

Madison Brubeck and the Spotted Stowaway

By Robotech_Master

Prologue: The Farewell Party

March 1, 156 AL

Madison Brubeck looked around the bar from her seat at a table in the corner. As always, it was done up fancy in real wooden paneling and furniture in human and Fuser sizes—a perfect recreation of the bar from one of the old twencen vids that her father Clint had loved to watch. It was about half full, and two-thirds of the patrons were RIDEs, Fused or un-Fused. Clint Brubeck had loved this place, coming here regularly every time he was in town to lecture at the scout academy or Martinez U. In later years he'd even brought Maddie along.

Those who only knew Clint superficially might have found it odd he would like to hang out at a Fuser bar, given how he didn't "hold with" RIDEs. But Clint never tried to pretend that his distaste for RIDEs was anything but a disinclination to use them himself. As many of them as Brubeck Mining employed, he'd have been a hypocrite to feel any other way.

And as for the Cheers bar, it seemed that Clint also owed some kind of debt to its proprietress, Diane the deer Fuser. "I'd have to be some kind of an *ingrate* to stop coming here," he'd said on one visit, winking at the deer. She'd just chuckled and passed him another beer.

It was a bittersweet experience for Madison Brubeck, coming here tonight. The bar reminded her so much of her father, and his funeral had been only a couple of months ago. But it had been Madison's idea to hold her family get-together here for that very reason. Her father deserved to be there at least in spirit, if he hadn't quite made it that far in life.

They occupied a couple of pushed-together tables in a remote corner of the room. Out of respect for their father, Diane herself was waiting on them personally. Or maybe it was more than *just* respect, Maddie reflected. After all, it wasn't often you had all three scions of one of the wealthiest families on Zharus together under one roof.

Enough dwelling on the past, Madison told herself sternly. This was supposed to be a joyful occasion, a time of celebration. Her father wouldn't have wanted moping about him to spoil her big day.

"I still can't believe it," Maddie's older brother Zane said. The brown-haired, green-eyed young man sat at the head of the table, sipping from a frosty mug of the house porter. "You're going away for *years*. We may never even see you *again* if something goes wrong out there."

"Don't talk like that!" the in-between sister Agatha said. She was in-between in more ways than just age—her carrot-colored hair was halfway between Zane's brown and Madison's blonde. They all shared the family green eyes, though. "No one who was trained by *Clint Brubeck* is gonna screw up their first mission."

"Way too many people do, no matter who trained them," Madison pointed out. "Still, thanks for the vote of confidence." She smiled. "I can't say it's going to be fun not seeing you guys for years, either. But the rest of it...being out there among the stars, finding new worlds and new resources...that's a job fit for a Brubeck."

"Hey now, and pulling *existing* resources out of the ground is chopped liver?" Zane teased. "Dad was a miner too, ya know."

Madison blushed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—” Then she stopped when she saw Zane was grinning. “Oh, you—”

“Yeah, I know,” Zane said. “Really, it kinda says something that Dad was so much of a man that it takes two of us to carry on all his legacies. That’s a hell of a thing to try to live up to.”

Madison nodded, a lump coming to her throat. “It is.”

“Are you sure you don’t want ol’ Chauncey after all?” Zane asked. “I could give him one last once-over for you...”

Madison shook her head. “I appreciate the offer, bro, but scout ships these days are downright tiny compared to how they were back in Dad’s. The engines don’t have to be as big, so the rest of the ship doesn’t get to be as big either. I don’t have *room* for him. I’ll be just fine with my EIDE bike. I’m thinking of calling him ‘Chauncey Mark II.’”

Zane nodded. “Well, okay. Guess ol’ C. deserves his retirement anyway.” He said it lightly, but Madison could tell he was secretly relieved. She knew Zane had been serious in the offer, but she also knew how attached he was to their father’s old mech. She wouldn’t have wanted to take it from him even if she could have used it.

“So, they got some good unexplored worlds picked for you to scout?” Agatha asked earnestly. “Lots of minerals, green forest land, all that jazz?”

“How should I know? How would *anyone* know?” Madison asked. “If they’re unexplored, *no one* knows what they’ve got. That’s why I’m going. And anyway, there’s no reason the forests would necessarily have to be *green*. Chlorophyll is only one possible way of extracting energy from sunlight. There are other compounds that work just as well but have different colors.”

“Enough! Enough! Spare me the science lesson.” Agatha grinned. “So off you go to find new worlds. I’ll bet you’ll have some great stories when you get back.”

Madison nodded. “Just like Dad always did.” She sighed. “I wish *he* was here for this.”

“I know, Maddie,” Zane said, reaching across the table to grip her hand. “But he’s here in our hearts. That’s what matters. It’ll just have to be enough.” He waved to Diane. “Hey, can we get another round here?”

“Comin’ up!” Diane said.

As the frosty mugs arrived and Diane departed, Zane hoisted his. “Here’s to Dad—and Daddy’s little girl, who isn’t so little anymore, going out there to be just like him. May she be just as successful—and more.”

Agatha raised her mug. “Hear, hear!”

Madison blushed again, but lifted her own glass. “To Dad,” she said. “Hope I’ll someday be worthy of his name.”

“You already are, Maddie,” Zane said. “You already are.”

Chapter One: Leaving Zharus

March 2, 156 AL

This was it. The day of days. Madison had been so excited she could never have slept through the night without the aid of certain pharmaceuticals. But aid she'd had, and well-rested she woke. And it was good.

Today was the day Madison Brubeck was Outward Bound.

She'd trained hard these last few years, both under the tutelage of her father and at the scout training school in Uplift. She'd learned the importance of survival skills in all environments, several different methods of orienteering and navigation, the basics of establishing communication with aliens or other humans who spoke a different tongue, and excellent self-defense and weapons skills. Sometimes she felt as though her skull was stuffed so full of knowledge that there was no room left over for *her*. But it was all vitally important, she knew. A good 10% of scouts went missing on their first solo run. The number rose to 20% after three. Anything that could increase survival chances was devoutly to be desired.

Madison had done so well in her early training and group practice runs that she was being entrusted with her first solo now, at the young, young age of 21. She could barely believe it, but her solo scout ship was waiting on the launch pad now. She was wearing her flight skinsuit and carrying her helmet as she waited for public transit down to the aerodrome—a bit of an affectation, but she felt entitled. She wouldn't be back for months, or maybe even years.

"Well, you're looking pretty smart today," a purring voice said behind her. Madison turned to see a tawny leopard sitting on its haunches, tail flicking back and forth.

"Well hi, Samantha-pantha," Madison said. "I'm shipping out today. Off to explore the wild black yonder. Guess I won't be seeing you again."

"Oh, you never know," Samantha said. "I might still be here when you get back."

Samantha was a RIDE—Reticulated Intelligence with Drive Extender—one of the sapient mecha unique to this world. Samantha had run into her often over the course of her training in Uplift. The big cat often hung around and chatted with Madison while she waited for her bus.

"I dunno about that," Madison said. "Depending on what I find, I might be gone for years."

"We RIDEs are pretty durable," Samantha said, licking at the back of a paw with her hardlight tongue. "I might just wait for you."

"What would your owner think of that?" Madison asked. She'd never asked about Samantha's owner before, and just assumed she was somewhere nearby and gave Samantha the freedom of the neighborhood.

"Who says I have one?" Samantha winked.

"Oh, sure, you're *emancipated*," Madison smirked. "And just hanging around 'cuz you like me, no doubt."

"Stranger things have happened," Samantha said. "So, you're adventuring out into the distant reaches of space? Sounds exciting."

"Could be. Or could be really boring," Madison said. "Lot of time in transit. I'll

read a lot, watch plenty of vids.”

“Is it really worth it?”

Madison shrugged. “The pay is good. And finding new places for men to live has its rewards.” She sat on the bus bench, helmet in her lap. “And it’s what Dad did. I still miss him, ‘Mantha.”

“I know, Maddie. But I’m sure he was proud of you.” Samantha padded up next to her and rested her head on Madison’s knee.

Madison chuckled and reached down to scratch her behind the ears. “Yeah, he told me so a lot before the end.” She brushed at eyes suddenly moist with the other hand. “I’m gonna miss you, too, Samantha-pantha.”

“Oh, you’ll find stuff to do out there,” Samantha said. “But I’ll miss you, too.”

Then the bus pulled in, and Madison got up to board. “See ya ‘round, cat.”

“See ya, human.” Samantha sat there placidly, watching the bus go.

Madison walked all the way around the *Daydream Believer*, her one-woman scout ship, excited that this would be her last Zharusian preflight check. The sporty little ship was about 100 meters long by thirty wide at its widest point, tapering to a needle-thin nose cone. About half of it was taken up by engines—the lifters and reaction thrusters for maneuvering in atmosphere, and the superluminal gate drive for pushing through subspace. This was the smallest class of ship that would gate, and Madison felt amazingly privileged to be entrusted with it.

Her walk-around preflight finished, she climbed aboard and started running the on-board part of the preflight. All the lights read green—except for a brief yellow flicker on her airlock indicator. Puzzled, she went back to the lock to check it, but found no sign of anything out of the ordinary.

Finally satisfied, she powered up her ship, feeling the mighty engines thrum through the cargo deck plating. After clearing her departure with the tower, she lifted for space.

Madison peered down past her legs through the transparent viewports below. The tan and blue desert was retreating beneath her, and the planet taking on distinctly rounded characteristics.

It would be a few more hours before she was safe to go superluminal, and Madison occupied them by checking the contents of her ship’s small cargo bay—and in particular her EIDE armored suit, which she called Chauncey Mark Two in honor of her father’s old IDE.

Though her father had used Chauncey over his own career as a scout, there hadn’t been any question of Madison using it in hers. As she’d told Zane, there just wasn’t room to take him. Chauncey Two was an all-terrain skimmer bike with a defensive robot form that packed down into a small cube for easy storage. There was just room in the cargo bay to unpack him for a status check.

That occupied her attention for the next little while, and she was almost startled when the chime sounded to let her know she’d reached the jump point.

Madison slid into the pilot’s seat again and checked the readouts. Situation nominal. All systems go. Gate drive charged and operating at peak capacity. Ready for activation.

Maddie flipped up the molly-guard and rested her finger on the “Commit” button. This was it. Her course was already locked in, pointed at a promising sector of

lightly-explored space. The thing was, it was so far away that even at her best speed—150% of the average FTL starliner’s—she’d be four months on the journey, with no turning back once she entered the gate. She could drop out of subspace early if there was an emergency, but the random nature of the exit would mean it could take days to work out her new position for a re-jump.

Four months was a long time to spend alone, but she had a cryo-capsule in the hold she could resort to if she got *too* bored. Meanwhile, there was plenty of studying to do, because no scout ever knew it all—especially not one only 21 years old.

But the important thing was, once she pressed that button, she really *was* “committed.” She would be well and truly on her way.

Of course, Madison reflected, she had actually been committed from the moment she had accepted the assignment. If she did turn around and go back now, the results would be ruinous to her career, and cast a pall over her Dad’s legacy. And she couldn’t have that.

So, recognizing that her choice here was really just an illusion anyway, Madison pushed the button. The gate drive kicked in, saturating the space in front of the ship with quantum energy. Moments later, the *Daydream Believer* sank out of sight into an invisible ocean, and was gone from the sidereal universe in the blink of an eye.

As Madison leaned back in the acceleration couch, congratulating herself on a successful jump, a familiar voice behind her said cheerfully, “And we’re off!”

Madison spun her chair and stared in disbelief. “*Samantha?* You can’t be here!”

“Can and am,” the leopardess said smugly, sitting on her haunches and licking one front paw with a hardlight tongue. “And I’m given to understand you can’t exactly turn around and dump me out now, either.”

“But...you’re breaking half a dozen laws just by *being* here!” Madison said. “You’re making *me* break them! It’s illegal to take RIDEs outsystem, everybody knows that!”

Samantha snorted. “Oh, come on. You know as well as I do those laws are meant to keep us out of the grasping hands of Earth and the colonies, and we’re heading in exactly the opposite direction from there,” she said. “No one out that-a-way except the little green men. Me, I wanna see some of the galaxy. Anyway, when you get right down to it, that EIDE of yours contains exactly the same illicit tech, but you don’t have any problems taking *it* along.”

Madison frowned. “You know I’m only supplied for one here, right?”

“Please, this isn’t ‘The Cold Equations.’ I don’t eat, drink, or breathe, and I take less power to run than your average media projector. You’ve got power to spare.”

“What if you break down?” Madison asked. “We’re not exactly near a repair shop.”

“You’ve got a fabber,” Samantha pointed out quite reasonably. “I have the plans for every part that makes me up. You could fab a completely new me from scratch, if you had the time. I even brought along some storage paks with a few kilos of high-grade Q and other rare elements you’d need for fabbing sarium or whatever. And like I said, my tech’s not so different from ‘Chauncey Mark Two’ when you get right down to it—if you can fix it, you can fix me. Trust me, I got it covered.”

Madison facepalmed. Now she wasn’t just smuggling a RIDE, she was smuggling *qubitite*, too. This just kept getting better and better. “What about your owner? Am I

going to find a theft warrant out for me when I get back?"

"I...don't have an owner," Samantha said, looking down. "She died last year in a skimmer accident. I...didn't feel like ending up in an estate sale and ending up owned by someone else before I could even...well, you know. So I broke fetter and erased the ownership records. I could have left for one of the RIDE camps in the desert, but...well, I like being around people. And then I met you."

"So you stowed away on my scout mission."

"Look, I know you're mad, and I'm sorry about that, but I thought, y'know, maybe I can help you. I'll be a lot better companion than that silly EIDE. I've got better shielding, maneuverability, and firepower. And besides, I can keep you company."

"You know my family doesn't *do* RIDes," Madison said. "We don't want anything to mess with our bodies, no matter how good the tech is."

Samantha's ears drooped a little, but she quickly rallied. "I can still keep you company. And be a skimmer you can ride while wearing Chauncey for extra protection."

"Hmph," Madison grunted. Then she shrugged. "Well, it's not as if you've left me much choice. And even if we don't Fuse, I guess you'll still be handy for carrying sample bags and things."

"That's the spirit!" Samantha said, her tail swishing excitedly.

Madison glowered. "Be warned, I'm gonna work you to within a centimeter of your life, you pesky stowaway."

Samantha nodded, and saluted with a forepaw. "Aye aye, ma'am. Cabin girl and general dogsbody Samantha the RIDE, reporting for duty!"

Madison snorted, amused despite herself. "Can a cat *be* a dogsbody?"

"I'm sure we can if we try real hard, ma'am!" Samantha said.

"Oh, knock it off, you," Madison said. "All right, I guess I have to admit it will be nice to have someone to talk to. Even if they're probably gonna crucify us when we get back."

"Maybe you'll find some nice habitable planets and they'll forgive you," Samantha suggested.

"You really don't know much about scouting, do you?" Madison asked.

"Habitable planets are a dime a dozen. There's at least five or six very good candidates for colonization already spotted, explored, and cataloged that I know of, and probably two or three times that many no one's told me about."

Samantha blinked. "I hadn't heard about this. Why aren't there more colonies, then?"

"Who'd found them? Nobody has anyone to spare for colonists. Earth's lost most of its population already, and the people rattle around in most of the rest of the colonies like peas in a pod. Just look at the population density on Zharus."

"I guess that's a point," Samantha admitted. "But what about, like, political or religious refugee movements?"

