, “Noooo!” and raise his arm. The bright flash blinded him for several seconds, and when he could see again, a chunk of the roof of one of the Admin satellite buildings was missing, smoke rising from the hole.

Then, nothing but panic and chaos around him.

Joe propped himself up on one elbow. “J...Julius?” He turned to look at the jaguar. “No...” A chunk was missing from Julius’s head to match the one taken out of the building. Sparks and smoke flickered around it, and within he could see the glowing

blue orb of Julius's graphene-doped-qubitite RI core. It seemed to be...flickering.

"Joe...shit," Julius said, his vocoder stuttering. "Looks like I'm not gonna be able to finish that James Bond movie I was cracking for you."

His hardlight pelt flickered and shut down. Joe was dimly conscious of Fritz kneeling at his other side. "What do you—"

"Shut up for once and listen, Joe," Julius said. "My diagnostics show...I've taken some core damage. I think it's bad. I've only got a minute or so before I shut down...and I don't know if they can start me back up again. Sorry about this...think I've just gone and ruined your life."

"Julius, *no!*" Joe insisted. "You *saved* my life! They can fix this—they *have* to!"

"*Listen,*" Julius insisted. "If they can't...I know you. You're gonna piss and moan and go all Howard Hughes in your penthouse and stop dealing. Don't do that. Don't give up on your dream...because of me. You got some...great shit we found. You...need to get that out in the world. Get some RIDES, the Q-frames, whatever...crack the rest. Do it for me." His optics turned to point at Fritz. "You...help him with that."

"You're...you're damned right I will," Fritz said. "I swear it."

Julius turned back to look at Joe. "My mind is going, Dave. I can feel it."

"*Julius...*" Joe said, caught somewhere between laughing and crying.

"Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do..." Julius sang. Then the light in his optics flickered out, and so did his core.

"Shit!" Fritz swore. "Shit, shit, *shit*. No! This wasn't *supposed* to happen!" He reached down and did something, and the top of Julius's skull fell off. Fritz raised his hand, and the core followed, hovering a couple of centimeters away in a lifter field in the lynx's palm. He looked over his shoulder and yelled, "*Mom!*"

And then Dr. Patil was there, kneeling next to Fritz and peering at the core through a loupe she'd pulled from her pocket. "Oh, this is not good," she said. The military had thrown up a shield dome around them to protect them from further harm and prying eyes.

"It was a sniper," Fritz said. "Think he had one of those gauss anti-materiel rifles. If it hadn't been for that pelt it woulda just...shattered."

"As it is, it appears a fragment of the armor casing spalled off and struck it," Dr. Patil said. "There is a hairline crack...it appears to go all the way into the deep core."

"It does," Fritz said unhappily, eyes shimmering with scanning.

Dr. Patil shook her head. "We cannot reboot him. Not with that kind of damage. Joe, I'm so, so sorry..."

Joe stared at her. "What...you don't mean he's...Julius is..."

The tears trickling down her face confirmed it. "I do not know of any way to save a RI with this type of damage." She reached out and plucked the core out of the lifter field, then placed it in Joe's hand and closed his fingers around it. "He would have wanted you to have this. Keep it...and remember him."

Joe never knew how he got back home after that. Probably someone drove him. Maybe it was even Fritz. He was dimly aware that, once it became clear the only damage had been the loss of one RIDE, they hadn't even felt it was worth holding up the ceremony. The assassin had been completely vaporized by Fritz's huge horking cannon blast, so there was no trace left to throw blame on anyone. It could have been Sturmhaven, but it could also have been some random nut. Even in his funk, Joe

remembered that Abraham Lincoln's assassin John Wilkes Booth had been a zealot, not an official Confederate agent. There were never any follow-up attacks, so the peace went off without any further hitch.

Joe spent his first few days in denial, believing—really *believing*—that it was all some bizarre hallucination or practical joke and Julius was just going to pad into the room and say, “Hey, man, I *really* had you fuckin’ going there, didn’t I?” But gradually it began to sink in.

General Latimer had wanted to give him another RIDE to carry on Julius’s bodyguard duty, but Joe flatly turned him down. “War’s over,” he said. “Don’t need another one. I’m good.” After thinking about it long and hard, he went ahead and got the tags docked. He had plenty of reminders already; he didn’t need another one every time he looked in the mirror. His new-old ears felt funny, and he was always shifting his position in chairs to account for the tail he no longer had, but it was a small thing to get used to, considering.

The next few months passed in an alcoholic haze, until one day Joe got up, looked at his scruffy self in the mirror, and realized it just wasn’t helping anything. He could almost hear Julius chiding him. “C’mon, buddy, you don’t want to be a total wreck when your brother gets back, do you? Put the fuckin’ booze away and get on with your life.”

Finally, Joe got a small rosewood box, and put a crushed velvet lining in it with a couple of indentations of just the right size. In one, he carefully nestled Julius’s core. In the other, he put the Silver Medal of Bravery. “There you go, buddy,” he whispered through a choked-up throat. “*You* earned this, not me. So why don’t you just hang onto it for me.”

He carried the box with him always. He kept it on his desk when he worked, spoke to it from time to time, and often put it under his pillow when he slept. Mindful of Julius’s last words, he worked really hard not to become the crazy recluse, the Zharusian Howard Hughes, that Julius had feared he might. And he moved forward with the plans they had made to turn Steader Entertainment into a RIDE-powered pop culture machine.

He hired a number of RIDEs—some solo units, some with human partners—to work on cracking the files, and was able to lease time on several Q mainframes that were no longer needed once the RIDE development program outgrew them. Between the RIDEs and the ‘frames, they were able to chew through the archives almost as fast as Fritz had, including all the non-media files that they’d mostly left alone before. They were still going to need a lot of help sorting it, but first things first.

Time, and work, didn’t necessarily *heal* all wounds, but they formed scar tissue. Gradually, Joe came to terms with being alone again. He still made sure to have the box with him wherever he was staying, but he kept it in a closet or a drawer most of the time, only taking it out and talking to it on special occasions. Life went on. *For some of us, anyway.*

EPILOGUE

May 1, 125 AL

Hey, buddy. Happy May Day. Mayday, mayday, Houston we have a problem...

Yeah, it's me again. I know I haven't flipped the lid on this ol' box in a while, but I've been busy. The circus has been in town. They just now finished up their Zharus tour and left, so here I am. I was spending time with my brother, Mikel. Wish you could have met him. You'd have liked him. He'd have liked you. He really got a kick out of all that stuff you and Fritz cracked. So did the rest of the circus.

Oh God, he had so many stories to tell. I'm still trying to digest them. He's changed, too. Travel will do that to a man, but he's still my little brother, no matter what. Just like I'm still his big brother, and always will be.

I was tempted, *really* tempted to go with him this time. Get away from it all, lose myself in the circus life among the stars. But a couple of things held me back. One is, I'd have had a hell of a time getting them to let me take you with me. Not the biggest obstacle, I know. I was even able to wangle permission for them to take some RIDEs. How about that, buddy? Maybe if that crap hadn't happened, you and me could've...

Well, no. Because the other thing's more important.

Earth is...up to something. They're being assholes—more so than usual. Working behind the scenes on Proxima and Centauri, pulling strings...putting down wildcat colonies and anyone else who might challenge their right to rule. Building up their military to the point where even the "official" colonies are starting to get worried. And the word's starting to leak about how awesome you guys are. So we gotta do something about that.

We talked about all the ways we could try to help Zharus deal with this crisis. Going for a fast military buildup to hold off an Earth invasion is right out. You guys aren't even integrated with all of our society yet, we just got over a major war, and trying that crap would just give everyone the wrong idea. Might even get Earth out here *faster*.

But then Isabella—she's the ringmistress of the circus, you'd like her too—had a crazy idea. I think Mikel's Steaderness has been rubbing off on her. Did you know they're engaged? But anyway, she reminded us of the old saying, "If you can't dazzle 'em with brilliance, baffle 'em with bullshit." It's the circus way, *and* it's the Steader way. So what we're gonna do is try to turn Zharus so twencen crazy so fast that Earth thinks we're all completely nuts. If we're nuts, what do we possibly have that they could want?

And since I carried through on that promise I made you, we're actually in a good position to start right away. How do you like that? We're gonna be a whole *planet* of crazy Steaders. And it's all thanks to you...

But if we're going to do that, I can't go gallivanting around the colonies. I've got to stay here and see the project through.

Anyway, that's all for now. Cheers! I'll come see you again soon.

January 1, 128 AL

Hey buddy. Happy New Year! Or Nude Deer. Or whatever.

Saw Fritz for the first time in years last night. I wasn't exactly thrilled. Had a lot of time to think about what he said that day. Remember? "This wasn't supposed to happen"? And given what Latty said about his little habit of creating emergencies and coming in to the rescue...yeah. I'd have wrung his scrawny little neck if there was any way I could. I'd at least have called Administrator Latty, but he jammed all my comms.

Just as well he did, too, I guess. Fritz actually wants to *help* us. I guess he feels guilty, for a wonder. And he's taking that promise he made you seriously. God help us,

there are *others* like him in the world now. He wasn't real clear on how that happened—I get the feeling he doesn't exactly know himself. But they're all just as badass code crackers and data divers as he is, but—and this is the important part—they're *not all asshats*. So he's going to be sending a few of them our way, to help with sorting through the stuff and digging out the odd bits of things that are hidden away in odd nooks. Or Kindles. That's a twenty-first-century joke, ha ha. Get it? Yeah, I think you'd have gotten it.

And the other part of our plan's starting to work, too. RIDEs are starting to watch all that crap—it's not like they have much else to do when their partners are doing other stuff—and starting to get hooked. The Integrates are doing their part, too—finding the best stuff, *and* finding odd bits of trivia and things we can use to help push it.

They're providing *context* for all this history, because a lot of these things just don't make sense otherwise, you know? It's like that Barenaked Ladies song we puzzled over, or that one by Billy Joel—"We Didn't Start the Fire." Or that Paul Simon thing about getting "McNamara'd into submission." I wonder, did every decade back then have those "gallon of milk" kind of songs that didn't mean anything at all past their use-by date? Interesting theory, I should have the Inties look into it...

And...I've finally started getting back into tinkering. I rebuilt the old Mach 5. I finally built that Pan-Am Starliner, too. Put your name on the plane's dedication plate as a keel plate owner, then went into my room and bawled for the rest of the day. But I've been looking at designs from other stuff, too. Lifters and hardlight aeroshells have been getting better and better, the last couple decades, so we can actually make skimmer and flier designs based on the most un-aerodynamic crap. It's starting to catch on, too. The other day I actually saw someone tooling along in a George Jetson bubble-car. *No* idea where he got it from. There are also some anime mecha designs that would make great IDEs. With all this new sarium tech, I think we could actually pull it off. Of course, they might not actually be any good in combat, but they could at least *look* cool.

There's talk of a googie-style coffee shop being built downtown. Googie! I *love* that word. Googie, googie, googie.

Anyway, I'm gonna go finish this champagne and lie down now. Sweet dreams, pal.

July 8, 143 AL

Hey buddy. Sorry to wake you, but there's...well. You should see all the shit I've been building lately.

Our Intie data divers have unlocked a trove of anime the past three years or so you wouldn't believe. It's called *Super Dimensional Fortress Macross*, and it spawned a few decades worth of incredible shit. Detailed mechanical designs sure made the mecha easier to build. Look at these! Just look at them!

I built a transforming hovertank that turned out useful. Had a little help souping up all the systems with some stuff Mikey gave me from his tours around the galaxy. Came back with his own techno-trove after all that travel, and he's been helping me stay one step ahead of the new Integrates that are popping up everywhere. Eridanite cyber-tech, Keplerian weaponry, NeoRusian data crystals, that sort of thing. Bad. Ass.