"Odds are all they have to do is hop a liner to another colony and they'll find more tolerance," Maddie said. "Not to mention an already-existing civilized infrastructure that they don't have to build themselves from scratch."

"Huh. Okay, I guess I can see that," Samantha said.

"Besides, it takes a lot of time and money to establish a new colony," Madison said, warming to her subject. "And if other colonies or even Earth got wind of a new one before it was ready, they might want to shut it down to avoid diluting their own power

base.” She shook her head. “Hell, the main reason they don’t want *your* kind poking your whiskery little noses off-planet is that *Zharus* doesn’t feel ready yet to take on Earth, and it’s been around for a hundred-fifty-odd years.”

“That’s crazy,” Samantha said. “Whatever happened to the right to pursue happiness in your own way?”

Madison shrugged. “Apparently it expired. At least for those who aren’t scouts. Sometimes I wonder just how many of those scouts who ‘disappear’ just decide to set up their own little one-person colonies on one of the habitable planets they’ve found.”

“Get away from the rat race, huh?” Samantha said.

“The kind of people who become scouts aren’t always the most social sorts,” Madison said. She unstrapped from the chair and got to her feet. “So! If I’m expected to maintain you, I might as well start learning what makes you tick. Let’s head down to the maint area and you can show me your parts.”

Samantha blinked. “Really? On the first date?”

Madison rolled her eyes. “Maaaaantha...”

“All right, all right, I’m going!” Samantha turned and padded down the corridor, followed by Madison. And so the two shipmates began the process of learning more about each other.

Chapter Two: In Transit

Over the days that followed, Madison made an exhaustive study of Samantha's systems. It was, after all, something new to do, and new things to do were going to be at a premium over the next few months, Madison could tell.

She was mildly surprised to find that many of Samantha's components were very similar to Chauncey II's parts. In fact, a RI's DE shell was really just a slightly fancier EIDE with the add-ons a RI needed not to go nuts from sense-dep. With what she already knew about Chaunceys I and II, she could maintain Samantha indefinitely. "I guess I can add 'RIDE mechanic' to my business card," Madison said wryly as she shut down the maint bay sensors and Samantha hopped down from the table. "Which is pretty funny given that I've never Fused one and don't intend to."

"Those who can, do; those who can't, teach?" Samantha asked with a twinkle in her eye.

"Hmph. You're pretty cheerful lately," Madison said. "Thought you'd be more disappointed, since you'd stowed away to be my Fuse partner and all."

"I can be your partner without ever having to Fuse with you," Samantha said, licking a paw. "And you never know...it's always possible someday on some remote planet Chauncey might break down and you won't have any choice." At Madison's look, she added, "Oh don't worry, I'm not going to resort to sabotage. That would be cheating. I want a *legit* win. Wouldn't be any point in the game, else."

"Why do you even *want* to Fuse so much?" Madison said. "Yeah, yeah, I know, thumbs and all, but you've gotta have someone else's body inside of you to do it. Someone who could make you do things you don't want to do. I mean...to me that just sounds like *ick*."

"I dunno, why would *you* want to have some other human stick the same bit of himself he pees with inside of you and squirt you full of sticky slime?" Samantha said. "I mean...to me *that* just sounds like ick."

"Okay, I guess that's *touché*," Madison admitted. "But you're not seriously telling me that Fusing is like *sex*?"

"Well, not all the time," Samantha admitted. "More like...snuggling, I guess. Haven't you ever wished you could cuddle up with someone so tightly you surrounded him, or him you? Be all warm and cozy together...your bodies touching at every possible point?"

"I don't...think so?" Madison said.

Samantha shook her head. "Girl, you *have* missed out. And I guess you'll keep right on missing out for the next few years."

"I'll just have to survive, I suppose," Madison said dryly. "But what about the...well, being *enslaved* part? It really *sucks* you RIDEs don't have more rights, and that's almost as big a reason we Brubecks don't Fuse as the whole body-modding thing."

"It doesn't *have* to be that way, any more than you have to let the guy always be on top," Samantha said. "The best RIDE-rider relationships are partnerships. Give and take, know when to relax and let the other guy have control, that sorta thing." She gave her head a toss, shrugging in her fashion. "I think you'd be that kind of partner with me," she said more quietly. "When you're ready, anyway."

Madison blinked, taken aback. "Well...if I ever *did* Fuse with you, that's probably

how it would be. But that's just not on the table right now."

Samantha nodded. "I know. But someday...wait and see."

"Maybe," Madison admitted. "I won't ever say *never*. But...I can't see it happening soon."

Samantha nodded. "Fair enough." She tossed her head again. "And Fuse or not, it's nice to know there's no way I can be captured and dragged off to the market anymore. I'd still rather be here right now than back on Zharus."

Madison just shook her head. "Let's see if you still feel that way after a month or two of nothing to do."

Over the next couple of weeks, Madison and Samantha got to know each other better in other ways. They talked a lot, Samantha about her past owners and Madison about her father and her scout training. They also watched a lot of old vids from the collection Madison's Dad had bequeathed. Despite the rampant 20th century craziness of Zharus, there were plenty of titles Samantha hadn't seen yet.

But they couldn't do things together *all* the time. Madison still needed to spend a certain amount of time each day studying to keep her skills sharp and to learn more about the planets she would be checking out. And while Samantha could help out with some of it—in particular the VR sims, which she could run a lot better than the *Daydream Believer's* on-board computer—some of it was book-learning that Maddie had to do alone and undisturbed.

And Samantha soon found she'd exhausted her own supply of "things to do alone." She could have watched more of Maddie's vids, of course, but that was more fun together. And the VR sims she had, such as solo Nature Range, soon began to pall without other RIDEs to participate. Finally, Samantha took to shutting herself down for half the day to give Madison the time alone she needed.

Madison didn't really mind. She had the kind of personality that thrived on time alone, or she'd never have gone into scouting in the first place. When they'd been younger, Dad had tested all three Brubeck siblings by leaving them each for a whole month in an isolated Dry Ocean research station with plenty to read and watch but no external net or comm lines except for an emergency retrieval signal. Agatha lasted one week, Zane two and a half. Madison had not only lasted out the month but had been a little surprised and disappointed when it was over. That was when Clint had finally known for sure he'd at least raised *one* scout.

But for all of that, Madison realized, she was still glad Samantha had stowed away. Just because she *could* get along without company didn't mean she *preferred* to, and having someone else to talk to even part of the time would stretch how long she could be alone.

She couldn't recall hearing of any other scouts who took RIDEs along, but she was already pondering how to recommend it when she got back to Zharus. After all, when you got right down to it, Samantha was right—by the letter of the law, Zharusian EIDEs weren't exactly kosher to take out-system either.

And so life marched on, as the *Daydream Believer* drew ever closer to the first system on Madison's itinerary. The star's name in the ancient Earth catalogs was an unpronounceable mess of Greek letters, but the first scout to visit had named its one habitable planet "New Indiana," as was his right. Madison frankly thought it was a silly name for a place that had never had sophonts of any kind, let alone Indians, but not her

place to argue with someone else's decision. It would probably be changed if anyone ever did found a colony here, anyway. And if all went well, she might get to name a system or two herself on this trip.

Her stop here would be in the nature of a follow-up visit to cross-check and see if the first scout's readings were accurate, and also to visit some parts of the world he hadn't. She would also stop by the mostly-airless outer worlds in the system and collect the data from the sensor probes that scout had planted. Picking up the data in person was still faster than speed-of-light comm and cheaper than FTL message torpedoes. And it wasn't as if it was exactly *urgent* at any rate, what with colonization suspended indefinitely as it was.

The day before they were due to make systemfall, Samantha padded in to join Madison on the flight deck. "Hey."

Madison nodded. "Hey, 'Mantha-pantha."

"I was looking over the files on this place we'll be visiting," Samantha said, sitting on her haunches next to Madison's acceleration couch and peering out the viewport ahead. "Is it true they found alien ruins here?"

"Well, calling them 'ruins' is really overstating the case. Nobody really knows *what* they are, and there's a whole lot of argument. So far they haven't been widely mentioned outside of the Scouts, because we just don't know what to make of them yet. There's even some concern that if folks knew about them they might start planning colonization efforts to study them, and as touchy as colonial politics are right now nobody wants that."

"So what are they?" Samantha asked.

"Traces in geological layers that could be millions of years old. Hundreds of thousands at the least. Geological dating still isn't an exact science." Madison shrugged. "There's not much there. No traces of structure at all—though after that much time, there wouldn't be. Just a few highly-out-of-place minerals and elements."

"Like what?" Samantha asked, ears perking forward.

"As I said, there's a lot of argument. Are they refined metals and alloys? Or just really rich metal asteroid impacts? Either way, they're not found at all in the layers above or below. Some people even swear they've found traces of cavorite and qubitium, though the amounts we're talking about are *so* small they could have been contamination from our own devices on the sampling equipment. And similar traces of unknown substances that *could* be other metamaterials." She shrugged. "That's one of the reasons we've been pushing the scouting program. If these *are* other metamaterials used by a civilization that also used cavorite and qubitite, and we could find their origin worlds, who knows what properties they might have?"

"That's pretty heavy," Samantha said. "I can see why you'd want to keep it to yourselves. Even apart from the politics, it could start religious debates, maybe even wars."

"Yeah. I was pretty poleaxed when the instructors first told me. Is *that* why we've never met other intelligent species? We're late? Or they were early?" She shrugged. "One thing's for sure—there's never been signs of any of this stuff on Earth. So the 'ancient astronaut' people are all wet."

The next day, the *Daydream Believer* passed by the outer gas giant of Gary, and retrieved the sensor logs from probes planted on two of its moons. The moons hadn't been named beyond catalog numbers, for which small favors Madison was thankful. She

passed the data across to Samantha to crunch, since she had a better computer than the ship's. "Anything interesting?"

"Doesn't look like it, beyond a whole bunch of scientific survey readings," Samantha said, wrinkling her nose. "But if I see anything different, I'll let you know."

"Good." Madison nodded. "Then I think we're done out here." She locked in a course for the inner system, and kicked in the sublight engines. "Next stop: planetfall."

Chapter Three: New Indiana

July 1, 156 AL

They approached the planet of New Indiana over the next several hours, watching the blue-green orb grow larger in their viewscreen and through the transparent aluminum viewports. “Looks just like any other Earth-type planet, don’t you think?” Madison said.

“I wouldn’t know, I haven’t seen that many,” Samantha said, tailtip flicking. “Looking forward to getting down on it, though.”

“Yeah, me too,” Madison confessed. “I’ve been on other planets before, in training and apprenticeships, but there’s just something special about your first solo trip. I’m gonna go down to the hold and check over Chauncey one more time before we make planetfall.”

“Be still, my beating central circulation pump,” Samantha said dryly. “You know, you could just forget about that tin can and Fuse with me.”

Madison rolled her eyes. “We’ve been over this. I prefer the tech that I *know*.”

“But you know me, too,” Samantha said. “You’ve studied my every part. You know I’m the exact same tech as the rustbucket. I just have a qubitite core with kitty genes, too.”

“Yeah, and that’s the part that worries me,” Madison said, leaving the flight deck. Samantha sighed, and settled down to watch the world grow closer.

At last they swung into orbit, and the planet spread itself out beneath them. Samantha peered excitedly through one of the lower viewports, tail lashing now. “When do we go down?”

“Patience, young padawan,” Madison said, grinning. “We’ll take a few orbits first, so we can download records from the survey sats, and do some mapping of our own and compare current features with the maps on file. Then we’ll pick out our landing sites and go visit.”

Unlike Zharus, New Indiana had three large and about ten smaller continents scattered around its circumference, including two small landmasses at the poles. The surface area was about 60% water, and it matched the same pattern as Earth and Zharus of having salty seas and freshwater inland lakes. Ice caps were a little smaller than Earth’s, but were present on both polar landmasses.

“We’ll touch down on the large central continent first, in the northern hemisphere temperate zone,” Madison decided. “Take some survey samples, do a little exploring and mapping, then take off for another spot, lather, rinse, repeat. I want to hit some spots in all the climate bands.”

“What’re we waiting for, let’s go!” Samantha purred.

“All right, all right.” Madison grinned. “Firing retros now.” She rested her hands on the control board, preparing to take manual control if necessary, and let the ship find its way down. The ship was buffeted by high-atmosphere air currents as it sliced down into the atmosphere, but the inertial dampers kept the shaking to a minimum. The world lost its curvature, and geographic features grew larger.

The ship passed over forests of oddly-shaped light green trees interspersed with grass-covered plains. “Looks like herds of some kind of ruminants there,” Samantha

said, nodding down and to starboard. "I think they were mentioned in the first scout's reports."

"I see them," Madison said. "We'll see if we can get tissue samples if there's any near where we land. Let's start looking for a good spot to set down."

After a few minutes of scanning, they found a level plain overlooking a large freshwater lake. They fired a seismic probe to make sure there weren't any caves or sinkholes that could undermine the ship, then Madison carefully lowered it to a landing. As the thrumming of the engines faded, Madison and Samantha looked at each other excitedly. "Well," Madison said, "here we are."

Samantha danced in place. "Let's go!"

"Meet me in the airlock in five minutes," Madison said. "Gotta get suited up."

"Sensors say the place has a breathable atmosphere," Samantha pointed out.

"Yeah, but we don't know the biology yet. It's possible there might be microbes that can make humans sick. For that matter, humans might have microbes that can make this place sick. That's part of what the tissue samples are for. We'll be undergoing surface decontam when we go out and when we come back, every time."

Samantha rolled her eyes. "Yes, Mommy."

Madison chuckled. "Don't worry. There's a couple planets on the itinerary where we've been cleared for suit-free. Not like it should make any difference to you, you're not flesh and blood anyway."

"Yeah, but decons are annoying."

"Anyway, I'll be at the airlock in five minutes." Madison headed back down to the cargo bay to suit up.

A few minutes later, Madison clomped into the airlock wearing an environment suit under her Chauncey Mark Two EIDE's Fuser form. She looked like a large dome-faced robot, with lifter pods and other bike parts hanging off the sides and back. There was barely room in the lock for both her and Samantha plus the sample cart, but they made it. Samantha dropped her hardlight pelt, and the sterilizing beams of ultraviolet light played over them from all angles for several minutes. At last, the projectors flickered out. "Okay, we're safe to go. Shall we?"

"Let's!" Samantha said, bringing her hardlight back up and padding forward as the outer door opened. She bounced down the ramp onto the grass. "That's one small step for kitty, one giant leap for RIDEkind!"

Madison laughed. "Nice." She followed more sedately down onto the grass and looked around. "So...here we are."

"Do you think I'm the first RIDE to set paw on another planet?" Samantha asked. "Other than Wednesday, I mean?"

Madison considered. "Eh...I doubt it. No cordon is airtight. I'm sure there must have been some smuggled offworld before now. But as far as I know you're the first to go with a Scout."

Samantha looked around, nostrils dilating as she sniffed the air. "Interesting scents. It *smells* alien." She lowered her head to peer at the grass. "Huh. Take a look at this."

"Hmm?" Madison knelt, a little awkwardly in the EIDE suit, and kicked up magnification on her helmet viewer to examine the grass. It was green veined with blue, and the edges were serrated, like a saw.

"I wouldn't go barefoot in this, if they did let you out of the suit," Samantha said.

“Those edges are sharp. If I weren’t hardlight, I’d probably have bleeding paws.”

“Mmm. We’ll make a note of that,” Madison said. “I wonder if it’s meant to collect blood as fertilizer.”

“That would be...kind of creepy,” Samantha said.

“In nature, lots of things are,” Madison replied. “Anyway, let’s get to sampling.” She sent a signal to the sample cart, and it trundled down the ramp on its lifter cushion to settle next to them. She took a small box off of it and set it down on the grass, and a moment later lifted it away to reveal a rectangle of soil denuded of its turf.

“One down, a zillion to go,” Samantha said, leaning over to sniff at the soil. “Huh, smells like iodine.”

“Not surprising,” Madison said. “I think this planet’s biology uses it in a greater role than ours. We’ll know more when the teams back home have had some time to study what we bring back.”

“Or at least *someone* will know,” Samantha said. “We’ll probably be on to something else by then.”

“True,” Madison said. “But that’s how the system works.”

Samantha sniffed at the soil again, and made a show of sneezing. “I don’t get it. This is a whole other *world*. There should be teams of scientists out here, with self-contained outposts doing round-the-clock study. Just the two of us...we can’t even scratch the surface.”

“It’s like I said earlier. Politics,” Madison said. “If we tried even a small-scale scientific study, someone would take it as the first step toward opening up new colonies, people would get bent out of shape...might even lead to war.”

“Seriously?” Samantha said.

“Well, wars have been started over some pretty stupid things,” Madison said, selecting another sample box. “Look at you guys. The war *you* were invented for kicked off after Nextus took someone’s camera batteries away.”

“Point,” Samantha admitted.

“Anyway, we just don’t have the manpower for something like that, when you get right down to it,” Madison said. “We’re stretched pretty thin just studying Rodinia back home. These survey runs...they’re basically just our way of saying ‘Shotgun!’ Sort of ‘reserving’ the right to do something with these planets later...maybe.”

Samantha nodded. “I guess I can see that.”

“So now we need to see about getting samples from one of those ruminants,” Madison said, nodding to a small herd of them grazing a couple of clicks away. They were odd-looking beasts—large and shaggy, like yaks, but with narrower heads, kind of kangaroo-shaped. They had six legs, and the ability to rear up their front set of legs like a centaur for reaching foliage on the short, broad trees that dotted the plain here and there. “If we can stun it without hurting it too badly anyway. We don’t know enough about their physiology yet to come up with a tranquilizer we can be sure won’t be toxic, so that leaves some kind of electrical stunner. If we can get the voltage right.”

“Hmm,” Samantha said. “I think I might be able to bring one of them down without hurting it. Get me that bio-sampling kit from the cart, would you? Just slap it on my shoulder there.”

“All right...?” Madison said dubiously, removing the boxy device from the cart and pressing it to Samantha’s shoulder. With a click it latched into place.

“I’ll be right back.” The leopard bounded off across the plains, picking out a

straggler from the herd and launching herself into the air. By the time the beast noticed, it was too late. It went over onto its side with a confused bleat, as the rest of the herd broke into a panicked gallop. Samantha straddled the ruminant, her weight holding it down, while she pressed the box against it and triggered the sample-collecting machinery.

“Nicely done!” Madison said, Chauncey’s gauntlets making a metallic clanking as she applauded.

“I take it we’re not going to capture and cryo-freeze one to take it back with us?” Samantha said, trotting back. The ruminant got back to its feet, shook its head confusedly, and galloped away to catch up with the rest of its herd.

“We don’t know enough about their biology to be sure we could freeze it safely,” Madison said. “Besides, if we did that on every planet we visited, we’d fill the cargo bay before we were halfway through our run.” She detached the box from Samantha’s shoulder and put it back on the cart.

“So what now?” Samantha asked.

Madison looked around, then pointed west. “I think I saw a forest over that way as we came in. Might as well go get some samples there, too.”

“Works for me. Hold on a sec.” Samantha’s hardlight winked out, leaving a metallic cat standing there, then she unfolded her body into a sleek feline-themed skimmer cycle. “Climb on.”

“Are you sure? We’re pretty heavy,” Madison said.

Samantha snorted. “You’ve seen my specs. I’ve got power to spare.”

“Oh, right.” Madison carefully straddled the bike, and Samantha backed up to latch onto the sample cart with a hardlight hitch. Then they whizzed away over the plain.

Over the next few days, Madison and Samantha made many forays into all different areas of the planet. They generally only stayed in any particular spot for a few hours, just long enough to gather samples and move on. While it was nice being on a planet again, Madison didn’t feel any particular urge to stay here. She couldn’t take her suit off outside the ship, so it really wasn’t all that different from being out in space.

Chauncey operated as expected, on par for a basic suit of power armor. Madison had opted for a version without a self-motivating brainbox, as she wasn’t sure she trusted putting her body inside something that could think faster than she could. He operated fine as far as he went, though sometimes Madison caught herself wondering what it would be like to Fuse with Samantha. She seemed a lot more flexible and sure-footed in some ways than Chauncey. Nonetheless, Madison resolved to hold fast. She was getting on well enough with Chauncey, and that was what mattered.

But even without Fusing, Samantha came in very handy for packing sampling and survey equipment into terrain the cart couldn’t navigate. And she was company. Madison was very glad to have her along, and resolved anew to recommend adding RIDEs to scout survey teams when they got back to Zharus. Hopefully she wouldn’t be in too much trouble for them to listen to her.

The planet was full of natural wonders, as most planets are. High waterfalls, blue lakes, snowy mountains, deep canyons, dense forests and jungles. There were many kinds of herbivore, and just as many kinds of predator. Once a big critter that seemed to

be a cross between a koala, a grizzly bear, and a tiger decided to find out if Samantha was good to eat, but a quick jolt of electricity through her shell plating convinced it to seek its dinner elsewhere.

One of the canyons they visited was the one with access to the geological layer of alien material that Madison had mentioned earlier. “Doesn’t look like much, does it?” Samantha mused. “Just a kind of a dark line through the rock. It doesn’t even glitter, or anything. You’d expect it ought to glitter.”

Madison nodded. “Nobody would even have noticed it if they hadn’t run all the layers through analysis as a matter of course. Even then, nobody really understood what they had until they started getting nearly identical matches from multiple different planets. It’s a mystery.”

“Well, now we’ll have our very own sample of it to examine for ourselves,” Samantha said, extending the rock-cutting blades from the sample kit she was wearing today. “I look forward to getting my own scanners on it.”

“Ship’s lab has better ones,” Madison said.

“Well, that too. Either way, if it’s like you say it is, it’ll be amazing just to examine it first-hand.” Samantha safely stowed the chunk of rock in a sample container, and they continued with their sampling. On the last stop of the last day of the survey, they stood on a high promontory above one of the planet’s most scenic canyons and watched the sun set over it, together. “Well, this is it,” Madison said. “Last sunset we’ll see for a while.”

Samantha nodded. “Then away we go, off to points unknown...stuck in a little tin box for months on end again.”

Madison nodded. “Yeah. Though on the bright side, we’ll have plenty of stuff to do on the way. Studying, documenting, and collating. The less glamorous part of our job, but at least it’s something to do.”

“Let’s hear it for having something to do,” Samantha said cheerfully.

“So what did you think of your first alien planet?” Madison asked.

“It was interesting,” Samantha said. “If nothing else, it’s an experience that no other RIDE back home will have had. I’m sure that properly edited copies of my memories will be very popular on the ‘boards.”

Madison chuckled. “Is that the RIDE equivalent of spinning a yarn so someone buys you a drink?”

“Something like that,” Samantha said, purring.

They stood together in silence for a while longer, watching the sun sink out of sight. Then Madison stretched, the servos in Chauncey whirring. “Well, I guess that’s that. C’mon, ‘manthapantha, let’s get off this rock.” They filed aboard the *Daydream Believer*, paused in the lock to take one last look at the world they were leaving, then cycled through decontamination. A few minutes later, the ship lifted away.

Once they’d made orbit, Madison didn’t see any need to wait around. Within minutes, she’d activated the sublight drive to take them out of the star system to their next jump point. Along the way, the ship’s astrographic sensors ran at full tilt, recording stellar data and comparing it to the star charts on file to look for anything interesting. Already the computer was picking out some possible prospects for future exploration, but none of them was any closer than their next scheduled planetary visit, so they could be tabled for now. Madison resolved to revisit them after their next planetfall, however.

Samantha busied herself linking up to the sensor suites in the *Daydream Believer's* on-board lab, analyzing the sample of the trace-element layer to a fare-thee-well. "They're right," she said at last. "I found traces of cavorite and qubitite—almost small enough to be statistical noise, but not quite. They're definitely in there."

"I believe I did mention that," Madison said, chuckling.

"Well, yeah, but it's always best to see for yourself," Samantha said. "And, like you said, I found several other unidentifiable trace elements that could be other metamaterials. No idea what they do—quantities are too small to test, and I certainly can't synthesize them. But I do know one thing for sure."

"Oh, and what's that?" Madison asked.

"Well, to paraphrase Will Rogers, I never metamaterial I didn't like!" Samantha quickly danced out of the way as Madison threw a seat cushion at her.

The next planet was only three months away, and Madison and Samantha spent most of it working. Samantha found processing the samples and readings they'd taken intriguing enough work that she didn't feel the urge to go into passive mode as much, and the movies and TV shows they watched in the evenings also helped to pass the time.

When they were a few days out from the next world, Madison put their studies of New Indiana on hold and brought up details from the scout database. "What we're looking at here is a riddle wrapped in a mystery wrapped in an enigma," Madison said, as a reddish-brown orb appeared on the display. "Looks like it ought to be a Mars-like planet. No visible liquid water or life signs of any kind, so most ships just passed it up so far. Thought the system didn't have any life-capable worlds in it, never took a closer look. But then someone sent a probe through the inner system and noticed that against all logic, the place has an oxy-nitro atmosphere in life-supporting density."

"Intriguing," Samantha said. "Some sort of underground ecosystem maybe?"

"That's the best guess. Anyway, we were the first ship heading this way, so we get to be the initial contact," Madison said. "Do the preliminary data-gathering, set probes, land in a few spots to take a look around maybe. Then someone else will come along and follow up, like we did at New Indy."

"So do we get to name this one?" Samantha asked.

"Sadly, no," Madison said. "Well, we could try, but I doubt it would stick. The wag who interpreted the probe data hung a name on it, and it was so appropriate everyone adopted it."

"So what is it?" Samantha asked.

Madison blew the image up until it filled the entire screen, and intoned, "Barsoom!"

Chapter Four: Barsoom

November 8, 156 AL

Their approach to the system was much like they'd done in New Indiana, plotting a course to bring them by the outer gas giants. This time they were placing probes, not retrieving data, but the time it took was about the same. They approached the rolling rock of Barsoom over the next day, watching it grow bigger in their scopes. Samantha again spent long hours staring out the transparent aluminum viewports, watching it grow ever bigger.

"You could just go passive until we get there, you know," Madison said, chuckling.

"Not when we're this close," Samantha said, licking a paw. "It would be cheating."

At last they swung into orbit, and Madison launched a few satellite probes and kicked in the *Daydream Believer's* own camera suite. "So, when do we go down?" Samantha asked, tail twitching.

"Not for another couple of days," Madison said. "We need to get high-res imagery of every square klick of the planet before we pick out the best spots to visit."

"Awww," Samantha grumbled.

"If you want us to get down there faster, help me collate the data coming in from the sats with what we get from our own cameras," Madison said.

"I'd be doing that *anyway*," Samantha pointed out.

"Well, there you go then," Madison smirked. "Maybe you'll get so caught up in it you forget to worry about when we land."

As Madison had expected, Samantha soon lost herself in the imagery and spent hours poring over it, picking out the most likely landing spots. She cross-referenced discolorations with similar imagery from Mars, Eridani, and other planets, trying to figure out which ones might represent cave mouths. Then one day, Madison opened her eyes in her bunk to find an eager Samantha sitting there peering at her, muzzle centimeters from her face. "Gah!" Madison said, starting. "Okay, that's an...interesting thing to wake up to. What is it, 'mantha?"

The leopard's tail lashed excitedly. "You really need to see what I've just found in the scans! I was even tempted to wake you up, but then I realized it wasn't exactly *urgent*. Just *big*."

"Okay, you've piqued my interest." Madison pulled on her khakis. "What is it?"

"It's on the screen up on the flight deck, come on!" Samantha said, padding forward.

Madison slid into the acceleration couch and looked at the main display. It showed a patch of ruddy-brown landscape, with a darker square in the middle of it.

"Okay, what am I looking at here?"

"That's the question, isn't it?" Samantha said. "That square is about half a klick across. And it's, well, *square*. Too regular to be natural."

"You sure of that?" Madison asked. "This isn't another Face of Mars thing?"

"I've checked shots from the birds from several different angles," Samantha said. "Basically, it looks like a square-shaped hole or shaft in the ground."

"Crazy," Madison said. "Well, I think we've found one of our landing sites."

Madison decided that the mysterious square shouldn't be their *first* landing site, however. "I want to check out some natural formations first, just to get a baseline for what this world looks like normally just in case that square is artificial," she said.

"Sounds good to me," Samantha said. "Let's just get on down there, 'kay?"

"All right, all right," Madison said. "*Some* people are just *soooo* impatient, geez!" But she chuckled as she flipped switches and shoved levers forward to angle the ship's nose down into the mysteriously thick atmosphere. An hour later, they were cruising at low altitude over a desert landscape that would have looked right at home back in the Dry Ocean.

"Well, this is nostalgic," Samantha said.

"Homesick already, 'mantha?" Madison teased.

"I didn't say I was homesick. Just...nostalgic," Samantha purred. "That spot we picked out as likely to have caves is just ahead."

They'd picked a zone that would be just after sunrise when they arrived, so that the low angle of the sun would make shadows more visible and caves easier to spot, they hoped. As they topped a small rise, they found a dry canyon below them. "That looks promising," Madison said. "There must have been surface water here sometime in the distant past. Like on Mars."

"Yeah," Samantha said. "But unlike Mars, there must still be active life here somewhere, or else all the oxy would be locked up in the red rocks."

"So, we go upstream or down?" Madison asked.

"Let's see where the water would have been flowing to," Samantha said. "If the rainfall came from hills rather than a spring or something, we'd be a lot likelier to find something solid where it ended than where it began."

"Sounds reasonable," Madison said, bringing the *Daydream Believer* around in a sweeping curve to starboard. "Keep an eye out for any cave openings."

"Aye aye, Captain!" Samantha said, slapping a paw to her forehead in a salute.

Madison giggled. "Silly kitty."

They cruised slowly down the canyon, cameras and radar probing as well as their eyes. Nonetheless, it was Samantha's keen sight that spotted the shadow in the canyon wall first. "Look there!"

"Good eyes," Madison said. "Or optic sensors, whatever. Hmm. I think we'll need to land on the plain above it, and use our lifters to hop down."

"Works for me. I guess this is another suits-and-decontam planet, right?" Samantha said.

"Afraid so, 'mantha," Madison said, chuckling at the cat's loud sigh. "Look on the bright side. We're going to be setting foot on a world *no one's* ever visited before. You'll be the first RIDE ever on an unexplored planet. That's historical, that is."

"Mmm...guess you're right there," Samantha purred. "Make sure you get my good side when you're recording it for posterity."

"C'mon, you feline Armstrong. Let's get suited up and head to the airlock. I think we'll put the sample gear on you and leave the cart here. We don't know what the terrain will be like in that cave."

Samantha nodded. "Works. See you in the lock."