There's another series I'd really love to watch. We even ran across some hints about it back when you were alive, remember? Called *Firefly*. Joss Whedon doing a

space western, starring the guy from *Doctor Horrible*. The one from *Castle*, not the one from *Doogie Howser*. But there's some kerfuffle going on in Intie political circles right now, and for whatever reason, some of them thought it would be fun to wipe it out of my system except for the copy this one of my data divers has, and frame him for stealing it so he has to go on the lam. Remember when I said they're not *all* asshats? Well, they're not all *not* asshats, either. We're working on it. He seems to be in good hands—a group of independent Intie shapeshifters took him in and are taking care of him. Someone 'took the sky from me,' but maybe I'll have it back before too long.

Let's see, family news. I don't think Mikey's ever really settled back into planetside life after the divorce from Bella. I feel for him. Believe me, I *know* what it's like losing your anchor in life. But then, you know all about that already. Anyway, after that, something happened...it's a long story exactly how, and sometimes I'm not entirely sure myself. I sort of got dragged into things, like Cary Grant in those old screwball comedies—remember the one with the leopard?—but to sum up, their daughter Quinoa ended up staying with me. She's thirteen now, and she's a real pistol.

And...y'know, I think she might be just what I needed. Someone to talk to... someone to watch old flicks with. I think I've watched more stuff since she came to live with me than I have since you were around. And enjoyed it more. I've even been able to go back and revisit the stuff Fritz gave us. The pain...well, it's not gone. It'll never be *gone*. But it's got something brighter to balance it out now.

What else, what else...oh, yeah. The plan's going well. It's been working better than Bella, Mikey, or I even thought possible, in fact. Zharus is a twencen theme park beyond our wildest dreams. Between that and the furry sex-change power armor suits, not just Earth but *every other colony* thinks we're nuts. (Well, except Wednesday, but then, we *did* save their ass, and we've always been closer to them than everyone else in more ways than just spatially.) As near as any of our informants have been able to make out, the Earth government thinks we're so nuts that they've actually been shipping *their own* dissidents and oddballs here. I almost feel like sending them a thank-you card.

As a side benefit, we've been getting a lot more tourism lately. The government might think we're nuts, but to ordinary folks that just makes us a 'Bohemia.' The 'allure of forbidden fruit' and all that. Seems like people are happy to come all the way out to the ass-end of nowhere if there's a *reason*. Even a *stupid* reason. Maybe *especially* a stupid reason.

Anyway...life goes on. What with the way sarium nanotech has improved our anti-agathics, it frankly goes on a lot longer than I was expecting. I'm an old man, buddy. By twencen standards I'd be a shriveled, senile old fossil—yeah, I hear your wisecrack now, "Whadaya mean *would* be?"—but I could *still* have another century left the way things are going. Or even more. Wish I was spending it with you.

I dunno. As close as we were, I wonder if we'd be Inties ourselves by now. I wonder what that's like? *Anyway*...I should get back to work on getting the *Macross* stuff ready for release.

Good talking with you, buddy. See you on the flip side.

Joseph Steader, This Is Your Life!

May 15, 157 A.L.

“Hello, anybody home?” Quinoa Steader called cheerfully into the garage bay.

“Hey, Quinoa!” Rhianna called back. “Where’ve you been? It’s been a few months, hasn’t it?”

“Been a little busy lately,” Quinoa said. “First there was the cleaning up after myself, then a little space tourism since I was up there anyway.”

“Do tell?” Rochelle said. She and Rhianna had a RIDE up on their cradle, as usual for the working garage. They were un-Fused at present, with Kaylee and Uncia lying comfortably nearby.

Quinoa came closer and peered at it. “Is that a tapir?”

“Yep, meet Tater,” Rhianna said. “In for his six-month check-over and hardlight tuneup.”

“You always have the weirdest RIDES,” Quinoa said. “Who’d even *want* a tapir?”

“Says the sphinx-girl,” Rochelle said.

“He was a Donizetti one-off,” Rhianna said. “Apparently made for someone who really *really* likes tapirs. I don’t judge, I just fix ‘em.”

“Oh, well, if he’s a Donizetti, that explains everything.” Quinoa chuckled. “My own Quorra was one of his.”

“So, you said you were cleaning up after yourself?” Rhianna said. “How’s that?”

“Not much to tell, really,” Quinoa said. “Back when Fritz and Uncle Joe locked me up that one time, in Uncle Joe’s mansion on the Aloha Elevator counterweight, I went through the window to get away, and it evacuated the house. Furniture, odds, and ends went everywhere, making a bit of an orbital navigation hazard. Zharus Orbital Tracking gave me until the end of this month to have all the debris cleaned up or they’d fine me. And Uncle Joe, the rat-fink, felt that getting it taken care of on my own would ‘teach me a valuable lesson.’ Never mind that he’s the one who locked me up there in the first place!” She rolled her eyes.

“Sounds like a herculean task,” Rhianna said.

“Oh, not really,” Quinoa said. “More *tedious* than anything else. ZOT had radar plots on everything that was still in orbit. Even back in the twentieth, Earth radar was able to track orbital debris as small as flecks of paint. So it was just a matter of going around and scooping it up.” She shrugged. “Took me a couple months, all in all. Outfitted myself with some Intie space paks from Camelot, plotted my orbital maneuvers, and basically spent most of the time in hibernation waiting for orbits to match up.”

“Wow,” Rochelle said. “You didn’t need a sub or anything?”

“Nope. I mainly used nets to scoop all the stuff up together, then towed them back to the mansion. It wasn’t too bad. I had a lot of time to think, and Zharus is really pretty from orbit. And I managed to rescue a few things with sentimental value, like Rosie, our old robot maid. All in all, a couple months well spent.”

“And I’m *sure* you’re not bringin’ this up jus’ to brag on how awesome Integrates

are, ‘cuz you’re *all over that* by now, right?” Kaylee put in.

“Oh, of *course!*” Quinoa said virtuously. She clasped her hands together and a little hardlight halo appeared over her head. “Well, okay, maybe a little bit,” she admitted, as the halo turned into devil horns before disappearing. “Anyway, after that, given that I was already out in space, and all kitted out with state-of-the-art deep space survival gear I’d barely even broken in, I caught a ride out-system with the *Clementine* to visit some of the deep space Enclaves—Halley, Shoemaker-Levy, Ikeya-Seki. We’d met some peeps from there on Zane’s training-montage cruise before the big dust-up at Domefall, but I hadn’t ever been all the way out to the rim before.”

“Sounds pretty interesting,” Rochelle said. “How did that go?”

“Pretty well. I’d never been, and they were happy to see us—me and the Clemmie crew were the only actual participants from the Integrate Civil War who’d gotten out that far yet. Spent a couple months touring and giving talks, doing a little diplomacy and stuff, then caught another lift on a space freighter back in while the *Clementine* stayed.” She glanced at Rhianna. “I gather I missed some excitement down here—like your whole *family* showing up out of the blue, Rhianna?”

“Not my *whole* family—there’s a bunch of cousins and more distant relations tucked away on a slow ship that’s still a few months out,” Rhianna said. “But parents, sibs, and grandmother, yeah.” Rhianna paused. “In fact, my grandmother kind of wanted to meet you. You free for the day?”

Quinoa blinked. “Sure, but...why would your grandmother want to meet *me*?”

“Well, she actually wants you to re-introduce her to your uncle,” Rhianna said. “She was assigned as Joe and Mikel’s babysitter when they were on Earth digging for treasure.”

Quinoa’s ankh-shaped DIN necklace flashed as she googled for information on Rhianna’s grandmother. “...really? Your grandma is Captain Thermopylae?”

Now it was Rhianna’s turn to blink. “Captain *what*?”

“Thermopylae. It means—”

“I *know* what it means,” Rhianna said. “Who called her that?”

“Er...well, I overheard my Dad and Uncle Joe talking about old times some, when I was younger. That seems to be their private nickname for her,” Quinoa said, blushing a little. “I gather they had quite a crush on her at the time.”

“Really.” Rhianna shook her head. “Well, I *guess* that shouldn’t be any more surprising than learning that she knew them at *all*...”

Rochelle giggled. “Was she aware of it, you think?”

Quinoa shrugged. “Not as far as *they* knew, but I gather they were your typical young guys at the time. She could have been anywhere from blissfully ignorant to secretly thinking it was cute. I guess we could ask her.”

Rhianna shook her head, grinning. “I draw the line at prying into Nana’s love life. But let me go ahead and give her a call.”

A few minutes later, a Harley-Davidson-inspired skimmer bike pulled into the bay, and Socah Gates climbed down. Her leather riding clothes blurred into a frilly, straight flapper dress out of the 1920s, with a wavy, bobbed haircut and close-fitting hat. The woman wearing them was far older than she looked and carried herself heavier than a person her size should, mostly because she was. The clothes, the pale complexion, were all hardlight projections over a fully cybernetic body, like a RIDE’s pelt.

Quinoa cocked her head for a moment, and her eyes widened. “Oh, wow! That’s a

full-body prosthesis from Earth, isn't it?"

"That it is, young woman. A North American Army officer's G.I. Jane Mark Eight, with a few Zharusian touches," Socah Gates said. "Take it you're Mikel's daughter I've heard so much about?"

Quinoa bobbed her head. "Oh...yes, ma'am. Sorry. I'm Quinoa Steader." She offered her hand.

Socah took it. "Colonel Socah Gates, 56th Heavy Mech Infantry, North American Army, retired. Pleased to meet you."

"And I'm *delighted* to meet you!" Quinoa said. "I've heard so much about you from my Dad and Uncle at one time or another, but never thought I'd ever run into you in person. And I *sure* had no idea you were related to Rhianna."

"Life's just full of surprises," Socah said. "I had no idea we'd find a *granddaughter* instead of a *grandson* when we got here. Or that another one would join her a couple of months later."

Quinoa blinked. "Really? Wow, I'm sorry I missed *that*."

"Ivy and her partner Cira are off touring Califia right now, or I'd introduce you," Rhianna said. "She might end up moving there. She has a talent for fixing skimmers, and that's where you find 'em."

"So how are your folks doing these days?" Socah asked. "I understand Mikel's still off-world?"

"Dad's on Proxima, trying to keep Earth's grubby paws off of them," Quinoa said. "He knows it's a losing battle, but figures any time he buys for them is also time bought for us, so..." She shrugged. "Uncle Joe's doing okay. 'Fine as frog hair,' he'd say...think that's an expression he picked up from Clint Brubeck."

"If I may ask, who's your mother?" Socah said.

"None other than Isabella Brunel, Grand Ringmistress of Brunel's Star Circus," Quinoa declared proudly. "Still going strong after so many years. Though she *might* retire once she hears about what's happened to me. Zharus is pretty much where the circusfolk end up when they finish their careers."

"Oh, ho! The Star Circus? I ran across them during my last gunboat diplomacy tour on Centauri thirty years or so ago. Spectacular!"

"That would have been during Dad's second tour with them," Quinoa said.

"I don't think I saw his name anywhere on the playbill, then," Socah said.

"He often used a stage name," Quinoa said. "And he was probably at a different big top than you saw. Most people don't realize just how big a show the Circus really is. They do the whole star system all at once, and it takes a repurposed colony ship to haul it from place to place."

"I take it your parents aren't together anymore?" Socah asked carefully. "Forgive me, I don't wish to bring up painful memories."

"My parents divorced when I was four, so I'm over it. Dad decided to raise me on Zharus and Mom agreed I needed a planetside childhood. I see her every time the Circus makes the round here. They're a bit late, but I think they should be back next year."

"Then you'll show her that colorful, feathery new self of yours," Socah said, grinning. "The iridescent red and green feathers are stunning."

Quinoa spread her wings. "I thought of maybe trying out for sideshow freak, but I don't think Joe would go for it," Quinoa deadpanned. "That's how they did the RIDE-tagged folks before, in the Zharus Zoo."