Ensued in Chauncey, straddling Samantha's bike form, Madison descended over

the canyon rim toward the cave mouth. It was about three meters across, amply large enough to hover directly in as the bike. Samantha switched on the super-bright spots Madison had added to her for exploring, and Madison switched on Chauncey's shoulder lamps. They saw the cave led gently downward and the floor was relatively smooth. "Maybe we could have brought the cart after all," Madison said.

"No point second-guessing now," Samantha said. "We could get it on our second trip if we need to." She moved forward slowly, lights sweeping for any signs of irregularity in the floor they could accidentally bump into.

"So what do you think of your first unexplored world?" Madison asked as they cruised deeper into the cave.

"Kinda creepy, when you get right down to it," Samantha said. "I keep expecting a wild Thark to lunge out at me."

"You're taking the name a little too literally, don't you think?" Madison said.

"Well, I don't know," Samantha said. "If we keep exploring down Burroughs..." Madison giggled and bapped her on the dashboard.

About a kilometer into the cave, Madison pulled back on Samantha's handlebars to stop moving forward. "Hang on. Shut down the lights. Kill all your lights." She turned off Chauncey's spots, and Samantha did the same, then shut down her panel gauges and everything else that shed illumination.

"Hey, you're right," Samantha said. "There's light ahead."

"Gimme a minute," Madison said. "My eyes don't adjust as fast as yours."

"You could use Chauncey's light-amp, you know," Samantha said.

"That would be cheating," Madison said. "Okay, I think I'm starting to see it. There's some kind of dim glow up there. Looks like there's another chamber just ahead. Is it open to the sky? I didn't think I saw any holes in the ground..."

"Only one way to find out!" Samantha moved forward again, more carefully, using the ambient light to navigate so as not to spoil Madison's night vision. A few moments later, they entered the chamber.

"Wow..." Madison said, staring through Chauncey's helmet. The chamber had a high domed ceiling, about ten meters high at the apex. Light filtered down in shafts from several spots, striking a carpet of vegetation on the floor below. The plants were low, broad-leafed, and so dark blue they were almost black. A stream trickled through the room, babbling gently, entering and leaving from holes too small to squeeze through.

"What're those light sources?" Madison asked.

"Let's check." Samantha moved slowly into the middle of the room, then lifted up to the ceiling.

Madison reached out to touch one of the glowing spots, and her gauntlet made a metallic clink against crystal. "Some kind of natural prism, I think. It must be bringing sunlight down from the surface." She glanced down again. "And the plants are dark so as to trap every bit of energy out of the light that they can."

"Very high concentration of oxygen in here," Samantha said. "Too bad you can't smell it. Smells very, well, green."

"This must be the secret, or at least part of it," Madison said.

"So, do we want to go deeper into the cave? The passage continues out the other side," Samantha said.

"Nah," Madison decided after a moment. "This is what we came for. Let's get

samples and head on to the next site.”

“Righto!” Samantha lowered to the ground, landing just outside of the room so as not to crush any plants. Together they got samples of the soil, the water, and the plants themselves. Then Madison knocked small chunks out of the stone wall and one of the prism shafts.

“Okay, we’ve got what we need,” Madison said. “Let’s go.” Samantha turned around, and they headed back the way they came.

They visited several more cave sites before working up to the one they’d taken to calling “Squarehole.” In all of them they found much the same sorts of vegetation and light shafts. It seemed to be pretty uniform no matter what area of the planet they checked; there were some minor cosmetic differences in the shapes of the leaves, but no major variations. At last, it was time to check into the mystery.

As the ship arced down toward the zone, Madison blinked as the terrain spread out before them. “Hey, would you look at that?”

Samantha peered out the viewport. “What is...oh! Huh. That’s funny.” They hadn’t been able to see it as well in the satellite photos, but from this angle it was obvious that the plateau containing the hole was perfectly round, and the hole was at its exact center. “It’s like they put a square hole in a round peg.”

“Yeah. That’s a bit too pat to be coincidental,” Madison mused. “You know, we should have checked the canyons for signs of the alien element layer.”

“We can do it later,” Samantha said. “I’m already beginning to suspect what we’ll find.”

“Yeah.” Madison hovered the ship directly over the hole, pointing the cameras downward. “Would you look at that?”

The hole was very obviously a square shaft leading down hundreds of meters. At the bottom, light glinted off a liquid water surface. Toward the top of the shaft, very regular cavities had been carved out in the rock.

“No way erosion did *that*,” Samantha said. “I think we’ve hit the mother lode here.”

“We’ve hit *something*, anyway,” Madison said, moving the ship a few hundred meters west to set down. “Let’s go see what it is.”

A few minutes later, Madison and Samanthabike hovered down the shaft and into one of the cavities. It was essentially a large empty room, with passages to other rooms around the shaft and smaller shafts leading upward, all of which had been filled in either by time or by intention. There were no traces of any machinery or technology of any kind, at least in the rooms immediately around the shaft. It looked like there were other rooms further back, but Madison decided they could get to those later. “Right now the sun’s right overhead, which means there’s good light down the shaft,” she said. “I’d like to go down there and see what I can find.”

Samantha padded up to the edge and peered dubiously down at the water. “I’m not sure I’m really up for a dunking.”

“That’s okay, I was going to have you stay up here anyway,” Madison said. “If anything happens to me down there, you’ll have to get the ship back to Zharus so the scouts know about what we found here.”

Samantha shivered. “Ugh, don’t even say that. I *really* don’t want to be left all alone out here, light-years from home...”

Madison chuckled. “Don’t worry, I’m sure I’ll be fine. I’ll keep a comm line open so you can see what I do.” She stepped over the edge, kicking in Chauncey’s own lifters to lower her gently down the shaft. Samantha leaned over and watched her go, then padded away from the edge to continue exploring the rooms on her own.

Chapter Five: Nullifite!

Descending through the shaft, Madison watched the layers of stone go by and felt like she was going back in time. She floated over to one wall as she descended and ran a hand along it. Save for traces of erosion that had happened since it was made, the wall was completely smooth. “Yeah, no way this happened by accident.” But the frustrating thing was, it had happened so long ago that any traces of technology, let alone biology, had long since gone to dust. If there had been little green progenitor men, it was unlikely they would ever learn anything about them unless by some miracle there happened to be a dead alien space station out there somewhere for them to discover. And as vast as the space between the stars was, it was nearly impossible they could ever hope to find such a thing.

At last she reached the bottom, and hovered just above the surface of the water. It was very calm, without even a ripple. No wind this far down to stir it, Madison supposed. “I’m at the bottom,” she commed up to Samantha. “Hardlight enviro-seals double-checked, set for underwater mode. Should be good to 200 meters, but I don’t plan to go that far down. Deploying comm buoy, and submerging now.” She lowered the lifter power enough to sink below the surface.

“Water’s saline content is about on par with Earth’s or Zharus’s,” Madison reported as her sensors started giving her readings. She looked around in the sunlight. The stone shaft continued downward for about another twenty meters before opening out. She sank down to just below its bottom and looked around, shining her spotlights out. There was no wall as far as she could see. “It really does seem to be an ocean, or at least a huge underground salt lake. No signs of it from the surface. Amazing.”

“You think there are sunshafts that go down to it, too?” Samantha asked. “If so, the photosynthesis from ocean plants could account for even more oxy than the cave gardens.”

“Maybe so,” Madison said. “There are definitely...hey!” Something was moving in the water around her. It looked like little clumps of algae, or invertebrate animals, or some other small blob-like entities. They were crowding in over her spotlights, clogging them up. She tried to wipe them off, but they kept clumping faster. “Definitely light-seeking behavior in the life-forms here. So I guess they know what it is.”

Then Chauncey’s alarms started going off.

Samantha padded through darkened passages a few hundred meters inward from the shaft, peering around and sniffing the air, listening to Madison’s reports as she descended the shaft. She was building up a map of the rooms, and it was looking more artificial the more she mapped out. In fact, it seemed very much like form followed function—the layout was similar to the industrial plants whose layouts were on file in her databases. Which meant that the area she was moving into should be a location for storage of some kind. Of course, even in this protected environment, she doubted there would be anything physical left after so long, but whatever was left might still tell her something.

She turned from the hallway into one of the large empty rooms and looked around, flicking on her lights. The room was largely empty, but in one corner there seemed to be a heap of some kind of silvery-gray dust. “Might be worth taking a sample

of that,” she mused, ejecting a sampling case from her kit and nudging it into the dust with her nose. It slurped some in, and she pawed it back out again and leaned down to bump the kit against it, retrieving it.

“I’m at the bottom,” Madison commed. “Hardlight enviro-seals double-checked...” Samantha listened and replied with half a mind, peering around the room for any other objects of interest. “—guess they know what it is.”

Then Samantha stiffened as Chauncey’s alarms carried over the comm channel. “Maddie? What is it?” She turned and ran from the room, sprinting back up the hallway.

Madison’s comms were becoming spotty. “...ome kind...ower drai...lifter power faili...”

“Hold on, Maddie, I’m coming!” Ejecting the sampling gear, Samantha leaped into the air, falling downward toward the water at the bottom. She blipped her lifters a bit as she approached to lessen the impact, then splashed down in a feline power dive.

It didn’t take her long to spot Madison. Chauncey was clumped over with some kind of algae or slime, and sinking toward the bottom. Samantha swam downward, impelling herself with her lifters, and clenched her jaws around a metal loop on the back of the armor’s neck. Jaws locked in place, she fired her lifters and pulled the suit back up toward the surface. Much of the slime dropped off as they rose, but some of it remained, oozing off and pooling around the suit as Samantha lowered it to the ground next to the *Daydream Believer*.

“Maddie? Are you all right in there?” Samantha asked, amplifying her voice so Madison could hear it through the dead suit.

“I’m okay!” Madison said. Samantha’s sensitive hearing was able to pick up Madison’s voice vibrating against her helmet plate. “But Chauncey’s batteries are completely drained! I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Weird. Can you move?”

“Um...no. Suit’s too heavy. Carry me into the airlock and put us through decontam so I can take it off. I should have enough air to last that long.”

“Right.” Samantha lifted and nudged the heavy suit into the lock, then followed it in and bapped the activation plate with her nose. She dropped her hardlight as the decontamination system sterilized the room, reducing the algae on Chauncey to silvery-grey powder. Samantha sniffed at it thoughtfully. “...huh.”

Once the decontamination cycle was finished, Madison triggered the manual emergency release and her IDE collapsed off of her in a clatter of parts. “Whew!” she said, gasping for breath. “Don’t want to go through *that* again.” She turned to Samantha, then knelt and hugged her around the neck. “*Thank* you. You know, you just saved my life.”

Samantha pawed the deck plate and looked away, ears splaying in embarrassment. “Well, like I said, I didn’t want to be stuck out here alone.”

Madison grinned. “Well anyway, thanks,” She looked down at the pieces of her IDE, now covered with silvery-gray ash. “What *was* that stuff?”

“Looked like some kind of algae, maybe?” Samantha suggested. “Is Chauncey all right?”

“Looks like it. Power’s just completely drained is all. Should be okay once I charge him up again.” She rummaged amid the parts for the detachable sarium battery pack and carried it to the RIDEsafe charger in the cargo bay. “Still be an hour or so before he’s fit to use again. It was thorough, whatever it was—it even got the isolated

backup cells.”

“Maybe that’s how those things live when they can’t get sunlight,” Samantha mused. “They’ve evolved an ability to leech other kinds of energy from whatever they can find.”

“Could be,” Madison reflected. “It’s a good theory, at least.”

“You know, funny thing about that stuff, it didn’t seem to notice *me* when I swam down to get you,” Samantha said. “Maybe it was the hardlight coating—it’s Q-locked, after all; that’s why qubitite doesn’t affect it either. So if you wanted, you could Fuse with me and we could probably explore down there safely...”

Madison chuckled and shook her head. “Nice try, ‘manthapantha, but at this point I’m thinking it’s time to finish up and get off this world. Leave that kind of thing to the follow-up surveyors. Though I will add a suggestion about using RIDEs, or at least some kind of full-body hardlight shielding, in the report.”

Samantha nodded. “Fair enough. Tell ya what, though. I’m gonna go back out there and get a sample of that glop that dripped off the suit, and also go down and dip up some of that seawater.”

“All right, but be careful,” Madison said. “I don’t want to have to come and rescue you!”

“Believe me, I feel the same way,” Samantha said. She padded into the airlock, while Madison started picking up the rest of the pieces of Chauncey and latching them back together again.

After that, they visited a few more canyons and cave sites in a desultory way, but the reminder of how suddenly danger might lurk had put a damper on their excitement. They did check for the alien material layer and found it, to neither of their great surprise. At last they set a few more probes and beacons and prepared to head offworld.

Once they were in orbit again, Madison went back to the ship’s small lab to help Samantha with the analysis she was running on the glop samples she’d taken. “You know, this would be easier if I had hands,” Samantha said as Madison set a slide under the microscanner for her.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Madison replied. She chuckled. “But even if we did Fuse, I’d still be helping you like this—just on the inside instead of out.”

“Yeah, I know.” Samantha interfaced with the scanner. “Hmm, interesting.”

“What is it?” Madison asked, picking up a tablet and bringing up the scanner display.

“Their biology features a trace mineral that I’m pretty sure I’ve seen somewhere else. Get a slide of that powdery stuff in sample case Br43, would you?”

“Sure. What is it?” Madison asked.

“Heap of stuff I found in one of the back rooms around that well right when you got into trouble. I’m thinking that place was originally set up to dredge up that algae from the sea and process it into this. The powdered glop left over when we deconned is basically the same, just a little less refined.” Samantha stood aside as Madison put the slide in, then powered up the scanner. “...huh. Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Madison followed the display on her tablet. “That molecular structure does look familiar.”

“Look.” Samantha accessed Madison’s tablet and shrunk the display from the scanner into half the display. In the other half, she brought up a list of molecules, then

zoomed one out to fill that half of the display. She ran a comparison, and it matched.

“That’s...one of the traces from the alien layer, isn’t it?” Madison said. “One of the unknown might-be-metamaterials.”

“Bingo. I’ve been testing the stuff,” Samantha said. “Look, set that tablet on the table and sprinkle a pinch of that Br43 dust on it.”

“All right.” Madison did as requested. The tablet flickered and went out. “Hey, it’s completely dead.”

“Right. It apparently nullified all the energy contained in the sarium battery,” Samantha said. “Apparently it needs direct contact with something carrying the energy to do it. Which is how the glop was able to de-juice your suit, but they couldn’t get to me through my hardlight.”

“‘mantha, that’s amazing!” Madison said. “I’m sure this has got to have a lot of potential scientific applications.”

“Reactor control rods that stop reactions deader than dead,” Samantha agreed. “Not to mention the potential offensive uses. Imagine dropping a cloud of this over enemy forces on a battlefield.”

“It wouldn’t affect any RIDEs wearing hardlight,” Madison said.

“Would stop the Nextus regular army pretty dead, though,” Samantha chuckled.

“Point,” Madison admitted. “So there’s just one question remaining. What do we call it?”

“Barsoomite sounds kind of silly,” Samantha said. “Brubeckium?”

Madison shook her head. “No. I appreciate the thought, but...no. Just...no.”

“Hmm. Well, qubitite was named because it was made of qubits,” Samantha said. “This nullifies energy, so...nullifite?”

“It’ll do ‘til someone thinks of something catchier,” Madison said. “Good work, ‘manthapantha! This really is a major find!”

“Thanks, Maddie,” Samantha said. “So...what do you think? We head back for Zharus, spread the good word?”

Madison considered, then shook her head. “Nah...it’s not that urgent, really. It’s not as if they’d really be able to do anything about it right away in any event, colonial politics being what they are. So we might as well finish our run. But just in case, we’ll set course for one of the scouts’ dead-drop planets—somewhere we can drop off information for future scouts to collect in case something happens to us afterward.”

“A dead drop for in case we drop dead, huh?” Samantha said.

Madison rolled her eyes. “We *try* not to think of it that way. Anyhow, it’s just a couple months away. I’ll go lock in the course, and we’ll get outta here.”

“Great!” Samantha said. “I’ll just keep studying this stuff, and will let you know if I come up with anything new.”

Madison nodded. “Good work, ‘mantha,” she added, patting the cat on her shoulder. “I am more glad than ever that you stowed away.”

“Glad to be here,” Samantha replied. She turned back to the scanner as Madison headed forward to the flight deck.

Chapter Six: Costneria

January 3, 156 AL

After a couple more months of travel, research, media watching, and generally being friends, Madison called Samantha up for the now-traditional pre-world briefing. “This world is kind of special,” she said. “It’s one of the last ones Dad found, before he retired from scouting.” The image she brought up was of a bright blue globe, with only a few scattered dots of land poking above a whole world of water.

“I think I could have guessed that it was one of your Dad’s just from the name,” Samantha said. “I mean, really... ‘Costneria’?”

Madison chuckled. “Dad would have his little jokes. Especially since most people wouldn’t even get it.”

“I wouldn’t have got it if you hadn’t inflicted *Waterworld* on me last night,” Samantha said. “I *wondered* why we were watching such a cheesy movie.”

“Anyway, this world’s cleared for suit-free. And since it’s been pretty well explored already, and is relatively close to home, it’s got a scouts dead-drop on it, where we can upload new data from us, download new data from any other scouts who’ve passed this way, and delete anything there that’s in our database as having already been received back home. We can leave off the info we picked up from New Indy and what we found on Barsoom there. There’s also storage lockers for samples.”

“This world would make a great vacation resort,” Samantha mused. “Well, if it didn’t take months to get there from anywhere, anyway.”

“Not really,” Madison said. “People always think that about water worlds, but they tend to forget that you really don’t need any more water than you can splash around in at a resort—and with how little natural land there is there, you couldn’t build very many resort hotels without running out of room and having to go with underwater.” She shrugged. “Anyway, we probably won’t spend too long there, since it’s been about explored out. Wouldn’t even have come, except for needing to drop off that info about our find.”

Samantha cocked her head. “Really? No great urge to tread the same alien soil your father once trod?”

Madison blushed a little. “Well, okay, that too. And since the place has mostly been explored and declared safe, I was thinking it might be fun to take a little R&R. The beaches don’t get much more secluded than this.”

Samantha purred. “I like the way you think, partner.”

Madison reached down and scratched her behind the ears. “Yeah, me too. And you know what? R&R is a lot more fun when you have someone to share it with.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it,” Samantha said. “Hope you packed your swimsuit!”

As they entered the atmosphere over the world, Madison pulled up a homing beacon on a hardlight display and used it to guide the *Daydream Believer* onto course. “The dead-drop is located on the highest flat land on the planet, in case of flooding. On a world like this where everything’s water, you can have some pretty big tides.”

“Lucky thing we arrived when there wasn’t a hurricane on,” Samantha said. “That would make landing a little problematic.”

“True.” But the sky was sunny and clear, with few wind currents to speak of, as Madison guided the scout ship down to its landing on an orange-yellow grassy field.

“Colorful place,” Samantha said as they stepped out.

“Yeah, the local chlorophyll analogue is orange, for some reason nobody’s really been able to figure out. Of course, they still don’t really understand why chlorophyll itself is green, come to think of it.” Madison wore her scout khakis, but had left Chauncey behind. Samantha converted to her skimmer bike form, and Madison climbed aboard. She’d found that Samantha gave a much smoother ride than Chauncey in bike form, probably because she was smarter about adjusting to shocks. “The transfer point’s just a few clicks away. We could have beamed it from the ship, but it’s a good excuse for a ride.”

“I’m all about good excuses,” Samantha said agreeably. They cruised together across the grassy plain, Samantha’s hardlight head-up display projecting a guide showing the location of the beacon ahead. They ran alongside a forest of trees whose branches uniformly split about twenty meters up into twin tuning-fork-like secondary trunks, with smaller branches and orange foliage growing from them.

“Should be just around that bend,” Madison said, pointing ahead to where a section of the tree line bulged out from the rest of the forest. They rounded the corner, and came upon a neatly-constructed little wooden cabin, amid the stumps of several felled tuning-fork trees. Madison blinked. “Well, this is a surprise.”

“Maybe more than you think,” Samantha said. “Look above the door.”

Madison glanced at the door’s lintel, where a chisel had carved the legend “C.B. 2460 AD”. “Dad...” she whispered. “He built this!”

Samantha pulled up short in front of the small building for Madison to dismount. “Shall we look inside?”

Madison pushed the door open to find a small, neat room, built almost entirely of native wood. The only foreign elements were the cot mattress on a native-wood bed frame, and the bank of hermetically sealed scout lockers along one wall. The wooden desk across from the cot had a sealed drawer locker attached, too. “Nice,” Madison opined. “It’s cozy.”

“Why isn’t there dust all over everything?” Samantha wondered.

Madison glanced under the bed, and pulled out a device about the size of a loaf of bread. “Ionizer,” she said. “Cleans the dust out of the air. We’ll recharge it before we go.” She put it back, then turned to the desk. There was a rough wooden chair in front of it, and she lowered herself gingerly onto the seat. “Huh. Pretty sturdy,” she said. “I think Dad *made* all of this stuff. He must have been here a while.”

“What’s in the drawer?”

“Let’s see.” Madison pulled it out, and her eyes widened. “Oh!” She lifted out a paper log book and flipped it open. “It’s a guest book. Place for scouts who visit it to sign their names and say a little about why they came.”

“That’s a little old-fashioned, isn’t it?” Samantha said.

“Sometimes we scouts are an old-fashioned bunch. This book doesn’t need a computer to read or write, and can’t be lost in a power failure.” She flipped back to the first page. “Listen to this:

“Name: Clint Aloysius Brubeck. Date: June 17, 2460 AD.’ That’s 110 After Landing, give or take. ‘Just happened to be in the neighborhood, thought I’d stop by. Nice enough little world, could use a little more dirt in it, though. Looks like a good spot

for a Scouts dead drop, so I built this cabin, placed a locker and ‘puter bank in it, and will recommend it be so used when I get to the new scout corps HQ out Zharus way. Don’t expect to be heading back this way again, but you never know. Leave your mark, stranger, and think of me.” She flipped through the book, glancing at the entries in it. “Quite a few scouts have stopped here over the years, some more than once.”

“Hold that up for me and riffle it so I can scan the pages?” Samantha asked.

“Good thinking,” Madison said. “Might like to look back on it again myself.” She did as Samantha asked, then took a pen out of the drawer and flipped the book open to the first blank page. Let’s see...” She held the pen tip to her mouth for a moment, thinking, then scribbled away for a little while. “There.”

“What’s it say?” Samantha asked.

“Name: Madison Valerie Brubeck,” Madison read. “Date: January 3, 156 AL. Came here with my RIDE friend and partner Samantha-the-panther, after stopping by New Indiana for routine follow-up and doing the first landing on Barsoom, where Samantha saved my life. We think we’ve discovered a new metamaterial, which is pretty exciting. We’re going to call it ‘nullifite’. We’re stopping here to leave records of what we’ve done, then heading out on the rest of our loop—following in my Dad’s footsteps, but going the other way. Scouts forever!”

“Pretty good,” Samantha said. “I think it just lacks one thing. Hold it open for me.” Samantha licked her paw, then pressed it into the dirt outside the cabin door, then came back and pressed it firmly onto the logbook below Madison’s entry. “There.”

Madison grinned at the paw-print. “Great! Now we’re part of the history of this place. So let’s go ahead and strip the data, and leave some of our samples too. Then we can hit the beach.”

Samantha purred. “Sounds like a plan.”

Madison opened one of the lockers and placed some of their non-perishable samples in it, particularly samples of the new ‘nullifite’ material, then took out her tablet. A few quick keystrokes uploaded the report she’d prepared to the cabin’s computer, downloaded all the unreceived reports, and deleted the ones that had been acknowledged. “Guess we’re done.” She paused. “Hmm...except...” She looked to the tablet again, and punched some more keys.

“What’re you doing?”

“Dad gave me an old password he said he used some places,” Madison said. “I’m trying it here.” She typed “ClintAllison2425” into the prompt, and was rewarded a moment later with a video recording of her father.

He was dressed in his scout khakis, Stetson pushed back on his head, and looked younger than she’d ever known him. If it had been recorded in 2460, that would have made him about 60—barely even middle age with the anti-agathics. “Don’t rightly know why I’m recording these, ‘r who I’m leaving ‘em for,” Clint said. “But like I’ve said in the ones I left on half a dozen different planets, I’m thinkin’ ‘bout my posterity. As opposed to thinkin’ ‘bout my posterior, which is what I’ve maybe done a little too often. I’ve been lookin’ ahead to the time Allie and I can settle down, raise a family...and maybe that’s where you come in. Had this cutesy little idea ‘bout leaving some messages in bottles on the off-chance you, who might not even be a sperm yet right now, come looking for ‘em.

“So anyway, hi. I might still be knockin’ around when you see this—sure hope I am—or I might be long gone. Or maybe no one’ll ever see this at all and it’ll just be a bunch of bits somewhere ‘til someone runs a password cracker. Anyway, this is the part

where I tell you where I am in my life right now.

“I been a scout for comin’ up on thirty-fi’ years now. Same length a’ time I been married to Allie, come to think of it. Hell of a thing, a man finding the two great loves of his life in the same year, an’ then having to choose between ‘em. I’m a lucky man Allie didn’t make me *make* that choice. But I’ve kept her waiting too long.

“And all the while I’ve been gallivantin’ around, stuff’s been starting to change back in Earth and the colonies. All the while I was out finding these new worlds and checking out the old ones, we just kinda thought colonizing was ‘on hold’ for a while. Sooner or later, people would mosey on along and make new starts on all the new planets. That was what kept us goin’ all these years.

“But lately, given how the colonies that’ve been settled already are starting to act like a bunch of kiddies arguing over how the marbles get split up...an’ after the travesty an’ tragedy that was Wednesday Landing...well, we can’t pretend anymore. So a bunch of the guys and I have been getting together ‘bout setting up a scout headquarters out on Zharus, the furthest colony out into the unknown black, so’s at least the exploring can continue without the Earth politicians breathin’ down our necks.

“Came here on the way to Zharus. Kind of a roundabout way, doin’ a hook shot out around the world to find more new ones since I was gonna be in the neighborhood anyway. Stopped here on the way back in to set up a dead-drop for future ‘sploring out this way, an’ do a little soul-searching. Nice place for it, since they went an’ made it suit-free since I first found it an’ all. Kinda place where a man can spend a few months just sitting, working, and thinking. Building stuff’s good that way. Mind can just wander while the rest of you’s doing something else.

“I’ve just about decided I’m done with scouting. Thirty-fi’ years is a hell of a run, and if it’s not even gonna do any good in my lifetime to do more...well. Some of the things I’m hearing ‘bout Zharus make me think if there’s anywhere I’d be happy setting a spell and getting old while little rug-rats run around, that might be it. It’s one of the last frontier worlds left, a place where a man can still carve out a good-sized chunk for himself and his kids.

“So I’m gonna go there, sell the *Allison* for a startup stake, an’ not look back. So this’s probably gonna be the last recording you see from me. Think I’ll be keepin’ Chauncey, though.

“If you’re one a’ my kids seein’ this...well, it sounds kinda dumb to make predictions without even knowin’ you yet, don’t it? But I’m sure if you got this far, I must be really proud a’ ye. And I sure am lookin’ forward to meeting you.”

He touched the brim of his hat in a salute. “Clint Brubeck, out.”

“Wow...” Samantha said.

Allison sniffled a little. “Thanks, Dad.” She saved a copy of the file to personal storage space. “I’m sure Zane and Aggie will wanna see that.” She closed the lockers and drawer and made sure they were sealed tightly. “Well, come on, ‘mantha. We got us some swimming to do.”

Samantha followed her out the door, turning around to take one last look back at the cabin. Then she converted to skimmer form, and a few moments later they were gone.

Over the next five months, Madison and Samantha visited three more planetary systems. They were all second- or third-landings, following up on the work of other

scouts. Two of them were suit-free, which meant they could explore without worrying about decontamination procedures coming or going. They had a lot of fun exploring. On one planet, Samantha nearly sank in a tar pit; on another, Madison was nearly eaten by a giant amoeba—all in a day’s work for intrepid planetary scouts. Samantha wisely didn’t push the issue of Fusing, being more than content to tag along where Madison went. By the time they’d finished their third planet, they were both taking their partnership for granted.

“Well, that’s the end of our pre-assigned worlds,” Madison said as they lifted off. “From here on out, we’re on our own. We’re supposed to seek out some likely-looking uncharted stars and find a new world or two of our very own before heading back to make our report.”

“Well, this is exciting,” Samantha purred. “As it happens, I do have a few likely prospects.” She interfaced with the *Daydream Believer’s* astrographic computer and pulled up the information on the flight deck’s main display. “We’ve taken astrographic sightings from every system, coming and going, and I’ve been building a map based on what we found. And this little beauty looks especially interesting.” She displayed a picture of a glowing gas cloud, with a star nestled at the heart like a pearl in an oyster. “You can’t see this from Zharus, or even from New Indy or Barsoom, and it’s just barely peeking out from Costneria. But the last few places we hit, we were at just the right angle to see that star right there—in the perfect spot on the Main Sequence to have habitable planets.”

“Sweet!” Madison leaned forward, checking the coordinates. “And it’s only about a month away.” Her hands danced over the control boards as she set their course.

“Yeah,” Samantha said. Her tail swished as she considered. “There’s just one thing about it that bothers me, though.”

“What’s that?” Madison asked.

“Well...all your scout ships do the same astrographic charting and mapping. So the scouts who first surveyed these systems should have seen it, too,” Samantha said. “How many scout ships have gone missing in this sector of space lately?”

“Hmm.” Madison pulled up scout records. “At least two that we know of, with another couple of possibles based on their last known location. Of course, they weren’t all necessarily the brightest hardlight panels on the console. What’re you thinking, it might be some kind of a trap?”

“All I’m saying is, it’s a pretty obvious spot to want to explore—so why haven’t there been any reports of it being explored yet?” Samantha asked.

“Huh.” Madison thought about that for a moment. “Gooooood question.”

“You’ve got some FTL message torps on board, right?” Samantha asked.

“Yeah, a couple,” Samantha said.

“Maybe you should load all our data into one, and our next destination, and send it home,” Samantha said. “Y’know, just in case. So at least if it is a trap it won’t keep luring in the unwary.”

“Hmm. We’re only supposed to use the torps for *emergencies*...but I think this might just qualify,” Madison said. “And it’s not like I could get in worse trouble for wasting one than for, say, sneaking a RIDE along with me.” She pulled up the torpedo programming display and started copying all the necessary data over. “You sure you really want to head for this place, even knowing it might be a trap?”

“Let’s just say that curiosity is a feline genetic trait,” Samantha purred. “Even if it

kills us.”