“So they don’t know you’ve Integrated yet?” Rochelle put in. “That’s...probably going to be a shock.”

“Honestly, as much as she’s been in the news lately, I’d half expect ‘em to know about it before they get here,” Rhianna said. “Starliner news feeds being what they are.”

Quinoa nodded. “Yeah...that’s possible.” She sighed. “I’ve tried to sit down and write or record a letter about it more than once, but it just doesn’t come together. I guess it’s just something I need to do in person.” She shrugged. “On the bright side, at least I won’t have to explain what Integrates *are*. Uncle Joe tells me there are at least a couple of them in the Circus already.”

“Well, *that* figures,” Kaylee said. “Integrates are kinda like Q-dust itself. They get in *everywhere*.”

Quinoa grinned. “And make everything stop working?”

Kaylee snorted. “Hey, *you* said it, not me.”

They all shared a chuckle, then Quinoa said to Socah, “I’ll bet you have some *great* stories you could tell about Dad and Uncle Joe on Earth.”

Socah chuckled. “Just a few. Funny thing, they’re a lot more hilarious in hindsight than they were at the time. Joseph and Mikel were quite a handful, and they didn’t always look at things quite the same way we did on Earth.”

“They don’t always look at things quite the same way we do on Zharus, either,” Quinoa said. “They’re Steaders.”

Socah smirked. “Well, *that* figures. Let me tell you about the day I first met them.”

“We’d love to hear it, Nana,” Rhianna said.

“Well...”

July 6, 100 AL (2450 AD)

DalWorth, Texas, Earth

“Can you believe it? We’re finally here!” Joe Steader waved an arm expansively toward the balcony of the hotel room they’d just walked into. By the standards they were used to, it wasn’t much. The plaster was cracked, the light fixture only half-worked, and everything from the room safe to the vid panel to the beverage cooler required credits to operate—if it worked at all. But that couldn’t cast a pall over Joe’s enthusiasm. “The cradle of humanity. The womb from which mankind emerged to colonize the stars.”

“Can something be both a cradle *and* a womb at the same time?” Mikel wondered, dropping a couple of suitcases onto the bed.

Joe rolled his eyes. “Come *on*, Mikey. Let’s get unpacked and then take in the sights.”

“Ahem.” The attractive woman clearing her throat was dressed in the dark green garrison uniform of the North American Army, and she had a Captain’s rank insignia on her collar. Her head was shaved save for a blonde one-centimeter mohawk up the middle, which made her strong chin and stern features stand out all the more. She was standing in the door, arms crossed, favoring the pair with a somewhat annoyed look. “The only ‘sights’ to see in this part of DalWorth are usually the ones on the end of someone else’s gun. Why on Earth didn’t you let us put you up in a five-star hotel closer to the center of town?”

Joe elbowed Mikel and snickered. “Did you hear that? She said why *on Earth!*”

Mikel rolled his eyes. “I told you, Captain Gates. This is the closest place by far to the location Clint Brubeck gave us for where he found the entrance to a section of the underground with a lot of old-time artifacts in it. We’re still waiting on permission to go in, and we want to be ready to start right away when that comes through.”

“My company has the building secured,” Captain Gates said. “I see you paid the proprietor enough that she could retire now if she wanted to.”

“She said she’s going to high-tail it to Eridani,” Mikel said. Both men were in their mid-30s by the count of Earth and Zharus years. “I tried to sell Zharus to her, but she has family on that end of colonial space.”

“Far as I’m concerned, anyone who wants to leave, should,” Gates said. “Old Earth can’t take more than about three billion humans comfortably, so we still have a way to go.”

“Funny you should say that,” Joe said. “Didn’t the population reach 10 billion before the Peak Oil famines? And it was puttering along comfortably with six or so through most of the Oil Age. Seems like the place has been backsliding.”

“Can’t be good for your economy to have a shrinking population like this,” Mikel added.

“This reminds me of that book from Clint’s collection, *But What of Earth?* by Piers Anthony,” Joe said. “It theorized that as the population of Earth lowered as people left for other worlds, civilization as a whole would regress. Hey, I just realized...we can see the original copy of that while we’re here.”

“Boys, the famines are perfect examples of a Malthusian Crisis,” Captain Gates said. “We are simply trying to prevent it from happening again by living within the planet’s means to support us with sustainable resources—still have about 150 parts-per-million worth of carbon dioxide to pull out of the air. Plus, now we can restore various planetary ecosystems to pre-Oil Age health. Imagine a herd of bison out there on the Plains. There’s room for that now.”

“Hm. True, that,” Joe said.

“I think we actually have some herds of bison on Zharus,” Mikel said. “In the terraformed plains of southwest Gondwana. You should come visit sometime, Captain Gates.”

Gates snorted. “Fat chance. Too much to do in this corner of the galaxy.” She shrugged. “Anyway, comm me if you need anything, and *don’t* leave the building without an escort. If something happens to two of the galaxy’s richest people on my watch...”

“All right,” Joe said. “Since you asked so nicely.”

Gates saluted, and left. As she headed down the stairs (the elevators, like so much in this building, were out of order), she faintly heard Joe saying to Mikel. “Can you believe that? How many soldiers do you think know what a ‘Malthusian Crisis’ even is?”

She chuckled and shook her head. She supposed it was a good thing she liked the two of them *now*. She had the distinct feeling they were going to try *all* her patience before this posting was over. She’d already caught Joe sitting in the cockpit of one of the six-meter CHN-50 IDEs, with a smile on his face that made him look like a twelve-year-old with a brand new toy. She’d finally had to promise him some time in a trainer IDE to get him to come down. On the bright side, at least she knew exactly what carrot to dangle in front of him if she needed to get him to behave.

Mikel seemed to be the more sensible of the two. More goal-oriented, less

inclined to want to stop and smell every rose he ran into. Their differences were probably what made them such an effective team—each one providing a perspective the other lacked.

Gates checked in with her officer of the watch before turning in early. She got the feeling the next few months were going to be made up of *long* days.

April 27, 101 AL (2451 AD)
Cornwall, Britain, Earth

“Joseph Cassius Steader, what the *hell* damn fool thing have you gone and done *this* time?”

Joe looked up from the fresh trench dug into the foggy British countryside by the AI-controlled ArchDigger. “Captain, last night’s sensor scans detected something car-shaped here, fairly well-preserved. I have to see what’s what.”

“We’re not authorized to excavate in this location,” Captain Gates said. “Digger, cease operations!”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Joe said. “We’ll put all the dirt back when we’re finished. Digger, keep going.”

The elephant-sized machine beeped in confusion, a blinking yellow light indicating it had paused because of conflicting orders given by different people in short succession.

“Digger, execute override forty-two,” Joe said patiently. “Continue operation.”

The light turned green again and the ArchDigger, built specifically for archeology, continued its careful work.

“Digger, cease operations!” Captain Gates repeated. But the machine wouldn’t stop. “Just what did you tell it, Joe?”

“Found some interesting features in the owner’s manual,” Joe said, putting his finger on the side of his nose. “Some rather obvious loopholes, if you know where to look.”

“If you don’t know where to look then they’re not obvious,” Mikel pointed out. He held a tablet. “But we’re from Nextus, so we do know where these things tend to lurk. Digger, change to quadrant four.”

“Acknowledged,” the AI said. It ponderously moved to the left two meters on its four elephantine feet and started to widen what had already been dug. The Archeology Expert System that it ran was just as good as having an actual human archeologist with them.

“Don’t worry about the authorization thing,” Joe said. “It’s easier to get forgiveness than permission. We can usually *buy* forgiveness.”

“Besides, you already know this machine really will put everything back as close to how it was as possible when we’re done,” Mikel said. “It even kept the sod in one piece. This would go faster if we brought over the other one.”

Captain Gates gritted her teeth and opened a comm channel. “Lt. Fries, mobilize Squad Two with a 2A Defense loadout and Squad One for ECM and long-range fire support. Deploy perimeter drones. And send out Digger 2 while you’re at it. We’ll have to get this done fast.”

“Something wrong?” Joe asked innocently.

“Joe, this corner of Cornwall is ruled by the Baron. He has his own private army.

Do you have organized crime on Zharus?”

Mikel looked at her. “You still have it *here*?”

“Oh wow,” Joe said. “This is just like those Jimmy Cagney movies from Clint’s stash. ‘Put ‘em up, you dirty rat...’”

“The point here is that there isn’t much government outside the arcs in these parts,” Gates said.

“Then technically, it’s not an organized crime problem, it’s a warlord problem,” Mikel pointed out. “You have to have a government for there to be crimes.”

The Army officer opened her mouth, about to disagree, then nodded. “Okay, you might be correct there, Mikel. Nobody would care if we shot the bastards up a little.”

“Oh, *good*. Then it’s not a problem after all,” Joe said, clapping his hands. “I was almost afraid we might have to hire lawyers or something. If it’s just a jerk with some rusty IDEs in his pocket, we’re fine.”

Captain Gates once again managed to keep from facepalming by reminding herself it was unprofessional. It was getting harder and harder these days.

“I guess we’ll find out if this Baron is stupid enough to attack an NAA Detached Company of over a hundred soldiers with the latest gear,” Mikel said. A trio of IDEs and two APCs were trundling over the damp field through the thinning fog. In front was the other Digger, floating on lifters and making very little noise. It soon joined the first one, deploying into its elephant-like shape.

I wish we could detach ourselves from your company, Captain Gates thought, not at all for the first time. “All this had damn well better be worth it.”

“It’s in a large granite box,” Joe said. “The AES says there’s an 87% chance this was done on purpose. It’s too isolated, no signs of other structures of the same era. It was a dirt field then and it’s a dirt field now.”

“If it’s somebody’s grave, you should leave it alone,” Captain Gates said.

Mikel shook his head. “You do realize that goes against centuries of archaeological practice, right? Archaeology is all *about* digging up ancient graves.”

“If it looks like it actually is a grave, we’ll put it back how we found it, in accordance with the archaeological code of ethics,” Joe said. “After copying any media and taking detailed scans of any artifacts, and giving the professional archaeologists a chance to do their thing. We’ve even got local clergy on call to reconsecrate it if necessary.”

Captain Gates rolled her eyes. The IDEs had taken up defensive positions nearby, the APCs deploying a dozen drones each. “Just hurry up and get this over with. I want your asses in an APC in an hour.”

It took less than an hour for the Diggers to clear away enough soil around the giant stone box, scanning every step of the way. Etched on the top, in bold letters: TIME CAPSULE, LONGSTONE PARK, SALTASH 2030 AD. TO BE OPENED IN 2130 AD.

“All right, we’re good!” Joe said. “This was *meant* to be dug up. Looks like they forgot about it, though—such is the fate of most time capsules. Well, better late than never.”

“What’s it doing way out here?” Mikel asked. “GPS says we’re fifty clicks from Saltash...wait.” The younger Steader’s eyes flicked over his tablet as he read. “There hasn’t *been* a Saltash for centuries. Swallowed by rising sea levels in 2110. They must have moved it before then with pure muscle power, considering energy prices at the time. What could be that important?”

“Great. Wonderful. Load it on the skimmer deuce and let’s get the hell out of here,” Captain Gates said.

“Diggers, priority retrieval mode,” Mikel ordered. “Override site preservation protocols, code 23.”

“Acknowledged,” the two Diggers chorused. They started working much faster, the dirt starting to fly as it was pushed out of the way with lifter fields. The brothers had to move or they would have been showered with moist dirt.

“I actually agree with Captain Gates,” Joe said. “We should load it up and get out of here.”

“Well, *that’s* a miracle if I ever heard one,” Captain Gates deadpanned.

“Hey, even I can read a large approaching dust cloud when I see it,” Joe said, nodding to the disturbance off in the distant north as the fog cleared.