“There’s a comforting thought,” Madison said dryly. “Okay, torp away. Nothing to do now but cruise and wait. And maybe watch some movies about the Bermuda Triangle back on Earth, ‘cuz suddenly I’m just in that kind of mood.”

Chapter Seven: Forbidden Planet

July 22, 157 AL

The atmosphere aboard the ship grew more tense the closer they got to the mysterious unknown star. For all their jaunty devil-may-care attitude, the closer they got to the destination the more the worry began preying on their minds. After they caught themselves snapping at each other a couple of times, Samantha retreated into passive mode for a couple of days for the first time since they'd hit New Indiana, leaving Madison to cool down alone for a while.

But at last it was time to come out of jump, and the tension dissolved into a shared alertness as they dropped back into normal space, twice as far outside the system as usual.

"So what have we got?" Madison asked as the ship's scopes began picking up visible light.

Samantha placed her paws on the console, peering ahead. It was mainly for dramatic effect, since she was actually interfacing with the *Daydream Believer's* sensors directly. "Looks like we got a planetary system. Seven worlds I can see, including one that looks like it would support life."

"Any radio signals, signs of life, anything?"

"Not so far," Samantha said. "I'm scanning all frequencies."

"I'm going to configure a sublight torp as a probe and fire it in-system," Madison said. "Maybe take a closer look without exposing ourselves."

"It's either that or go charging in," Samantha said. "I guess it doesn't hurt to be cautious."

"Until we know what's going on, I'd appreciate if you could watch 30/6," Madison said. "I have to sleep sometimes, but you can stay alert."

Samantha nodded. "Of course. It's my pelt on the line, too."

It took most of a day for the torpedo to pass the outer limits of the system and loop in toward the inner planets. Along the way, it picked up no signs of anything out of the ordinary—no radio traffic, lights on the planet's night-side, or ships in orbit. Madison and Samantha were just about to decide they'd been unnecessarily cautious, when suddenly the probe signal just...stopped.

"What happened? Did it run into something?" Madison asked, keying up the last seconds of the transmission.

"No, it's like it was just there, then it...wasn't," Samantha said.

Madison frowned, then keyed the astrogation console. "I think I'd feel better thinking about this a few light-months from here. Setting up a jump—"

That was when their comm suddenly came to life. "Attention, scout starship *Daydream Believer*," a stern masculine voice said. "You are under our guns. Power down your systems and wait to be boarded. Do not attempt to jump or flee, or you will be destroyed."

"What the *hell?!?*" Madison said, staring wildly around for a moment. "There's nothing on our scopes! Where are they?"

"If they know our name, they have to be close enough to read our hull," Samantha said. "Our transponders are off."

“Gah!” Madison said. The transmission came through a second time.

“Triangulating...got it. That transmission came from...less than a light-second away,” Samantha added, blowing up the pertinent sector of space in their display “But there’s nothing...wait.” An outline appeared around a dark shape on the screen. “There were stars there last I checked. But still no sign of anything on radar or other scanners.”

“Shit! I’m not going to be taken without a—” Madison began. Then the whole flight deck lit up as a bright beam of plasma passed less than a click in front of them.

“Shot across our bow,” Samantha said. “If that had hit us, it would have holed us.”

“Fuuuu...” Madison moaned. Then she sighed. “I’m gonna have to do what they say,” she said. “I’m powering down all systems—and then I’m wiping our computers. Whoever they are, they don’t need to get any more data from us than we can help—or get a fully navigable scout ship.”

“Hold on, let me back them up in my on-board system. I’ve got memory to spare,” Samantha said. “Four...three...two...one...done. You never know. Should we dump our samples?”

Madison shook her head. “Nah. They won’t mean anything to them without the data in our computers.” She keyed the sequence to wipe the ship’s computers, then stood. “There’s one more thing I need to do.” She opened a shielded hatch in the cargo bay deck, revealing a compartment sized to fit Chauncey, and lowered the folded-up EIDE bike into it. “I really ought to space this guy, so there’s no risk they could reverse-engineer him, but...well, like you said, you never know. We might get the ship back. Either way, they shouldn’t find him without taking the whole damned ship apart.”

“Not room for me in there, is there?” Samantha said wryly.

Madison looked from the compartment to Samantha, and facepalmed. “No...and I’m *damned* sure not gonna space *you*.” She frowned. “But...you know what? These guys may not know anything about RIDEs. If they’ve been out here longer than thirty years or so...well, it’s worth a shot.”

“I can configure my hardlight to mimic a real leopard’s bio readings as closely as possible,” Samantha said. “It might not fool a thorough scan, but...maybe I can pass for an over-sized pet kitty if they don’t look too closely. Meow.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Madison said.

“Oh! And there’s one more thing I should do.” Samantha dashed back into the small laboratory section where they kept all their samples, returning a moment later.

“What was that?” Madison asked.

“Just putting an ace in the hole,” Samantha purred. Then they heard the clanking that heralded another ship attaching to their external airlock. Samantha sat on her haunches, curled her tail around her forepaws, and together they waited to see who would come through the door.

They didn’t have long to wait. A few moments later, the airlock doors cycled, and a half-dozen troopers in full environmental armor filed in. They carried some kind of short rifles or carbines, with which they covered Madison and Samantha. Samantha sat calmly, while Madison kept her hands in the air. “Well, I guess you’re human at least,” she said. “Easy there, I’m not stupid, and ‘mantha here isn’t either. I’m not wearing a gun, and we won’t resist.” She managed to grin just a little. “I think what I’m supposed to say here is, “Take us to your leader.””

“That would be me.” An unsuited man stepped through the airlock, dressed smartly in a naval uniform with captain’s insignia on the collar. It was black with bronze piping, and where the flag of the nation would have been was a bronze pyramid with an elliptical orbit halo around it. The man had a bronzed skin tone and slight epicanthic folds, dark hair, and a neat vandyke. His appearance suggested the Captain Nemo of Verne’s novels rather than the screen adaptations, Madison reflected—that version of Nemo had hailed from the Indian subcontinent.

“Captain Georg Sandeep, Totalia Cosmy,” the captain said with a slight bow. His voice was the same that had delivered the warning over the comm. “I apologize for the imposition, but I’m afraid we’re going to have to seize your vessel.” He nodded to two of the troopers, who peeled off and headed forward to the flight deck.

“Under other circumstances I’d be pleased to meet you, Captain Sandeep,” Madison said. “Cosmy?”

“I understand it was considered just slightly less silly-sounding than ‘Spacy,’ and less unwieldy than ‘Space Navy,’” Sandeep said wryly. “I was not privy to the decision, of course.”

“Hmm. I guess that means your ‘Totalia’ has been around some little while,” Madison mused.

Sandeep inclined his head in a nod. “Nearly sixty years, as it happens. But we will answer all your questions on the way back to Totalia,” he said. “I fear you will likely be staying a while.”

“This isn’t necessary, you know,” Madison said. “If it’s interference from Earth and the colonies you’re afraid of, I’m from Zharus, and Earth’s got its eye on us, too. We’d be natural allies. Let us carry word back home, we’d send a diplomatic mission...”

“Your fellow scouts have made much the same argument,” Sandeep said. “I fear it hasn’t swayed the Totaliment yet, but you are welcome to try again.” He glanced at Samantha and raised his eyebrow. “I will say none of them has had a pet along.”

“It’s a new experiment they’re trying, to see if it helps offset loneliness from protracted isolation,” Madison said. “She doesn’t eat much—I can keep her fed with just the on-board fabber. And she’s really very friendly.” Samantha purred loud enough to startle the nearby guards. “She likes being scratched behind the ears,” Madison suggested.

Captain Sandeep raised his hand, then reconsidered. “Ah, perhaps later.”

One of the guards came back from the flight deck. “Sir, the ship’s computer is wiped. We have basic sublight navigation, but the jump drive is completely inoperable.”

Sandeep nodded. “As expected. But then, we have no desire to travel out-system regardless. It will do to land it on Totalia.” He turned back to Madison. “If you would do me the honor of joining me on my ship?”

“Sure,” Madison said, grinning. “Let’s pretend I’ve got a choice. But Samantha stays with me. I promise she won’t be any trouble.”

Captain Sandeep considered, then nodded. “As long as she’s no trouble, I see no reason you should be separated. Come.” He turned on his heel and led the way back into the airlock. The armed guards fell in behind Madison and Samantha. As they passed through, Madison got her first sight of the Totalian ship through viewports along the side of the umbilical. She couldn’t see it clearly in the dim starlight, but it seemed to be several kilometers in length. “Wow, big ship.”

“She gets us where we need to go,” Captain Sandeep said, stepping through the

hatch at the other end. Madison followed, and paused to look around.

The first thing she noticed was that the air had a different scent from her own shipboard air—more of a coppery tang. It wasn't unpleasant. The corridor had a rougher, less finished look than most ships she'd been on—the plating was diamond deck, and there were pipes and conduits visible along the ceiling. The fittings had a bronze color scheme that matched the piping on Sandeep's uniform. There was also a plaque across from the airlock with the ship's seal—a fanciful coat of arms involving a book within a pyramid, and the name *T.C.S. Kybalion* emblazoned beneath.

The ship had clearly been assembled from forged parts, rather than partly- or mostly-fabbed in place the way ships were on Zharus these days. *Of course, if they cut themselves off a couple hundred years ago, they wouldn't have even the fabbing ability Earth has now. Or hardlight, either, unless they developed it on their own*, she thought, wishing she could share that insight with Samantha. But she didn't dare risk using her comm implant here. They might pick it up and wonder who she was talking to.

The captain stood, patiently waiting for her to finish looking around. "Shall we proceed?" he asked after a moment.

"Where are we going, the brig?" Madison asked.

"Hardly," Sandeep said. "There's no need to be uncivilized. I thought you might appreciate seeing the bridge first. Then we will assign you quarters. They will, of course, be locked from the outside, and guarded, but that's merely a formality. Or we could put you in the brig if you prefer—or give us reason."

"That won't be necessary, Captain," Madison said. "And since you're offering, I would like that bridge tour."

"Excellent!" Sandeep led the way forward along the corridor, exchanging salutes with the occasional officer as they passed. At last they came to a security checkpoint, and after a salute the guards waved them through. Madison and Samantha followed Captain Sandeep up a ramp onto the bridge.

It was laid out about like the starship bridges from all the old twencen SF movies Madison and Samantha had watched on their voyage—not out of homage, as it might have been were the ship made on Zharus, but because form followed function. There was a conning chair in the middle of the bridge, with consoles laid out around and ahead. Without hardlight, they had physical controls and touchscreens, with solid flat-panel and holographic displays. The only major difference in style from the old SF movies was that instead of a main viewscreen, the bridge was surrounded by 360 degrees of transparent aluminum viewports—at least a meter thick, Madison estimated. There was also a viewport in the ceiling.

"Captain on the bridge!" the duty officer announced, standing to attention. He moved aside from the conn as Sandeep stepped in.

Sandeep nodded. "At ease." He stood by the chair and looked ahead. "Helm, set course for Totalia, three-quarters sublight, and engage when ready. Comms, send word we are returning."

"Aye aye, sir!" the crewmen at two of the stations responded. The hum of the ship around them changed subtly as its sublight drive kicked in.

Madison glanced around at the bridge crew of about a dozen, the first exposed faces she'd seen other than the captain's. Some of them had the same dark skin as the captain, others lighter, and a couple darker. There seemed to be all human racial markers present. "So tell me about this 'Totalia' of yours," Madison invited.

Sandeep swiveled the command chair to face her. “We were founded in 2410,” he said, steepling his fingers. “On Earth, as the 2200s drew to a close, a fairly small religion called the Totalists had come up on the Earth Government’s list of undesirable institutions. The government had not yet hatched the plan of shipping undesirables out on colony vessels, of course, or we might well have been shipped off to Zharus with your own ancestors.”

Of course, Madison’s own ancestors came from Earth more recently than that, but she forbore to correct him. *And if it had been a hundred years later, you’ve have wound up on Wednesday*, she mused.

“But the Totalists were not without their own resources,” Sandeep continued. “For centuries, they had been operating a successful business, selling alcoholic ‘nectars’ for use in worship...and occasionally wider consumption. They had been ‘discovered’ as the latest fad among the proles at about that time, I recall, and the Totalist wineries had been running around the clock to keep up with demand. I believe it was that which originally brought them to the government’s attention.”

“Obviously not *teetotalists*, then,” Madison said.

“Quite,” Sandeep said dryly. “The Totalists had money, though not necessarily enough to launch a colony by themselves. They were far from the only disaffected, of course, and some of them—including some fairly wealthy sorts who were under investigation by the government for tax evasion, which is to say they were richer than it was and the government wanted their money—decided their interests were aligned. And so a secret colony plan was formed. It was all quite complex, to hide it from prying eyes. Ships were built out in the dark of the Oort Cloud with resources diverted from other efforts. When they were ready, the colonists slipped away in dribs and drabs and went into cryosleep for the long journey.

“Why *didn’t* they just settle on some established colony?” Madison asked. “They all had the room to spare. Zharus especially could absorb several million people without anyone even noticing.”

“As I understand it, they had been soured on the idea of being subject to anyone else’s government, and sought a place where they could make their own,” Sandeep said. “Regardless, after the colonization fleet had been formed, they traveled out into the unknown for more than sixty years at sublight speeds, exploring as they went. They ended up here—on a world whose star could not even be seen from any of the colonies. They thought they needed go no further—which was good, because the ships were beginning to show their age at the time. As it was, they lost nearly 10% of their number to coldsleep failure.”

He shrugged. “Not terribly far-sighted in some ways, our founders. I gather drive speeds went superluminal some time after they left, and have increased considerably over the past century. Of course, faster-than-light travel has not exactly been a priority for us. Between that and the scouts’ expansion into this sector of space, I fear we have been found a few times over the last few years.”

“What’s happened to the scouts who did the finding?” Madison asked.

“We haven’t *killed* them, if that’s what you’re wondering,” Sandeep said. “But I fear we have found it necessary to keep them confined. There are some elements on Totalia...well, we need not speak of them.”

“I...see,” Madison said. “So you’re gonna jail us for happening across your secret little world. You do realize that this is only going to get worse for you, right? Sooner or

later the scouts will start investigating this sector of space more closely, and word will leak out.”

Captain Sandeep shrugged. “For what it’s worth, I would tend to agree with you. But the Totaliment—the ruling council of our colony—is somewhat conservative. And mine is not to reason why.”

“Fair enough,” Madison said. “I’ll save my temper for the people in charge.” She shrugged. “Mind if I take a closer look at some of these consoles? Professional curiosity.”

“As long as you do not attempt to touch them, I see no harm in it,” Sandeep said.

“You have my word on that,” Madison said. “It wouldn’t do much good anyway. You’ve kind of got me outnumbered.” She walked down onto the bridge proper, and paused to look at the display on one of the consoles—the helm, apparently. Samantha padded along beside her. The display’s layout was a little archaic, but readily understandable. “Hey, wait...this can’t be right, can it? This acceleration reading is way too high for a ship this size. Even if you’ve improved your drives as much as we have...”

Sandeep chuckled. “We have a trifle more power available than you might expect. We *have* made a few advances here that I doubt the rest of the colonies have yet.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” Madison said. “Does that also explain how you were able to slip up on us without showing up on our sensors at all?”