Captain Gates looked where he was pointing and *did* facepalm. “Aw, crap. All units, alert! We got incoming!” She glared at the Steaders. “This had *damn* well better be worth it. Squad Two, open fire! Get that shield dome up over the site!”

“It will be, Captain,” Mikel said soberly. The trio of IDEs guarding them opened fire with their shoulder-mounted gauss guns. “When all’s said and done, you’ll see.”

Rhianna and Rochelle exchanged glances. “Cornwall wasn’t that bad when I was there with the Homeworld Reclamation Corps. Wow, Nana. So they actually had you defend them against an angry warlord while they were digging up stuff?” Rhianna said.

“That’s my Dad and Uncle Joe!” Quinoa said proudly. “They put the ‘crazy’ in ‘crazy as a Steader.’”

“The Feds took a hand in cleaning up the place after that,” Socah said. “Partly out of embarrassment. Didn’t look good for some schmuck with a pocket full of war relics to attack rich tourists, no matter how deservedly. And after we put ‘em down—without so much as a *scratch*, I might add—there wasn’t all that much to do, really. Guy had N-1s for cryin’ out loud. Practically old enough for the Steaders to want to dig *them* up, too.”

“The thing about N-1s—” Rhianna began, then changed her mind. “Uh, never mind. If I get started on IDE operational history I won’t stop for hours.”

“That’s my granddaughter,” Socah said, patting her on the shoulder. “In the end, I suppose, it *was* worth it...though at the time I’d be damned if I ever admitted it to them. The box had a gorgeous old car in it...Mini Cooper, think it was. They said something about an Italian job. It was packed full of old books, papers, media, and such. And an 8-track Queen tape in the glove box. After they took scans of everything, they handed it all over to the local historical society.”

“Cool!” Quinoa said, her eyes sparkling. “This is *just* the kind of story I always wanted to hear about them!”

Socah chuckled. “*Believe* me, I’ve got plenty more. And enough time has passed that they’ve *finally* changed from aggravating to amusing even for me.”

“I wish we had more time to hear them right now,” Rhianna said. “But ol’ Tater here isn’t tuning *himself* up.”

“Right, we should probably go on and get out of your fur,” Quinoa said. “Lucky thing: Uncle Joe and I are actually staying in our Uplift digs right now, so you won’t even have to hop a sub to visit.”

“I would love to see him again. Pity your father isn’t here, though.”

“Give it a couple of years,” Quinoa said. “He promised me he’d make sure to get

out at the last possible moment, and something tells me that's not too far away. You kind of...wouldn't recognize him, though. He's mostly cyber now. Eridani tech, mostly."

Socah whistled. "And they let him off the planet?"

"Dad has some kind of special status—he's a dual citizen of Zharus and Eridani," Quinoa said. "Some kind of technology sharing deal with the Star Circus. I don't know the details, I was just too young. Every time the Circus stopped there he'd get a little more done. But, that's another story."

"Frankly, I hope your Uncle Joe still recognizes me," Socah said. "For much the same reason. I didn't get this G.I. Jane until ten years after they left. There was kind of a 'flesh ceiling' in the mech branch at that point." She wrinkled her nose. "Which makes for a really gross image, but I didn't coin the term. Had to get the shell to make Major. Which is probably what led to the end of my marriage, but *that's* another story."

"Well, let's go meet him and find out," Quinoa said. "Oooh, I can't *wait* to spring you on him. I *still* owe him for the time he and Fritz locked me up in space and I had to dive from orbit to get away."

Socah raised an eyebrow. "Sounds like I'm not the only one with stories to tell."

Quinoa chuckled. "I'll fill you in on the way over. Let's go."

"...and thanks to last month's vote, the new RIDE rights legislation is on track to take effect as of the first of October. Consul Vogel's office issued a statement today welcoming the new age of equal rights for man *and* machine—"

Joe clicked the button on the battered old replica twentieth-century remote he'd been using for decades, and the media wall blanked back to a living room wall with windows looking out onto black-and-white 1950s suburbia. He dropped the remote onto the sofa, then got up and walked into the bedroom. He opened the top drawer of his chest of drawers, and reverently lifted out a small rosewood box. The finish showed thirty-five years of wear, but the box itself was still sturdy. He sat down on the edge of his bed, opened the latch and flipped up the lid, to look on the treasure within.

Nestled in the crushed velvet interior were two objects. On the right were a silver medal and ribbon plate combination, Nextus's Silver Medal of Bravery—the highest military commendation a civilian could receive. As far as Joe was concerned, it might as well have been the prize from a bottom of a cereal box, because the real treasure was on the left: a dull blue orb about the size of a walnut that represented the mortal remains of his best friend.

Joe lifted the cracked RI core out of the box and held it carefully in one hand for a moment, turning it over and looking at the faint hairline crack that was barely even visible to the naked eye. He thought, as he always did, that it was such a small thing to have cost the life of a friend. He stroked a finger over it gently, then nestled it back in the box.

He didn't do this so often anymore. He'd long since realized that it was stupid to keep torturing himself. He needed to get on with his life—that was what Julius had *wanted* him to do. But every so often, it was worth remembering what he'd lost, reliving the good times and the bad, and reminding himself why he kept on doing what he was doing.

And today was one of those times.

"Hey, buddy," Joe whispered. "I know it's been a while, but...good news! Remember that whole RIDE rights thing we used to talk about? Well, it took a little

longer than we wanted, but it's finally happening. Thanks in part to Fritz, of all people. And to Quinoa—boy, you don't know how glad I am that girl's finally had some *sense* knocked into her.

"Of course, the real heroes of the thing are all the RIDEs and their people who came together to fight Fritz off, and Zane Brubeck and his friends. I wish Clint was still around. I'll bet he'd be the proudest Dad you ever saw. But then, when you get to be my age, you get used to outliving your friends. I've had some practice at *that*, eh buddy?"

"Anyway, it's good to know the age of RIDEs as equipment is on its way out. Even in Nextus! If they get their legislation passed, too, I might just have to move back there for a while. See what it's like there when RIDEs are free." He shook his head. "Just wish you were here to see it with me."

As he was looking down at the box, Joe heard the penthouse door down the hall open. "Hey, Uncle Joe?" Quinoa called from the living room. "Company!"

"Be right there, hon!" Joe called back. "Well, I guess I'd better go," he said to Julius's core in a lower voice. "Miss you, buddy. See you—"

His farewell was interrupted by a voice from his distant past. "Joseph Cassius Steader, what the *hell* damn fool thing have you gone and done *this* time?!" In a split second, Joe was sixty years younger, sitting in a canvas tent next to his brother, getting a well-deserved tongue-lashing from one fiery-tempered, steely-eyed Captain Socah Gates.

Joe dropped the box and fell right off the bed. "...what in the *hell*?" Leaving the box sitting on the mattress, he scrambled to his feet and stumbled into the living room.

She was standing right there in his living room, an apparition from out of the past—dark green Army uniform, ribbons and medals on full display. There were a lot more of them than he remembered, and the insignia at her neck was a full bird Colonel, not a Captain. But she still had the same blonde hair and buzz cut mohawk, the same stern expression on her face...and the same almost-hidden twinkle in her steely eyes.

Joe leaned to the side enough to see Quinoa behind her, grinning like a Cheshire sphinx. "Quinnie, are you putting one over on your decrepit Uncle Joe?"

"Yes, but not in the way you think!" Quinoa said.

"I see I can't leave you alone for sixty years without you going and making over a whole planet in your own image," Colonel Socah Gates said. "If I'd known *this* was why you dragged me and my men around all over the place all these years ago...well, at least it would have made the whole thing seem to make more sense at the time."

Joe stared. "Captain...er, *Colonel* Gates, is it...really you?"

"I'd say 'in the flesh,' but the flesh part ain't quite true anymore," Socah said. "But yeah. It's really me." She smirked. "I was just in the neighborhood, and decided to stop by."

"In the neighborhood," Joe repeated. "Just stopped by. Wait, didn't I try and sell you on vacationing out here? Finally made it, then?"

"In a manner of speaking," Socah said. "Call it a *permanent* vacation. Or 'retirement,' which is pretty much the same thing. Actually, my daughter and son-in-law got kicked off the ol' rock, and I tagged along with the rest of the family to make sure they don't get into any *more* trouble."

"And they came *here*, because thanks to me, this is where Earth sends all its weirdos," Joe said, slowly grinning.

“Partly,” Socah said. “Mainly ‘cuz we had family here already. See, when my daughter Arlene Gates married a fellow name of Roy Stone, they thought it would be cute to combine their surnames. Stone...gate. One of their kids had already come out this way and opened a garage.”

“As in Rhianna Stonegate? Freeriders Garage?” Joe said, eyebrows raised.

“That’s her,” Socah said. “Well, ‘him’ when he left. Our arrival, as you might imagine, was fraught with a number of surprises.” She chuckled. “We were told shortly after we got here that we would see ‘ten impossible things’ in our first day on-planet. That proved to be an understatement.”

“It’s a wonderful planet, isn’t it?” Joe said proudly.

“It is, I have to give you that. ‘Scuse me while I slip into something more comfortable.” Her outline blurred and the uniform was replaced by her flapper chic outfit.

Joe rubbed his eyes. “Uh...*wow*. That’s a new look for you.”

“It’s the cat’s meow,” Socah said. “Really, I blame you. If you hadn’t dug up all that media, I’d never have found the Roaring Twenties. Besides, a new world demands a new me, and the tech they installed in my G.I. Jane gives me *quite* the flexibility.”

Joe shook his head. “I can’t believe this. My old minder turns out to be the grandmother of the woman who turned my entire society on its ear. It feels like someone’s playing a cosmic joke on me.”

“Never let it be said the gods don’t have a sense of humor,” Quinoa put in.

“Well, I’m sure glad you gave Earth the old 23 skidoo,” Joe said. “Uh, can I get you anything to drink? Do you drink?”

“Thanks to that new tech I mentioned, sure,” Socah said. “Even though I’ve been here a couple of months, the ‘new’ still hasn’t worn off that yet. I’ll have a gimlet.”

Joe nodded. “Gin and lime juice, hard-boiled detective Philip Marlowe’s poison of choice. That suits you.” He went over to the wet bar along one wall and busied himself there.

Socah had a seat on the sofa. “So tell me about Zharus,” she said. “I’ve been wondering for decades why you took the stuff we helped you dig up and turned this place into the laughing stock of the galaxy. Mind you, I have my suspicions, but it would be nice to have them confirmed.”

“Well...I’m afraid to answer that question I’m going to have to be brutally frank, Colonel,” Joe said.

“Go ahead. We’re both too old for subtleties,” Socah said. “And please, just Socah now.”

“The whole idea was to keep Earth’s grubby mitts off our stuff,” Joe said.

“Ouch,” Socah said, grimacing. “Well, the truth *does* hurt, even if that is what I thought from the outset. It’s why I retired when I did. I was sick and tired of being a grubby mitt.”

“Glad to hear it,” Joe replied, passing her the drink and sitting down with a scotch and soda himself. “Well, I’ve never been one to hold grudges. A toast. Welcome to Zharus, Socah. Feel free to reinvent yourself however you like. It’s what we do best.”

Socah grinned, clinking glasses with him. “I wouldn’t dream of being anywhere else.”

While Joe and Socah reminisced, Quinoa smiled and slipped into his bedroom.

Whenever she was staying here, she tidied up, made the bed, put the toilet lid down, and did all the little things her lifelong bachelor uncle had never gotten into the habit of doing. He didn't have a regular servant staff, except in his larger mansions, so the place could get pretty messy after a while—and Integrate lifters were just the thing for straightening up an entire room at once.

But as Quinoa was pulling the blankets into place this time, she came across a small rosewood box she'd never seen before. It had obviously come out of the open top drawer of the dresser. She was just about to put it back when curiosity got the better of her and she opened the lid. Her eyes widened as she discovered what lay within. "What in the world...?"

She plucked the core out of its nest with a lifter field and held it up to her eyes. Thanks to Quorra's scanners, she could look at it a lot closer than any human eye. She could see the quantum data cloud within, bisected by the crack—but there didn't seem to be any holes or empty pockets within the data. As far as she knew, *theoretically*, this core should still be viable. And if it was viable, that meant it deserved a body.

She quickly closed the lid again and started to bring the box back to the living room to ask about it—then thought better of it. She didn't want to interrupt her uncle's reunion with Captain Gates, after all. Instead, she closed the drawer, tucked the box under her arm, and cloaked it. "Hey, Uncle Joe, I'm going to leave you two alone for a while, 'kay? I'll just let myself out."

"Go ahead, you're good at that," Joe said, grinning. "Just use the *door* this time, eh?"

A few minutes later, Quinoa was back at the garage. She passed a happy-looking Tater the tapir on his way out. "Hey, Rhi, Shelley..."

Rhianna raised an eyebrow, and her lynx ears twitched forward. "Back so soon, Quinny? Everything go OK with Nana and your uncle?"

"Oh, yes, they're getting on like a house afire," Quinoa said. "But I just found *this* in Uncle Joe's bedroom...and I had to bring it right here." She produced the rosewood box. "What's my uncle doing with a damaged RIDE core?"

Kaylee Fused over Rhianna, and a moment later Uncia did the same with Rochelle. "Beats me, but let's go to the clean room and find out."

"So Joe, you never married?" Socah asked.

"Never found a woman who'd put up with me," Joe said, grinning. "I have 'Eternal Bachelor' on my Cape Nord Man Card. You were about as close as I ever got, and you were taken."

"I'm flattered," Socah said. "Mind you, I wouldn't have said I was flattered at the *time*, but I am now." She shook her head. "Poor Manny just couldn't get used to the idea of being married to a Barbie doll. But I couldn't pass Captain without it."

"Sorry to hear that," Joe said. "Uh...it wasn't anything we did, was it? I'll admit to being young and stupid at the time. I never thought about the effect all the crap we pulled might have on your career."

Socah waved the hand that wasn't holding her drink. "Don't worry yourself over it. It wasn't you. There was just a...I guess you'd call it a *fad* going among the brass at the time. The idea that no one could have the ability to field-manage a mech battle in detail without the extra processing power of cyber to assist with it." She shook her head. "Stupid, really. Somehow we got by for centuries *without* cyber. But it was a choice

between upgrading and getting promoted, or staying flesh and not, and the Army was footing the whole bill, so...”

“And what did they do with your organic body?”

“I never asked. Parted it out? There’s probably some woman in Walla Walla who still has my liver and kidneys for all I know. You know Earth and the organ trade.”

Joe nodded. “Have you thought about having a new body cloned?”

“I have a sort of standing order at the Regen Clinic in town, but I haven’t pulled the trigger yet,” Socah said. “Honestly, it still amazes me they even *can* do something like that. And after living in this thing for so long, I’m not sure I could give it up. You get used to it, and the hardlight and energy tech you have here makes going fully organic again almost redundant.”

Joe nodded. “Yeah, that’s fair. Mikel is kind of the same way these days, and he has about the only cybertech more advanced than either Earth *or* here can do. He keeps telling me I should go to Eridani and get some ‘upgrades,’ too, but...nah. Not for me.”

Socah placed her empty drink on a coaster on the end table next to the sofa. “So what is for you?” She chuckled. “I remember you used to be so excited just to sit in the cockpit of one of our old IDEs. I gather from what Quinoa has been telling me that you’re kept your hand in as far as mecha are concerned?”

“I have warehouses *full* of mecha I’ve built over the years just from twencen media. Not all of them are any good in actual combat, but they sure do *look* cool. Mostly I rent them out for nostalgia conventions, car shows, and live-action versions of anime series.”

“That’s one of the things I miss most about being in the army,” Socah confessed. “Shoving big metal around. Zane Brubeck’s promised to let me play with Chauncey one of these days, but...”

Joe chuckled. “Well, you were as good as your word about giving me time in one of your trainers. I should return the favor. Perhaps we could...go have a look? See what you like? I can see you in a Phalanx or some other Destroid.”

“I’d like that,” Socah said. “But I don’t want you thinking I just like you for your big...machinery.”

Joe nearly dropped his drink. *Holy crap, did Capta...er, Colonel Thermopylae just make a double entendre at me?* “I...think I can let that pass.” He chuckled. “Of course, that’s all in Nextus. We could certainly take a sub there, but at my advanced age I’m less likely to do that on the spur of the moment these days.”

“Want to hit the Milk Bottle for cones, then?” Socah said. “I gather it’s all the rage for consummating reunions.”

“Practically a Zharus tradition,” Joe agreed. He extended his hand to her. “Shall we skedaddle to the speakeasy?”

“Now you’re on the trolley!” Socah said, taking his hand. Her outfit shimmered back into Roaring Twenties driving leathers. “C’mon, my bike’s parked outside.”

“I can hardly wait to see what style you went with,” Joe said, following her out the door. “Oooh, a Harley Softail? Nice! It suits you.”

The mystery RIDE’s damaged core floated gently in the surgical unit’s lifter field, passive diagnostic scanners delving deeply into the qubitite quantum pockets. The Freerider Garage’s best examined the results in VR space.

“So, he’s male,” Rochelle said. “Genetic template shows...jaguar. Metadata says

he was last in a JGR(m)-MMA-002A. One of the first NextusMil lines to enter production.”

Rhianna nodded. “The original jaggies. The Sturmhaven line of jags Melody Munn comes from was based on their stolen blueprints.”

Uncia giggled. “Wow, so Melody’s...a copycat?”

“Whoever he is, this guy could have rubbed shoulders with Kaylee and company back in the day,” Rochelle mused. “He’s like a jungle Nils.”

“I met a few jags in my time,” Kaylee said. “Tended to be loners. Decent enough folks, I guess, but nothing stands out.”

“Medial fracture along the medulla and right temporal lobes,” Rhianna said, spinning an exploded version of the core neural map—a combination of human overlays on a feline mind. A jagged red line curved up through the simulated neural tissue. “Looks like he managed to get himself into protective stasis despite the damage. Shelley?”

“I agree—good kitty! What hasn’t changed in thirty five years is booting that way will kill him,” Rochelle said. “Fortunately we can now do a quantum state transfer to a new core without even touching the old one. It’s not without risk, but it’s far better than permanent stasis.”

“Do it,” Quinoa said vehemently. “I have no idea who he is, but I know he’s got to be important to Uncle Joe.” She glanced down at the rosewood box she still hadn’t put down. “I hadn’t even known they gave him the Silver Medal of Bravery. I tried to look it up, but the circumstances are still classified. Probably his own doing. I emailed Conyers to see if he can shed any light on it, but...”

“Just a guess, but if he kept it in the same box as *him*, I suspect they’re connected somehow,” Rhianna said.

Kaylee cocked her head. “Ya know...I haven’t thought about this in *decades*, but now I think on it I remember that they were assigning RIDE bodyguards to various high civvy muckety-mucks back then, and Joe Steader was about the muckiest muck you could get. Most of ‘em kept theirs after, an’ upgraded ‘em, an’ other rich people wanting one of their own to keep up with the Joneses was part of what kicked off the whole craze for ‘Ahnuld’ models. But I don’t ever remember seeing Crazy Joe with a RIDE, or tags.”

“Did he ever talk about having a RIDE?” Uncia asked.

“No. And he always refused the chance to get one,” Quinoa said. “Quorra and I tried to set him up with one, after we found how awesome it was being together ourselves, but he wouldn’t have any part of it. We always just figured it was something like the way Clint Brubeck felt about ‘em. But then again, Quorra was a present *from* him.”

Quinoa thought back with her Integrate’s eidetic memory to the day Joe had bought Quorra for her. It had only been a couple of years ago, but it seemed like a couple of lifetimes. She’d just officially come into a big chunk of money from her Mom and Dad on her 25th birthday, and she’d decided to celebrate with a RIDE of her own. She’d done temporary Fuses with a couple of friends’ partners, enough to know what it felt like and get some idea for what she wanted. Then Uncle Joe, who’d insisted on paying for the RIDE himself as a birthday present, had taken her down to *Signor* Donizetti’s and they’d fleshed out the design.

Quinoa had wanted something *flashy*. Something that would attract attention, that almost *nobody else* had. Mythicals had been out of fashion for a while, but that was

all right—it just meant Quinoa could restart them as a *new* fashion. That was what rich people like her did, after all. Be a big enough iconoclast, and the world is your copycat. And she'd also been attracted to the idea of skirting the edges of propriety—a sphinx's face was close enough to a human's to draw frowns in some circles. Not that this was a deterrent to Donizetti, who liked pushing the edge in his designs as much as she liked pushing the edge in using them.

Before they'd finalized the order, Joe had taken Quinoa aside in a corner of the waiting room to speak to her. "Just one thing before we go on. You need to be sure about this, because a RIDE is not a toy, and she's not even a pet. She's a person, and you *will* treat her with respect. You can't just send her back in a day or so if you get tired of her. But treat her right and she could be one of the best friends you'll ever have. You understand?"

"Yes, Uncle Joe," Quinoa had said. She'd rolled her eyes, 'cuz that was what you did to a parental (or avuncular) lecture, but he wasn't through.

Joe patted her on the shoulder. "Good. Because I'll be checking up on you two after you get her. I won't ask her to betray any confidences, but I will ask if she's happy. If she's *not*...well, we'll have ourselves a talk."

Much as Quinoa had groaned at the time about being lectured like a little girl, she had to admit the lecture had stuck with her. In the few short weeks she'd had Quorra before they'd Integrated, the two had quickly become the best of friends. And the whole thing certainly didn't seem like the attitude of someone who didn't *care for* RIDEs.

"Well, this is a Nextus-Sturmhaven War-vintage Mark 1A core," Rochelle said, bringing Quinoa back to the present day. "And they didn't have the expertise in core repair back then that we've since developed. Even Dr. Patil would have thought this core was beyond repair. And she'd have been right...*back then*."

"Right." Rhianna nodded. "We'll need one of the tested-good core blanks we got from our Shed rummage last week. For the best shot at this, we should use one from the exact same generation."

"One step ahead of you." Rochelle held up a translucent plastic case, the dark blue orb of an RI core glinting within it.

"Great. Let's get set up. Quinoa, you ever worked on a core transfer before?"

Quinoa shook her head. "I've read a little about it, but despite what you might think I'm really not a technician. Cleaning out Katie's old shell was easy because I've got the processing power to keep track of how all the parts fit together, but I'm not so great at the non-mechanical stuff."

"That processing power would still be a help," Rochelle said. "And since he's apparently got something to do with your uncle..."

"If I can help without messing anything up, sure!" Quinoa said. "If this guy's important to Uncle Joe, I'd love to be a part of fixing him."

"Great. Then lend us a hand, and we'll handle the heavy lifting," Rhianna said. "Core transfers are a little tricky, especially when there's damage. To use one of the twentieth-century analogies your family loves, it's like burning a CD where the bits you burn vanish from your hard drive as you copy them. You only get one shot, and if you burn a coaster, you're screwed. Luckily, the copy process is a lot more robust than a rickety old mechanical CD-ROM drive." She opened the case and tipped the core into a similar lifter field next to the first one.

"The initial quantum entanglement is the hard part," Rochelle said. "You need to

entangle the two cores so they think they're one really *big* core, then move all the information across to the section of the big core that's in the new core before you disentangle them. You usually check to make sure they're properly meshed by copying test files back and forth from the new to the old...though when you've got one with a crack in it like that, it makes it trickier."