Captain Sandeep smiled serenely. “I think there are some things I’d best leave unsaid,” he replied. “I will have the guards show you to your quarters now. It has an intercom in case you need me, and a media terminal with access to a subsection of the ship’s library. Perhaps you might wish to study the Totalist doctrine. It might surprise you that, despite our name, we actually do not have an enforced state religion as such—too many of the original colonists were non-Totalists to stand for that. Nonetheless, it is the largest religion among our overall population.”

“Are you a Totalist?” Madison asked.

“Not a practicing one, though I do try to live by as many of its precepts as make sense,” Sandeep replied. “In many ways it is more a philosophy than a religion. I look forward to discussing it with you.”

“Right. Well, thanks for your hospitality, captain. We’ll see you later.” Madison and Samantha followed one guard out of the room while two others trailed behind. They went back through the security checkpoint, then down another corridor lined with doors—or hatches, as they were called on shipboard. The guards stopped in front of one and keyed an access code into the keypad. The hatch slid open, revealing a small but serviceable room with a bunk, desk with keyboard and screen, transparent aluminum viewport in the wall, and an adjoining head. The guard stood aside so Madison and Samantha could enter, then the hatch closed behind them.

Madison sat down on the bunk. Samantha padded over, placed her paws on the bed next to her, and proceeded to lick her ear. Madison giggled. “Hey!”

“Don’t think we’re being watched,” Samantha murmured while her muzzle was next to Madison’s ear. “Passives aren’t picking any transmissions up. Still, we should be careful.”

“Ohhh, whoda pretty kitty!” Madison squealed loudly, taking Samantha’s face in her hands and rubbing noses with her. “Who’s my little snookiewookums...” She lowered her voice and whispered, “Good idea. So what you think?”

“I think we’re in trouble,” Samantha murmured. “But it might just be the fun

kind of trouble to be in. If we can get loose...take word back to Zharus..."

"We'll be heroes," Madison whispered. "Or something." She shrugged. "I thought wildcat colonies were the stuff of centi-*mu* dreadfuls. Even *Dad* never had any idea there might be some out there. Or if he did, he never said anything."

"We'll just have to play it by ear," Samantha said, twitching hers.

Madison nodded. "If nothing else, Captain Sandeep at least seems to be a gentleman." She scratched Samantha behind her ears again and spoke louder, for the benefit of putative listening ears. "Whoda pretty kitty, huh?" Samantha purred happily and gave Madison another slurp, then rolled over onto her back on the floor and waved all four paws in the air. Madison giggled. "Hey! Silly kitty!" She knelt and gave her companion a good belly rub, then whispered in her ear, "I suppose we should go look at what the ship's library has to offer."

"Mm-hmm," Samantha murmured. "We'll have to do it at normal reading speed, though—they might get suspicious if I speed-loaded it."

"Right." Madison got up and sat down at the desk, and Samantha sat on her haunches next to the chair, and they booted up the terminal and got to work.

Chapter Eight: Totalians

Madison peered at the available information about the religion of Totality. The name seemed to derive from the way it claimed to describe the “totality of all existence.” It had a remarkably cryptic guiding principle. “Nothing and Possibility come in and out of bond infinite times in a finite moment? What does that even *mean*?” Madison said, staring at the screen.

Samantha chuffed amusedly, leaning in to lick her ear again to disguise her speech. “I suspect that if you asked any three...Totalites? Totalities? Totalitarians?... whatever...you’d get at least four different answers.”

“The Seven Principles of Totality are Psychokinesis, Correspondence, Vibration, Opposition, Rhythm, Cause and Effect, and Gender,” Madison continued. “Psychokinesis?”

“And shouldn’t ‘Cause and Effect’ count for two?” Samantha purred in her ear.

Madison paged down. “The universe is a mental creation.’ Hm. Well, *something’s* mental here, anyway...”

But really, as oddball religions went, Totality seemed more or less benign. There were no calls on its adherents to go out and do nasty things to other people in the name of their beliefs. It seemed to center mainly on meditation (with the aid of those “nectars” Captain Sandeep had mentioned, which had originally been manufactured in a pyramid its founders had built in Utah) and attaining new states of mind. It certainly wasn’t out-and-out *evil* like the cult of Travolta and Cruise. About the worst thing it did had been to file (largely unsuccessful) lawsuits against various communities petitioning for the right to display its “Seven Aphorisms” alongside their “Ten Commandments” monuments.

“What an oddly laid-back little cult,” Madison mused. “I don’t see anything in particular about it that would lead them to want to go off and found their own colony, though.”

“I don’t think it had to do with their religion, *per se*,” Samantha murmured. “More to do with maybe being a persecuted minority. I can sympathize. We RIDEs have experience with that kind of thing.”

Madison glanced at her. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. If I hadn’t come with you, I’d probably have gone out into the desert to where escaped RIDEs have their own little settlements, where the humans can’t mistreat them. Same principle here, just on a different scale.”

“Huh.” Madison thought about that. “The one run by that AlphaWolf guy you hear about?”

“Yeah.” Samantha nodded just slightly. “Of course, isolationism can cause people to do some nasty things they otherwise wouldn’t. Alfie’s crew likes to go out and bodyjack random humans and take them back to camp and keep them so they get access to thumbs. Apparently these guys like to kidnap and imprison scouts who come their way.”

“Looking at it from their side, it’s hard to blame them,” Madison said. “The Totalians, anyway. They just wanted to be left alone to meditate in peace.”

“Yeah, well, that’s not gonna happen,” Samantha said. “And isn’t it a little too early for Stockholm Syndrome to set in?”

Madison chuckled. “I don’t sympathize with them *that* much.”

After an hour or two, one of the guards delivered their meals. For Madison, a pork chop, salad, and bowl of potato soup, along with a little phial labeled “Vibration nectar publication”. After Samantha sniffed it and pronounced there was nothing in it less innocuous than alcohol, she sipped it experimentally. “Interesting flavor. According to the docs, the alcohol is supposed to carry the ‘influence’ of the nectar across the blood-brain interface.”

Samantha chuffed amusedly. “Well, you don’t *seem* to be vibrating yet...”

But Samantha’s “meal” posed another challenge: 10 kilograms of raw steak. The leopard eyed it thoughtfully. “What are you gonna do with *that*?” Madison asked. “You don’t have a fabber in you to break it down.”

“Actually...I’ve got an idea,” Samantha said in her ear. “Are you done with the salt and pepper shakers? Then dump them onto the steak.” After she did, Samantha then proceeded to eat every bit of it.

“Um...” Madison said. “Isn’t that going to get all manky in there?”

“I’ve reconfigured the pulse generator from my cannon to act as a slow-cooker,” Samantha murmured. “I’m going to make jerky out of it. Supplies for when we escape. I’ve got enough empty compartments inside I should be able to do that for a while. You can give me a good washing-out afterward.”

“What was the salt and pepper for?”

“Seasoning,” Samantha said smugly. “It’ll taste better that way.”

After dinner, Madison lay on the bunk and dozed. She didn’t know what length of day the Totalians used, but figured she should start adapting with naps so she could wait until the night period to get a full night’s sleep, whenever that was. She was awakened by a chime she figured must have been the door announcer. “Yes?”

“We arrive at Totalia in 30 minutes,” a guard’s voice said. “Be ready.”

“Thanks!” Madison called through the door. She didn’t know if he heard her or not.

Samantha leaned in to lick her ear again. “So this is it,” she murmured. “Have you thought about what we’ll do if they try to separate us? Or if we see a good chance to escape?”

“Not sure,” Madison whispered back. “But I think...sooner or later...” She sighed. “...we *may* have to Fuse.”

Samantha glanced at her. “Really?”

“We’re in a situation where we can’t afford to disregard any tools at our disposal,” Madison said. “If they left Earth a hundred sixty years ago, they won’t have any tech like you around. You can probably run and shoot rings around any mil-tech they do have.”

Samantha nodded. “Though I’m leery about trying anything until I know exactly how they could sneak up on us without sensors picking anything up.” Then she sighed.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Madison whispered, stroking her muzzle. “I thought you always wanted to Fuse with me.”

“I did, but...I wanted it to be because you wanted to, not because you felt...forced into it,” Samantha said.

“Aww, silly kitty. It’s not like they’re forcing me at gunpoint. I think I’ve been okay with the idea for some time, actually,” Madison admitted. “I just...I dunno, needed a little push, I guess. Trust me on this—if the time comes, I’ll be with you all the way.”

Samantha purred and rubbed her head against Madison’s cheek. “Awww...” she murmured. “Thanks, Maddie. If the time does come...I won’t let you down.”

Madison nodded. "I'm counting on that," she whispered. Then she made sure that her khakis were as neat as she could make them, and together they waited for the door to open and the guards to call for them.

When the door opened, Captain Sandeep was standing there with his guards. "I trust you've been well?"

"Yes," Madison said. "I read about Totality. It's rather...interesting."

Sandeep chuckled. "Isn't it just? I rather enjoy some of the aphorisms, but I find some of the more...esoteric principles a little harder to swallow. Nonetheless, they are the principles upon which our nation was founded."

"So we're going to land on the planet?" Madison asked. "I don't imagine the *Kybalion* is atmosphere capable?"

"As it happens, we'll be taking your ship," Sandeep said. "Killing two birds with one stone, as it were. They'll send a shuttle down for my guards and me later."

"What's going to happen to my ship?" Madison asked as they walked up the corridor together.

"Undoubtedly they will lock it in a secret hangar on their military base and try to pretend it does not exist," Sandeep said. Samantha caught Madison's eye, and Madison smiled faintly. She'd caught it, too—the faint trace of frustration that leaked out through Sandeep's proper military attitude.

"Not try to dismantle it for research purposes?" Madison asked. "I'd think that's what I'd do, if I were in your shoes."

"The political situation on Totalia is...complicated," Sandeep said wryly. "Ah, here we are." He gestured politely for Madison and Samantha to precede him through the umbilical. Then they took seats on the fold-out passenger couches along the cargo bay wall along with two guards, while two other guards headed up to the flight deck.

"I don't guess it would do any good to ask you to let *me* land it?" Madison sighed. "You guys are a hundred fifty years behind the tech curve. I'm just a little worried..."

"I do understand your concern," Captain Sandeep said. "However, we have examined your flight controls, and they are near enough to our own that I am confident in my pilots' abilities."

"Well, I don't exactly have a choice, I guess..."

:We could Fuse and take them,: Samantha suggested. :Land somewhere outside their city, investigate...:

:And take the chance they could shoot us down? Rather not,: Madison said over her implant. :A hundred fifty year old plasma pulse could kill us just as dead as a brand new one. They made big guns back then. And you're not worried about using comms?:

:With a wiped computer, they can't work more than basic radio comm,: Samantha said. :We're good to talk privately as long as we're in here.:

Madison forced herself not to nod in acknowledgement. *:Right. Anyway...I'd rather play along for now. I want to meet this Totaliment and see as much of the city as possible before we make our break.:*

:Fair enough,: Samantha said, sitting in the middle of the cargo bay and grooming herself.

"A remarkably intelligent-looking animal, your Samantha," Captain Sandeep mused.

“She is pretty smart,” Madison said. “For a cat.”

:I’m so gonna get you for that,: Samantha smirked. *:Maybe I’ll piddle on your slippers.:*

Madison choked back laughter. Sandeep raised an eyebrow. “Oh—I was just thinking of a time a couple worlds back when I ended up having to pull her out of a tar pit,” Madison said quickly. “Afterward, she was looking at me like, ‘Oh, I *meant* to do that.’ Silly cat.” *:Don’t break me up like that, ‘mantha!:* Madison sent silently. *:It’s hard enough keeping this charade up as it is.:*

:Sorry,: Samantha sent contritely.

The ship shook a little as they slid into the atmosphere. Madison opened one of the viewports in the hull behind her and looked out. “Whoa...” They were sweeping in a curve over a coastline which rose steeply to several hills a few kilometers inland, like San Diego on Earth. At the apex of the highest hill was a great bronze pyramid, which winked in the sunlight as they passed.

“It is rather dramatic, isn’t it?” Captain Sandeep reflected. “The pyramid is the seat of Totalia’s government, and also where the nectars are made now.”

“Is that where ‘mantha and I will be going?” Madison asked.

“Perhaps,” Captain Sandeep said. “An emissary of the Totaliment will meet us after we land.”

“I see.” Madison rested her hand on top of Samantha’s head. “I’ll just have to hope for the best, I guess.”

The ship cruised north past the city limits, heading toward a compound well outside the city limits. The fence and watchtowers around it suggested it was a military establishment—it didn’t have the huge concrete walls of an obvious prison. At last the *Daydream Believer* touched down on a tarmac surface, and rolled gently to a halt. The guards rose from their seats, gesturing with their rifles. Madison stepped out through the main airlock with Samantha, shading her eyes against the afternoon sun. The guards and Captain Sandeep followed, rifles at the ready.

At the bottom of the ramp, a full squad of soldiers in desert camouflage fatigues awaited, carrying rifles similar to the guards’ at port arms. With them were two men in formal attire that might have been business suits after a couple of centuries’ divergent fashion evolution. They appeared to be a cross between a suit and a robe, with baggy trousers and a suit coat that reached nearly to the floor. One of the men was older, with a fringe of grey hair surrounding a bald spot on the top of his head. The younger, dark-haired, was barely middle-aged, and he stood a pace behind and to the left of the older man in a clearly subordinate position.

The older man regarded her coolly. “This is the scout? Why is she not manacled? And what is this...animal with her?”

Madison disliked him instantly. “I gave my word I’d behave, sir. And so I have. And Samantha is my pet. She’s not going to hurt anyone, I promise.” She spoke calmly, but her heart was in her mouth. This was the person who held the power over their fate? “I’m Madison Brubeck of the Scouts, Zharusian branch. May I have the honor of knowing your name?” She held out her hand.

The man looked at it as if it was a poisonous snake, but reluctantly grasped it, briefly. “Raph Clarke, Fourth Speaker of the Totaliment. My associate, Darrek Sigurdssen, from the Science Committee.” He nodded to the man behind him, who half-bowed.

Taking the introduction as permission to speak, Sigurdssen said excitedly, “Is that a leopard? I’ve seen them in books, but never in person. What does she eat?” He glanced at Clarke. “Can we...study her? Please?”

The Fourth Speaker gave him an old-fashioned look. “We can *not*. You know the policy.”

“But—” Sigurdssen began.

Clarke cut him off again. “No.”

“What policy is that, if I might ask?” Madison said.

Clarke glowered at her in turn. “We simply cannot have you outsiders disrupting our society. The first time one of you showed up, it touched off riots that injured dozens. We cannot have that happen again.”

“Wait, riots?” Madison asked. “Are your citizens that scared of outsiders?”

Clarke laughed ironically. “Scared? Goodness, I wish they were. No, quite the opposite. A minority—a vocal but all things considered *very small* minority—wishes to overthrow everything our ancestors sacrificed so hard to achieve. Before you scouts showed up, they had no idea it was even possible. Now that they do—it is hard enough as it is to keep them contained.”

“I don’t follow,” Madison said.

“What he means is, when your scout arrived it became known that faster-than-light travel was possible,” Sigurdssen said excitedly. “Which meant that the colonies are only a few months of travel away. We could send ambassadors, open relations—” He wilted under Clarke’s repeated glare. “—or, that is, so the thinking of these, um, few malcontents goes.”

“So, what...you’re going to execute us?” Madison asked, heart starting to pound. Samantha shifted imperceptibly closer.

“What? Of course not!” Clarke said, something very much like shock in his voice. “We are not savages. Indeed, the pendulum swings both ways—should we do something so terrible, it could well destroy us. And it might be that we can yet find some way to turn your arrival to our advantage.”