"Quinoa, you have the processing power to keep track of the error correction," Rhianna added. "This is *the* most important part of the transfer process. I've uploaded you the files and some sims you can run in fast-time to prepare. Most other Inties we've taken through this found it pretty simple, but if you're not sure, let us know and we'll comm one of them. We don't want to take *any* chances."

Quinoa nodded. "I've got 'em. Dropping into fast-time now, gimme moment... okay, there. Yeah, I think I can do this," she said.

"Your scores are good on the sims," Uncia acknowledged. "Even the really tricky one with the three-way crack. Good job. Mavra got that one first-time, too, but it gave Chantilly some trouble."

"Looks like we're ready, then," Rochelle said.

"Great! Let's get this done before Uncle Joe notices I took his box," Quinoa said.

"Time to make Dr. Heisenberg look the other direction," Rhianna said, cracking her knuckles. "Quinny, Uncia, handshaking now."

"Handshake received," Quinoa replied.

"We are go for quantum entanglement," Uncia added.

"Well, great! Let's get tangled!" Rochelle said.

"Must admit, you've got the hair for it," Quinoa said.

"Ouch, Ra-pun-zel hair," Uncia said, giggling. "Okay, here we go. I think we have a lock."

"Verified," Quinoa said. "Looks good from here."

"Beginning the data move," Rhianna said. "This kind of crack isn't *usually* a big problem anymore, but keep an eye on things."

"No errors so far," Quinoa said. "Letting my own cpu do its thing without me bugging it. Fingers crossed."

"Completion in ten..." Rochelle said. "Five...three, two, one...bingo. It's all moved over, and the old core reads dead-empty. Check me on that?"

"I concur," Rhianna said. "Mr. Kitty has a new home."

"Great! Disengaging entanglement...now. And...we're clear. That wasn't so hard, now was it?" Rochelle said.

"Not now, anyway," Rhianna said. "Even ten years ago..." She shook her head. "Well, anyway, let's plug him into a new jacket and give him a good defragging before we wake him up."

Quinoa reached out and plucked the old core out of the lifter field, holding it up to the light and peering into its depths. Unlike before, it was now nearly crystal clear with just a faint blue tint. The crack was more visible than before, since there was now no data cloud inside at all. She smiled, returned it to the rosewood box, and shut the lid.

"Want to help with the defrag?" Rochelle suggested.

"You bet!" Quinoa said. "Let's get him back in shape."

Socah grinned across the wrought-iron table at Joe, and took another bite of her RIDE's Dream chocolate mondae. "This place really is great, isn't it? My granddaughter

took us all here right after we first showed up at her garage.”

“It’s the best reason to live in Uplift,” Joe agreed. “I used to live in Nextus, but I moved after the war. Well, actually I don’t tend to live in any one of my places too long at a time, these days, but I don’t spend much time in Nextus anymore even so. Too many bad memories of the war.”

Socah nodded soberly. “War is hell, and I say that having been in my share of ‘em. At least in the Army it felt like I had some measure of control over things. Don’t like to think what it’d be like as a civvie.”

“Being Joe Steader did have some advantages. I plowed about two thirds of my fortune into the war effort, all told. Made bank once the bonds vested and RIDEs turned out to have plenty of civilian applications just like I thought they would...but that was never the point.” Joe shook his head. “I’d give up every cent I own if...well, that’s not important right now. Anyway, I was right there in the thick of things, rubbing noses with technical types like Dr. Patil and Dr. Clemens, and the top brass like General Latimer.”

Socah blinked. “Latimer? *Forrest* Latimer?”

“That’s the guy,” Joe said. “Gather he was some kind of big cheese back on Earth, then he retired to Zharus, and they drafted him for his military experience when the war started. A lot of ex-Earth military types were commissioned that way, to jump-start our army with some actual combat veterans. Some of them even came from different sides of the brushfire wars.”

“So *this* is where Colonel Forrest Latimer ended up?” Socah said, mouth agape. “The man was a menace, a complete *dickweed*. The shit he pulled in the last Aleutian War...ugh. His promotion pre-dated the whole cyber fad, the bastard. He resigned when it became clear he wasn’t going to go any further without going metal. I wouldn’t normally say this about an officer being forced out for asinine reasons, but...in his case, good riddance.”

“That’s ol’ Latty for ya,” Joe said. “He’s dead now. Skimmer accidents are rare, but they still happen. Some things even *our* med-tech can’t fix.”

“Thank heaven for small favors,” Socah said. “If I thought there was even a *small* chance I might run into him again, I might have to leave the planet, and I only just got here.”

“Believe me, there was a time when I wanted to go all punchy-face on him. And he had *such* a punchable face,” Joe said darkly.

“That man really hurt you somehow, didn’t he?” Socah placed her hand on Joe’s forearm.

“Eh, all he did was be insensitive. It was more the situation.” Joe sighed. “I lost a *good* friend in the war. My bodyguard—he died saving my life. And Latty thought he could be replaced.” Joe focused on his chocolate malt.

“I’m sorry,” Socah said. “Didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

“Oh, no, that’s all right. They’re mostly *good* memories,” Joe said. “It’s just the end that sucked. And you know, even knowing what was going to happen, I still wouldn’t give up that pain if it meant losing the good memories too.”

“That must have been some friend,” Socah said.

“He was,” Joe said. “All this twencen stuff you see all over Zharus...well, it probably wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for him. He had a profound impact on my life. He was a brother to me, really. The proverbial ‘brother from another mother.’” Joe sipped

at his chocolate malt for a moment. “Let me tell you about Julius...”

Back at the Freeriders Garage, Rhianna and the others dropped into VR and engaged Rochelle’s defragging software. It began reorganizing the core for more efficiency, sorting memory stores and putting them in their proper places. Occasionally they caught glimpses of the RIDE’s memories when the sorting software needed some additional input.

Among those memories was a brief recollection of lying on the floor in front of a sofa with a much younger, jaguar-tagged Joe Steader and, of all people, *Fritz* on it, a big tub of popcorn between them. “Oh, *sure*, every cat should have his own interocitor,” Fritz said. “Been meaning to build one myself one a’ these days. I’ll keep it right next to my turboencabulator.” Joe threw a piece of popcorn at him.

“Ehhhh...” Quinoa said, tilting her head in confusion. “What.”

“I, um,” Rhianna said, her head-tilt mirroring the sphinx’s. “I just...um...”

“Hey, isn’t that one of the movies we watched when he shot us into space?” Kaylee said with a slight growl. “Dammit, I want to be angry but I need more context. This ain’t what it appears.”

“I seem to recall, from your memories, Fritz vanished an awful lot, back in the day,” Rhianna said.

Kaylee sniffed. “Yeah. Gotta admit, if you’d asked me where he went, ‘sneakin’ off to watch bad movies with Joe Steader’ wouldn’t exactly a’ been in my top ten guesses.”

Quinoa shook her head. “I knew Uncle Joe and Fritz went way back, but I didn’t know it was *this* far back.”

“Let’s just get this finished,” Rochelle said. “Once we wake him up, we can ask him about that. Or we could just respect his privacy and let him tell us if he wants to, either way.”

“Should we upload him the Rip Van Winkle package we made up before we boot him?” Uncia asked.

“You know, I think we should give him a choice. If they really are old friends, Uncle Joe might want to tell him everything, show him everything,” Quinoa said. “They’ll have a lot of catching up to do.”

Rhianna nodded. “Good call. We’ll put it in an onboard file, but won’t interleave it. He can access it if he wants to.”

“I think we’re done here,” Rochelle said. “Loading up Nature Range, with a Central American jungle setting.” A jungle clearing appeared around them, trees hung with lianas of vines, tropical birds calling in the distance.

“Booting him up now,” Uncia said. A sleeping jaguar appeared before them in the clearing. “Wakey wakey, Mr. Jaguar!”

With a flicker, the jaguar was on his feet and awake. As often happened with crash restarts, the jaguar RIDE began speaking—or in this case, singing—mid-sentence. “—I’m half-crazy, all for the love of...” He paused. “For the love of Mike, what the fuck just happened?”

“Thirty-five years of RI core med-tech just happened,” Kaylee said. She was usually the first to speak when awakening a War-era RIDE. “Hey there, double-ought-two jaggie. G’morning.”

The jaguar peered at her and cocked his head. “I recognize you. You’re Kaylee, the second ought-one lynx. Am I back in the RIDE project Q-frame? Wait...you said

thirty-five years?

“You’ve been sleeping,” Kaylee said. “You were, uh...shot in the core.”

“I remember *that* part. *Shit!* Thought I was dead.” The jaguar shook his head.

“You were sort of in limbo,” Rochelle said. “We only figured out how to patch around core cracks recently.”

The jaguar sneezed. “Let me guess. Nobody bothered to figure it out before ‘cuz we’re just fuckin’ *equipment*. Core gets a crack, just toss it out and get another.”

“For a time, yeah,” Kaylee said. “But the times, they are a changin’. By the way, could we get a name?”

“Julius,” the jaguar said. “If you go by the fake net ID Joe whipped up to pay me under, ‘Julius Orange.’”

Quinoa snorted. “That sounds like Uncle Joe, all right.”

The jaguar turned his head to look at her. “*Uncle Joe?* The fuck?”

“Ah, hi. Quinoa Steader. Mikel’s my Dad, Joe’s my uncle.”

Julius shook his head. “Thirty-five years. *Fuck!* Joe’s still alive, right? Not dead or in a coma or anything?” He reached for a data uplink.

“He’s doing fine,” Quinoa said. “I just left him less than an hour ago.”

“By the way, this is my partner, Rhianna, and our business partners, Rochelle and Uncia,” Kaylee said.

“Charmed,” Julius said distractedly. “Well I’ll be a son of a queen. He went and did it. That damned dirty ape actually went and did it.”

“Damn him all to hell?” Uncia quipped.

Julius shot her a surprised look. “Yeah!” He shook his head. “He said he was gonna build that fuckin’ Space Hilton and it looks like that’s just what he did. Just looked him up, and the picture was right there on the ‘pedia page.”

“You mean Space Howard Johnson, right?” Quinoa said. “Yeah, Dad’s been crazy about that *2001* flick since before I can remember.”

“Not since before *I* remember,” Julius said. “Is he here? I need to see him.”

“No, he’s out with my grandmother,” Rhianna said. “Long story. Quinoa found a box with your core and a Nextus Silver Medal of Bravery in it that he kept in a drawer.”

Julius wrinkled his nose. “Aw hell. That fits. I bet he even fucking took it out and *talked to it* every so often.”

“Well, now that you’re awake, we can get you a new shell custom-made,” Quinoa said. “I’ve got an account with Donizetti RIDEworks—you wouldn’t have heard of it, but it’s the best designer sport RIDE maker on the planet—and—”

“Shit. Thanks for the offer, but ix-nay on the fancy custom bod. That would take forever. Just get me any old thing that’s safe to use and Fuse, preferably with hardlight, and get it *fast*—I’m fuckin’ thirty-five years late to the party as it is. Anyway, if I know Joe, he’ll want to take me down to one of his factories himself and build me a new one by hand or something. I’m not gonna spoil his fun.”

“I got a line open to Dickerson’s down by the auctionhouse,” Kaylee said. “He’s got a couple jaggie shells in stock that pass muster. Even have decent hardlight.”

“All the same I want to give whatever we buy a once-over and hardlight tune-up before we put Julius here in it,” Rhianna insisted.

“Then don’t waste time sitting here and jawing, get on it!” Julius said.

“We’ve already got the shell on its way,” Rochelle said. “I think you’ll like it. About ten years back, Nextus RIDEworks did a ‘commemorative line’ of DE shells for

the 25th anniversary of the first RIDEs—a ‘modern’ revamp of all the original lines, including yours. Didn’t sell too well, so they often show up on the market cheap. But it should be the next best thing to an original.”

“Great. Well...wake me when I’m in it. But *hurry*.” The jaguar flickered out as he put his core back into shutdown mode.

“Well, we have our marching orders,” Kaylee said. “Let’s hop to it, Freeriders!”

“...and that was that.” Joe shrugged, wiping away some errant moisture from his eyes. “I keep his core in a little box along with that medal, and take him out and talk to him from time to time. Was just doing it before you showed up, in fact. Telling him about the equal rights RIDEs are *finally* getting these days. God, I miss him.” Joe had to stop talking for a moment, and take a long sip of his malt.

Socah reached across the table to pat his hand. “Believe me, I understand. I lost more than my share of good friends in wars. Including ones directly under my command. I *know* about feeling responsible.”

“When citizenship rights for RIDEs finally come through in Nextus, I’m going to petition Nextus Admin to have that stupid medal posthumously reassigned to Julius,” Joe said. “It’s what he deserves.”

“I’m sure he’d appreciate that,” Socah said.

Joe nodded, taking another pull at his drink.

“RIDEs are an amazing thing,” Socah mused. “I can’t experience them directly, of course, but every other member of my family has found a partner now. Including another grandson-turned-granddaughter. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised you wound up with one.”

“He wasn’t at all what I expected,” Joe said. “I don’t think *any* soldier who got the first units knew that they were getting. I thought I was just getting a better bike. Instead...yeah.” He smiled wistfully. “Fusing a RIDE is like nothing you’ve ever imagined. It’s like...being, and being *with*, a whole other person.”

“So the rest of my family tells me,” Socah said. “Half the time you can’t pry them away from each other. We ended up having to get a bigger table and chairs for all the times they want to eat dinner together.”

Joe chuckled. “That sounds about right.” He sighed thoughtfully. “A few times I’ve considered finding another RIDE partner, but...it just felt wrong. Either I couldn’t have the same closeness I did with Julius, and it wouldn’t be fair to that RIDE, or it would feel like I was dishonoring Julius’s memory if I did. Anyway, I’ve got plenty of toys to take up my time, and Quinoa to keep me company in my dotage. I’m good.”

“So far, RIDEs are the only reason I can think of that I’d go organic again, but I suppose I don’t feel the pressure as much at my age,” Socah said.

“If you’re comfortable as you are, I wouldn’t make the change *just* for that,” Joe said. “Unless you happen to meet a RIDE someday and really hit it off to where you want to.”

“It’s a big change to make,” Socah admitted. “Not so different from the one I made in the first place. Or from Fusing a RIDE at all if you never have, get right down to it.”

“If I’d actually known what I was letting myself in for, the first time I Fused Julius...” Joe considered that a moment. “Hard to say, really. I can’t imagine *not* Fusing him now. Of course, it’s different for most people these days—the ones who grow up

knowing what RIDEs are all about.”

“The young whippersnappers?” Socah suggested. “Get off my lawn?”

Joe snorted. “That’s about right.”

“But not so different for us poor innocent souls who pop in from Earth,” Socah said. “When my youngest grandson became my newest granddaughter...barely a month and change after we even *got* here...”

“Well, I could tell you stories about some poor schlubs who get right off the boat and get their bits swapped on the same day,” Joe said.

“My granddaughter Rhianna’s friend Rufia—*nee* Rufus, from Earth—is a professional tour guide here,” Socah said. “She has plenty of that kind of story herself. But just because some people are out-and-out morons doesn’t make it any easier to see your own flesh and blood ‘only’ being an idiot.” She shook her head. “Fortunately, callow youth isn’t a permanent condition.”

“Socah, on the inside I’m still a giddy 12-year old,” Joe said with great aplomb.

“Yes, Joe, but *you’re* the exception that proves the rule,” Socah said, grinning.

Joe shook his head. “What does that even *mean*?”

Then Joe’s comm rang, to the tune of Cyndi Lauper’s “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.” “That’s my ringtone for Quinoa. Though I *might* have to see about changing it one of these days. Sec.” Joe put it to his ear. “Hi, hon. ... Sure, it’s going great, we’re at the Milk Bottle right now. ... Oh, they do? Sure, that’s fine. I’ve been wanting to meet them, too. ... All right, then see you soon, sweetie.” He pocketed the device. “My niece is at your granddaughter’s garage, and they’ve invited us to drop by.”

“Not surprising, after all the stories I used to tell them about my time in the 56th. But I’m surprised *you’ve* never met them before, given the part they played in defeating Fritz and ushering in RIDE rights.”

Joe chuckled and actually blushed a little. “Well, there’s the little matter that I was sort of on the wrong side for a little while. Fritz and I have had our differences, but we also go...well, all the way back to the war, and Julius’s time. And he helped a lot with the twencen media project. So I owed him enough to hear him out, and he seemed to be making sense at first. Then I took a good look at what he was *really* doing, and...well. Quinny tells me they’re not mad, but I’ve still been too embarrassed to show my face.”

“It sounds like they’re willing to let bygones be bygones,” Socah said. “They certainly didn’t sound angry when I talked to them before Quinoa brought me over.”

“Then shall we go beard the cats in their den?” Joe said.

“Sounds like a plan!” Socah agreed. They bussed their dishes, then headed back to the parking lot and Socah’s Harley.

As they pulled up to the garage, Joe looked at the sprawling complex of pre-fab drive bays surrounding a central garage building and a large suborbital hangar in back, and chuckled. It was hardly orderly, but then the best tinkerers—including himself—rarely were. And it was also familiar, as many times as stock footage of it had been featured on the news. He’d never been here in person, though many members of his social circle had. After all, they had to get their Donizettis done somewhere, and might as well be somewhere *famous*. The place everyone went always attracted more people, because everyone already went there. By all accounts, the older Donizetti-accredited shop across town was still wondering just what the hell had happened to all its business.

They pulled right into the central bay, which was empty of RIDEs except for the

two belonging to the two owners. Rhianna Stonegate, Rochelle Seaford, and their RIDEs, Kaylee and Uncia, were waiting, along with Quinoa. They were wearing clean coveralls, but they were coveralls still. They hadn't tried to dress up when they knew he was coming, which was another point in their favor. *But then, they've been palling around with Brubeck and the Waltons, not to mention Quinny*, Joe thought wryly. *They've had time to learn about the proper care and feeding of billionaires by now.*

The Waltons. He wanted to shake his head in bemusement. Who'd have thought *they'd* end up with RIDEs? Nigella got a mink, and Kenyon got fricking *AlphaWolf*. And it was the influence of Rhianna Stonegate, or of those *she'd* influenced, that ended up making the whole thing possible. These people really were something special.

They climbed down from the Harley, leaving their helmets on the seats, as the garage door closed down behind them to block the view of the news drones that were invariably drawn along in Joe Steader's wake. "Well, here we are," Socah said. "Rhianna, Rochelle, Kaylee, Uncia...meet one of the two biggest headaches I had in over sixty years."

"You're too kind," Joe said, grinning and offering his hand.

Rhianna took it and shook it with a firm grip. "Welcome to Freeriders, Mr. Steader. Been wanting to meet you for a while now."

"I'd say I'm in the comm directory, except I think I'm not," Joe said. "But you should have had Quinny ask me to stop by sooner."

"This was about the first chance we got for that," Rochelle said, shaking his hand after Rhianna finished. "I gather she was kind of in orbit the last couple months or so."

Joe chuckled. "Oh, yeah. Oops." *Maybe I was a little too strict there*, he thought. *But then again, if she'd really been annoyed about it, she'd have said so instead of just doing it. Will admit it was a little lonely without her, though.*

"My granddaughter is almost as big a gearhead as you are," Socah said. "She'll talk your ear off about IDEs, AIDEs, RIDEs, and whatever if you let her."

"Oh, really? I should bring her along when we go to my mecha warehouse," Joe said. "I'll admit to wondering what a mechanic who's worked on my old pal Clint's alter ego, rest his soul, would make of the stuff I put together back in the day."

"I really want to see how you made the VF-19 Excalibur work so closely to how it looked in *Macross Plus*," Rhianna said.

"Oh, well, that wasn't so hard. They had really good mechanical designs," Joe said, waving a hand. "It's just that they didn't have materials science up to handling them. Of course, when you get right down to it, it doesn't work as well in real life as it did in the show. But then, those shows always stacked the deck anyway."

"What was Clint Brubeck like?" Rochelle asked. "Zane said you and his Dad moved in the same circles..."

"Oh, he was quite a pistol. Our friendship waxed and waned over the years," Joe said. "There were times when I got a little too crazy for him, but I usually came back down to Earth pretty quickly. He's the one who actually kicked off my interest in the 20th century, you know. He even let me help him tinker with Chauncey from time to time." He chuckled. "Mainly when he wanted to install some part too heavy for him to lift by himself."

Rhianna chuckled. "That sounds like what I've heard about Clint, all right."

"I think we were closest right after my brother left with the Star Circus and I was plowing money into Brubeck Mining," Joe mused. "Me and Mikey were inseparable for

our entire adult lives up to that point. Once he left...I can admit now I felt kind of unbalanced. It was good to have someone to talk to.” He shook his head. “But Clint and I drifted apart during the run-up to the war. He left Nextus in disgust and just lived out in his mining camp. Sometimes I envied him for that. As a Steader, I felt too much responsibility for the war to leave. Then I found someone else to talk to...for a while.” Socah reached out and squeezed his hand.

And that was when, for the second time that day, Joe Steader heard a voice he hadn't heard in decades—a voice he thought he would *never* hear again.

“Well, *shit*. I leave you alone for just a moment, and next time I turn around, you're shackled up with Captain Thermopylae again. I swear, you humans *are* in perpetual heat.”

Joe turned and stared, his jaw dropping, as a tawny jaguar RIDE padded in from the next bay over. Joe knew this RIDE immediately. He'd memorized every spot on that magnificent pelt, every whisker on his muzzle. He knew intimately the way he moved, the exact way the simulated muscles rippled under his hardlight skin, and precisely how he lifted his paws and put them down. And he *knew* what he was seeing was impossible. But that didn't keep him from hoping. “...*J...Julius?!*”

“Hey, buddy. Been a while. At least it has for *you*. I just woke up an hour ago. God, you look like hell.” The jaguar padded up to him. Joe fell to his knees and reached out, and Julius rubbed his head against Joe's hand.

“But...what...how...I don't...” Joe stammered. “Am I dreaming? Again?”

“Here's a hint,” Julius said. “To blaaaaave...”

Joe snorted at the same time as he drew a breath, and coughed as he accidentally choked on his own spit. “But...but *how?*”

“He was only *mostly* dead,” Rhianna said in her best Billy Crystal impression.

“So your niece here brought me to Miracle Maxine's and they put me in a whole new fucking core,” Julius said.

“They...could do that?” Joe said. “But Dr. Patil said—”

“Science marches on an' all that shit,” Julius said.

“At the time, she was right,” Rochelle said. “But we've been learning a *lot* the last couple years. Having Inties doing the data corrections makes the process more of a sure thing.”

“I can't...I don't...” Joe stammered.

“Still having a hard time believing? Well, believe *this*,” Julius said, and Fused around him, bringing him back to his feet.

Joe gasped as all the old familiar sensations came back. He was fully enclosed by his old friend again. He *felt* him through the neural link in the hyperreal way none of his dreams had ever felt. And then, there they were. The same old virtual reality jungle clearing. The same jaguar avatar there with him. It was all just too much. He threw his arms around the jaguar's neck and broke down sobbing.

“Yeah, that's right. Let it all out, buddy,” Julius said, putting his forepaw around Joe's back. “Don't worry, they can't hear us outside—you're on 'mute.' God, I am so *sorry*. I didn't mean to fuck up your whole life.”

“You...you didn't,” Joe said when he could speak again. “You *saved* it. And you gave me purpose. All this stuff...the whole world...it was all for you.”

“Well, I see your memories are disorganized worse than ever,” Julius said. “God, how do you humans ever manage to get any *thinking* done?”

“We just let our RIDEs do all the thinking for us,” Joe said. “After all, they’re so much better at it. God, I missed you!”

Julius gave him a sandpapery lick on the cheek. “I can see that. Yeesh, I was right. You really *did* keep my core in a little box and talk to it. I’m not sure whether that’s endearing or fucking creepy.”

“It was a coping mechanism,” Joe said. “I can’t say I ever expected to have to *explain* it to you. Not that I’m not glad I am. This is the best day of my life since...I don’t know. Since Mikey and I found the Trove in Old Singapore.”

Julius snorted. “What, the day you first met *me* was chopped liver?”

“Uh...” Joe said.

Julius chuckled. “Oh, forget about it, I’m just yankin’ your chain. Oh, man, you’re so different now...but so much the same. Shit, you really gotta take better care of yourself.”

“I can’t believe you’re really back,” Joe said. “I keep thinking I’m gonna wake up.”

“I don’t know about waking up, but I think it’s time we drop back into the Real,” Julius said. “After all, we got a garage full of people waiting on us. Got ahold of yourself?”

“I...think so,” Joe said. “Though if I break down bawling like a baby again in front of everyone, I don’t *care*. It feels so good to have you back! Now I feel kind of bad I never had anyone check your core out sooner. I just...took Dr. Patil’s word for it.”

“Don’t blame her,” Julius said. “Like they said, before now it wouldn’a helped. When I read the damage on my diagnostics, I thought the exact same thing. ‘God,’ I thought. ‘I’m dead. Who’ll take care of Joe now?’”

Joe hugged Julius tightly around the neck again. “We’ve got each other back now,” he said. “And I’m *never* gonna lose you again.”

They opened their eyes back on the garage to the sound of synchronized nose-blowing. Rhianna had gotten out a box of Kleenex and passed it around. Quinoa was dabbing at her eyes. “You look *great* in spots, Uncle.”

“Doesn’t he just?” Julius purred. He retracted his head-helmet, and Joe blinked in the sudden light, then carefully reached up with one of Julius’s arms to feel the jaguar ears where his real ones had used to be. “Looks a damn sight better with my tags, too.”

“And less grey in his hair,” Quinoa said.

“That fits,” Joe said. “I feel thirty-five years younger. How is...how is this even *possible*?”

“I found the box in your bedroom,” Quinoa said. “And when I saw it had a core in it, which should still have been viable despite the damage...well, I had to get it to the specialists.”

Rhianna opened a drawer in the workbench and brought the box out. “Here it is, by the way.” She flipped it open to reveal the almost-transparent core and medal inside. “You can keep the old core as a souvenir.”

“Let me look at that,” Julius said, head-helmet returning. “Not every day you get to see your own brain. Shit! Look at that fuckin’ crack! I can’t believe you were able to pull me outta that.”

“We’ve actually seen worse,” Rhianna said. “But I’m always glad to help.”

“Thanks for holding onto it,” Julius said. “Dunno where Joe would be without his pet rock to talk to.”

“I’m sure I’d get by somehow,” Joe said dryly. He looked to Rhianna. “I owe you

all more than I can *ever* repay you. I'd have given my entire fortune for just five more minutes..." He trailed off as he choked up again.

"We've never been in this business for the money," Rhianna said. "Right, Shelley?"

"We leave that kind of thing to people who have experience with it," Rochelle said demurely.

"Well, you've got yourself a big ol' Nextus-bureaucracy-game favor owed in my book," Joe said. "It's hard for me to imagine anything you could ask that would ever even the tally. Call on me any time for *anything*. In fact..." :*You still have the "Franklin Mint" protocol, buddy?:*

:*Oh, that's fuckin' perfect!:* Julius sent gleefully. :*Four minty-fresh, comin' up!:* They glanced over at the small fabber on the workbench, and it whirred, spitting out four half-dollar-sized coins.

Rhianna picked one up and looked at it. It had a portrait of Joe Steader on one side, and a jaguar's rump on the other, along with the star-colonization-era Steader family motto "*Ad Astra Per Argentum*." "Is this...?"

Joe nodded. "It is. My own personal challenge coin. The data strip on the edge is signed with my personal crypto key to prove it's valid. If you run into any trouble with stuffed shirts over there...well, enjoy yourselves. I don't hand many of those out."

"That's like a get-out-of-red-tape-free card, Rhi," Kaylee said.

"Not to mention a get-free-drinks-for-life card," Julius put in. "Trust me, ain't many coins in Nextus that'll trump that. A'least there weren't last time I was alive, and a quick google suggests things ain't changed much."

Rhianna swallowed. "Well, thank you. I promise we *won't* abuse this."

"Oh, go ahead. Abuse it. Trust me, *nothing* you could do would balance out what you've done for us today," Joe said.

"Is that a challenge?" Uncia asked. Rochelle bapped her.

"Wasn't that a treat?" Socah said, sniffing. "I might just have to pull that clone trigger after all after seeing you two like this. Nice to meet you, Julius."

"And the same to you, ma'am," Julius said. "After seeing all his memories, I have to admit, you manage to live up to 'em."

Socah chuckled. "Thank you." She paused. "'Captain Thermopylae,' was it? The 'Hot Gates'?"

"Er..." Joe said. "Well...yeah. That was what Mikey and I always called you when we talked about you between ourselves. Can't say I ever thought it would get back to you."

She smiled. "I appreciate the sentiment, though it's been about fifty years since I had that body you apparently lusted after."

Joe shook his head. "It wasn't your body—well, okay, it was, partly, but—the big thing my brother and I always liked about you was your attitude. You didn't give a damn how much money we had, you were always ready to put us in our place. That's pretty rare when you have as much money as we did. It was a refreshing change from being surrounded by sycophants. And you've still got *that* in spades."

"If Nana used the same tone of voice with you as she did me when I was little..." Rhianna said. "Or *right after they got here*, for that matter..."

"I've been using it since your *mother* was little, Rhi," Socah said. "She ended up needing it more than either of you, though. Always getting into trouble, that girl."

Which...hasn't changed now that she's grown up, considering how we got here. Perhaps I should have used it even more than I did."

"Looks like you come by your talent for troublemaking honestly, pard," Kaylee said.

"I can't believe it's been fuckin' thirty-five years," Julius said. "What's the world even *like* now?"

"There's a new 'RVW' directory we made for catching up in your pre-mem area," Rochelle said. "Interleave it if you want, or you can catch up in the usual way. Up to you."

"I think I'll just live a while, and use your packet for catching up on anything I miss after that," Julius said. "Thanks, though."

"Plus, I gotta get us over to Donizetti's, bro," Joe said. "This isn't a bad shell for now, but I know how you loved being cutting edge. Google 'Katie Packard' to see the kind of thing I'm thinking about."

"See? What'd I tell ya?" Julius said, twitching their tail in amusement. "Honestly, it's not all that big a deal, but if you're buyin', I'm not saying no."

"And there's also the little matter of thirty-five years' back pay," Joe mused.

"Hey. I'm *not* gonna take your fuckin' money for the time I wasn't actually on the job," Julius said. "Besides, I just checked my savings account and with thirty-five years of interest on it, I done pretty well. So throw in the new bod and call it even."

Joe nodded their head. "Fair enough." He chuckled. "*You* always knew how to put me in my place, too."

"That's what I'm for, buddy," Julius said happily.

"Now, I wonder if we can leave without the newsies figuring out what's up?" Joe mused.

"How about this?" Quinoa said, her features blurring into a perfect untagged copy of her uncle. "Socah can drive me back to our place," she said in Joe's voice. "And you can be some random guy who came to pick up his jag after a tune-up."

"It's scary how well you do that," Socah said.

"A necessary talent in darker days," Quinoa-Joe said. "Fortunately not so much any more."

"And...sheesh. What the precise fuck?" Julius said. "Was just reading some stuff linked from 'Katie Packard,' and...Fritz turned into a supervillain bent on world domination? *Our* Fritz? I knew he had to be mental after what he did to your cousin, but this..."

"'Mental', he says," Kaylee said. "'*Your*' Fritz?"

"It's...a long story," Joe said. "We knew him before he went completely out of his gourd. Later on, he actually helped get Steader Entertainment off the ground by arranging for Integrates to help us crack, sort, and mine the stuff we dug up on Earth. And, well, you know about the stupid little stunt I pulled a few months ago."

"Yes, we do," Quinoa-Joe said, crossing her arms and glowering in a gesture so un-Joe-like that everyone else in the room had to laugh.

"Ow," Joe said. "If you're going to be me, at least don't *sulk*. It's not becoming."

"If I were going to judge people based on how they felt about Fritz, it would kind of put me at odds with Dr. Patil," Rhianna said. "We may not be too fond of him ourselves—"

"*That's* an understatement," Kaylee muttered.

“—but I guess there aren’t too many people in the world who’re all good or all bad.” Rhianna shrugged. “I actually wouldn’t mind hearing more about the old days, if you wouldn’t mind talking about it sometime.”

“Sure thing,” Joe said. “Comm me sometime. I’ll send you my private code.”

Rhianna nodded. “Will do. And thanks again.”

“Then I guess ‘you’ and I should be going,” Socah said, nodding at “Joe”. “Give me a ring when you and Julius want to get together. I don’t care what the hour is. I don’t sleep much and getting dressed takes no time at all.”

“And if you need anything, any time, give me a call,” Rhianna said. “Kaylee takes all my calls, and she can wake me at need.”

“You’ve already done so much for me...for *us*,” Joe said.

“Just be sure and come back here for your tune-ups,” Rhianna said.

“Oh, an’ comm me sometime, Jules,” Kaylee said. “There’s a bunch of rescued old-timers around we could get together with. Including one we rescued just last week who got losted during the run-up to ‘Final Fury.’ We’re thinkin’ a puttin’ together a support group.”

“Sounds fuckin’ *awesome*, Kaylee,” Julius said. “I never had the chance to talk too much with too many RIDEs back in the day, but...we got stuff in common, so why not?”

The garage door rolled up, and Quinoa-Joe climbed onto the Harley behind Socah. “See you later!” she said.

“Keep in touch,” Socah added, before pulling away.

Joe and Julius watched her go. “I still can’t believe this,” Joe said.

“I can pinch you with my Fusers if you want,” Julius said.

“That’s...quite all right,” Joe said. “Well, let’s go, pal. We got a *lot* of catching up to do. We’re gonna leave through one of the other bays just so there’s less suspicion.” The Fuser lifted off the ground and hovered back to the door Julius had entered by.

“Have fun storming the castle,” Kaylee quipped, waving her forepaw at the Jaguar Fuser.

“Bye! And thanks again!” Julius said as they left the garage.

I can’t believe this is real, Joe thought. This is too much like the old days. I’m going to wake up any moment, and...

“No, buddy, you’re not,” Julius said firmly. “This is fuckin’ real as it gets. And I’m gonna keep proving that to you ‘til I get it through your thick skull into your meaty little mind.” He converted back to skimmer bike form, a hardlight helmet materializing over Joe’s head just like in the old days. “Rhianna tells me this shell’s batts and lifters aren’t the best available, but the spec’s still at least 20% over what my old ones could do. Shall we see how fast we can make it to Nextus on the road, or you wanna show me that fuckin’ ridiculous Pan-Am of yours?”

“Let’s save the plane for another time,” Joe said. “I want to show you the Tunnel anyway. Let’s punch it, bro.”

“You got it!” Julius said. His lifters growled and they were off. “And *awaaaaaaay* we go!”

Joe closed his eyes, leaned back, and let the tears of joy stream down his face as his long-lost friend carried him home.

To Be Continued in the Gondwana Grand Tour!