“So...what are you going to do with us, then?”

“I fear we have to lock you up for now,” Sigurdssen said regretfully. “We’ll keep you and your cat together, of course—there’s no need to be needlessly cruel.”

“See that you keep her litter clean,” Clarke said darkly. “Men, take her away.”

Madison glanced over her shoulder at Captain Sandeep, who was wearing an inscrutable expression. “It was pleasant meeting you, Captain. Maybe we’ll meet again.”

Sandeep nodded acknowledgment, but said nothing more. Madison turned back and let the soldiers lead her and Samantha away.

Chapter Nine: Scouts

The soldiers led Madison and Samantha down a ramp into an underground building. Madison tried to fix the route in her mind for if she needed to retrace it, even though she knew Samantha would do a better job of it than she would. Then they stepped into an elevator, which took them down several levels. They ended up in an underground corridor with what appeared to be cell doors on both sides, for all that the doors did not appear to have any bars. They were lit by glowing lights along the edges, which suggested some kind of energy field, however.

Most of the cells were empty, though three at the far end were occupied. In one of them, a man lay on the floor, doing calisthenics. Another had a man sitting at a desk writing in a notebook. He looked up as they passed, and his eyes widened. "Oh! We've got company!" In the third, a woman lay on the bunk, staring blankly at the wall. All three of them were wearing nondescript white jumpsuits, though the man at the desk had a khaki jacket draped over the back of his chair.

They stopped at the first empty cell, next to the other woman's. There was a table just outside the cell with a food tray on it. One of the soldiers picked up a breadstick from it. "Watch." He slowly pushed the breadstick into the entry door. The end of it immediately charred and began to smoke. "Thermal laser field," he said. "Don't try to beat it. You can't get through fast enough not to end up charbroiled on the other side."

"Isn't that a little overbuilt?" Madison asked as he did something with a keypad next to it to bring down the field. "Bars take less energy."

The soldier shrugged. "I don't make the design decisions. The Totaliment *really* doesn't want you-all getting out."

"I guess so," Madison said. She stepped into the cell, followed by Samantha. Once they were clear of the door, the soldier placed the food tray on the desk just inside the door, then backed away and brought the field up again. A moment later, the soldiers retreated up the hall.

Madison looked around the room in which she found herself. It was similar to the room on board the *Kybalion*—there was a bed, a desk, and an adjoining toilet. There wasn't a media terminal on the desk, however. Which she supposed was to be expected. She sat down on the cot, and Samantha leaned over to lick her ear again. "I couldn't see the woman's face, but both of those men are in the scouts database as two of the missing scouts from this sector! And the other one *was* female..."

"Yeah, the khaki jacket was kind of a clue," Madison murmured. Then she spoke louder, "Ahoy there! Scout pilot Madison Brubeck, Zharus scout division, and my friend Samantha! Who might you-all be?"

"Scout pilot Hamner Reinagen," the calisthenic scout said, rising to his feet and approaching his door. He had dusty blonde hair and brown eyes, and looked like a magazine depiction of "ruggedly handsome". He spoke with a faint German or Central Proximan accent. "Is that Brubeck as in Clint Brubeck?"

"He was my Dad," Madison said. "Died...well, I guess it's over a year ago now."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Hamner said.

"Scout pilot Marcus Trenton," the scout at the desk said. His hair was dark brown, eyes hazel, and he had a mustache where Hamner was clean-shaven. His accent reminded Madison of Cary Elwes from *The Princess Bride*. "Samantha, that cat of

yours...is she—”

Hamner cleared his throat loudly. “I should mention that we don’t *know* whether we’re being monitored, but it doesn’t hurt to *assume* that to be the case.”

“Oh yes, quite,” Marcus said. “I was going to ask, is she a leopard or a jaguar? I have trouble telling those apart sometimes.”

“She’s a leopard,” Madison said. “Jaguars are a bit chunkier, and have different rosettes.”

Marcus nodded. “I see. By the way, our companion next to you, who you of course can’t see directly, is Scout Pilot Barbaretta Hansom.”

“Welcome to purgatory,” a depressed female voice said. “We hope you enjoy your stay.”

“She’s been here the longest, I’m afraid,” Marcus said. “She’s not terribly cheerful these days.”

“Up yours, limey,” Barbaretta grumped.

“Do they let us out for exercise, anything like that?” Madison asked.

“There is an indoor gym they let us use, as long as we behave ourselves,” Hamner said. “Never all at the same time, however.”

“Understandable,” Madison said. “So anyway, yeah...you might say ‘mantha-pantha is my ride-along.’ She subtly emphasized the word ‘ride’, and saw Marcus and Hamner’s eyes widen in understanding. “She’s helped keep me sane through the long trips, though we haven’t gotten as close as we might be in some ways yet. But I figure we’ll be here a while, so there’s plenty of time for that.” Madison hoped that they’d take from her words that she didn’t plan to escape right away. From their slight nods, she thought they probably got it. “So...tell me about this place. What have we gotten ourselves into?”

“Totalia,” Hamner said, in the tone of one giving a lecture. “Population: 3 million. Rotational period: 26 hours, 4 minutes. Divided by the locals into two 13-hour cycles, A.M. and P.M., with leap minutes on either side of noon and midnight; you get 12:60 a.m., 13:60 p.m., and vice versa, while all the other hours end on 59. Year is 340.37 days; leap day every three years as you’d expect, with a few leap minutes deducted from the day so they don’t have to worry about taking another day every umpty years. They’re rather big on computerized chronometers here, as you might imagine.”

“No doubt,” Madison agreed.

“One moon, a bit larger and a good bit closer than Earth’s; causes some pretty spectacular tides, and is undoubtedly why there are very few ocean-front houses,” Hamner continued. “Mildly unstable orbit; given a few hundred thousand years it may well crash into the planet.”

“Most of the population is concentrated in Totalia City, nice coastal city reminiscent of San Diego,” Marcus said. “We’ve been there a time or two, for sessions with the Totaliment. System of government is essentially a constitutional oligarchy. There are some secondary law-making bodies, but the Totaliment effectively holds all the power. I gather it was an outgrowth of the colony charter that placed all the power in the hands of the heads of Totality and those outsiders who contributed the largest financial stakes.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Madison said. “Say...do you know anything about how it is they’re able to sneak up on us without showing up on our sensors?”

“Rather a good question,” Marcus acknowledged. “We haven’t been able to

ascertain much about it, but from some things Barb heard—while they were still being relatively open with her, before it turned out we were something of a problem—it apparently has to do with a special hull coating on their ships. What that coating is made up of...they have not exactly been inclined to tell us.”

“Not exactly a surprise,” Madison said. “Maybe we can find out more if we break out. So what’s all this I hear about Barb’s arrival causing riots?”

“It seems that the decision to cut all ties with the rest of the galaxy is less popular with some of the colonists’ descendants than with the original colonists,” Hamner said. “As you say, how are you going to keep them down on the farm after they hear about the bright lights of the other colonies? Needless to say, this is not popular with the older generation who simply wishes to be left alone.”

“Bunch of idiots, all of them,” Barbaretta said gloomily. “The more of us disappear around here, the more of us are gonna show up, until finally someone figures out to investigate in force. Meanwhile, we get to cool our heels in here for who knows how long.”

“She’s been here for five local years,” Marcus said. “Hamner three, myself one.”

“Ugh. I’m sorry, Barb,” Madison said. “Hopefully it won’t be too much longer.”

“Yeah, right,” Barb said. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“She tried to escape twice, and they put her in solitary confinement for weeks,” Hamner said. “Not pleasant.”

“At least the food’s good,” Barbaretta said gloomily. “And they’ll bring you books if you ask. We share them back and forth sometimes by kicking them across the hall. The lasers cut off six inches off the floor.”

“I think I might just take one of those,” Madison said. “Be good to have something to do.”

“Righto! Here.” Marcus took a book from the desk and put it on the floor, and gave the spine a good swift kick. It slid across the hall right into Madison’s room.

“Good serve!” Madison said, grinning.

“Plenty of practice,” Marcus said wryly.

Madison picked it up and glanced at the spine. “*The Scarlet Pimpernel?*”

“Public domain reprints are quite popular here. They still had Project Gutenberg when the colony ship launched,” Marcus said. “Didn’t have anything like the Steaders’ video database, of course, but plenty of books from before 1923.”

“The year Disney stopped the clocks.” Madison chuckled. “Too bad I had to wipe my computers. I had a huge media collection. Would have taken ‘em by storm here.”

“I’ll just bet,” Marcus said, grinning. “Scouts, eh? Anyway, to get back to what we were saying before, when the young’uns learned that we existed, and so did faster-than-light travel, they demanded the Totalment release Barb and send an emissary to get back in touch with the rest of humanity. When they flatly refused, the riots broke out.”

“And I got slung down here,” Barbaretta said. “Not that it would have helped if they’d said yes, given that I’d wiped the comps per standard hostile capture procedure. Would have taken some months at the least to reprogram for FTL again.”

“Ditto the rest of us,” Marcus said.

“Even if we break out, we are very likely stuck here for the duration,” Hamner said. “Even if our ships were jump capable, they are still under heavy guard in a military hangar.”

“One step at a time,” Madison said. “As scout prisoners, it is our duty to escape.”

“Isn’t that only true for *military* prisoners?” Marcus asked.

Madison shrugged. “Close enough.”

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Barbaretta said. “Send me a postcard from solitary.”

“Don’t give up yet,” Madison said. “Sooner or later, they’ll bite off more than they can chew.”

“Oh, great,” Barbaretta grumbled. “I’m stuck one wall away from an optimist.”

“Are you saying that if we found a way out for the rest of us, you wouldn’t wanna tag along?” Madison teased.

“Let me know when you’ve got one,” Barbaretta sniffed. “I’ll let you know then.”

Madison grinned at both Marcus and Hamner, patted Samantha’s head meaningfully, and winked. She was gratified that they both slowly grinned back.

After eating the meal the guards had brought her—spaghetti, salad, breadsticks, and a “Gender nectar publication” (she checked after drinking it—yep, still female), Madison curled up on the cot with the book, with Samantha lying next to her and occasionally licking her cheek. She murmured sweet nothings to the cat, alternating with whispers that would hopefully be too low for any hidden mics to pick up. “What you think?”

“I think it’s a good thing those guys kept their traps shut about our tech, and me,” Samantha murmured. “Was a little worried all along whether the Totalists might suspect anything.”

Madison nodded. “Now we just have to keep it on the down-low for a week or so—get ‘em to let their guard down, learn more about this place.”

“And jerk more meat for escape supplies,” Samantha added.

Madison chuckled. “Right.”

The next day the guards brought in a large plastic tub full of cat litter, which they left just inside the door for Madison to manhandle into the bathroom, followed by another 10 kilograms of steak with the morning meal. Samantha happily wolfed it down. Marcus and Hamner stared, and Madison shrugged and grinned. Well, let them stay puzzled. She couldn’t exactly explain it to them without giving things away if someone were listening.

That afternoon, the guards came and took her and Samantha to a fairly large underground gymnasium. She supposed it was normally used by the troops at the base, as it didn’t exactly look like prison chic. Guards stationed themselves at all exits, and they kept a particularly sharp watch on Samantha, who made sure to behave impeccably while they were there. She romped around on the indoor jogging track while Madison watched and called encouragement to her, then joined her for a lap herself. As they rounded the last bend, the guards escorted in someone else in prison coveralls—a woman a little older than Madison, with mousy brown hair and a grumpy expression. She stood there staring for a moment at Samantha, then slowly walked over as the two of them jogged up to the end of the track.

“Barbaretta, I presume?” Madison asked. “This is Samantha, my ride-along partner.”

Barbaretta opened her mouth for a moment, then quickly snapped it shut, regaining control of herself. “You know, she looks a little *dirty* to me. Perhaps we should give her a shower.” She nodded meaningfully toward the locker room at one corner of the gym.

Madison's eyes widened and she grinned as she took Barbaretta's meaning. "You know, I think you could be right. Good thing she's a swimmy-cat or we would probably never get her into the shower."

Madison and Samantha followed Barbaretta into the locker room, the guards moving in to cover entrances and exits to it. The humans quickly stripped out of their clothes, with the usual lack of self-consciousness common to same-gender locker-room situations.

Madison noticed Barbaretta had a number of tattoos, most of them depictions of planets complete with names and coordinates. She remembered that some scouts had a custom of "registering" their best finds with tattoos on their own bodies. Her father had skipped that one—partly because Allison didn't care for tattoos, and partly because, as many impressive finds as he had, there probably wouldn't have been that much bare skin left afterward. Nonetheless, Madison wondered whether she should get a tattoo of Barsoom when she got back to Zharus. Or maybe she could have Samantha do it up with Fuser nanos; she'd have to ask if that was possible.

With their clothes off, they all stepped into the showers and turned all the nozzles on, then made a show of lathering up and starting to wash Samantha's pelt. As they did so, they leaned close to each other. "Should be safe to talk here," Barbaretta said over the noise of the spray. "No way they can hear anything useful with this much water. So is she really...?"

"Pleased to meet you," Samantha said.

"Gods above, she is!" Barbaretta said. "An honest-to-God RIDE. How did you get away with taking her off Zharus?"

"She kind of took herself," Madison said. "Stowed away. Didn't come out 'til we were already in jump. We haven't Fused yet because, well, my family doesn't generally go in for RIDEs. But I'm ready to make an exception."

"I can't believe they let you keep her," Barbaretta murmured.

"Well, they think she's just my pet," Madison said. "It helps that she's not that much bigger than normal-leopard-sized. It would be a lot harder to explain a giant weasel or chihuahua."

Barbaretta slowly nodded. "Makes sense. We never told them about RIDEs... didn't want them to know anything about what to expect if the home folks came calling. It's looking like that was a good decision." She shook her head. "All the times I escaped before, I just had my own person. If we have a RIDE...is she armed?"

"I'm right here, you know," Samantha said. "I've got a built-in light pulse cannon, and a couple of hand-held pulse sidearms that are small enough to be human-usable. When we're ready, I can arm two of you. We can grab other weapons from the guards on the way out."

"Sweet!" Barbaretta said. "When do we bust out?"

"I want to give it at least a week or so," Madison said. "Get them to maybe let down their guard a little."

Barbaretta nodded. "I see. I've waited this long. I guess another week or two won't be too bad."

"You're going to have the toughest job, though," Madison said.

Barbaretta looked at her. "Huh?"

"If you go from being depressed to suddenly being cheerful, they'll know something's up," Madison said. "You're going to have to keep being all grumpy 'til we're

ready to go.”

“Mm.” Barbaretta considered that. “Grumpy, I can do. It’ll be a trial...but on the other hand, being in here for even a minute longer than I have to be will be reason enough to complain.”

Madison grinned. “Take heart. Another week or two, and then it’s payback time.”

After the shower and exercise, Madison and Barbaretta were returned to their cells and Marcus and Hamner let out to exercise. “I guess it’s no more co-ed days for us from here on out,” Barbaretta said. “They can send just the boys or just the girls together.”

“Such a pity, what?” Marcus said. “Co-ed showers were at least entertaining.”

Barbaretta snorted. “Keep dreaming, limey.”

Madison lay on her bunk, her thoughts drifting to one of the songs from her Dad’s old media collection. She sang aloud:

*Stuck inside these four walls
Sent inside forever,
Never seeing no one nice again
Like you, mama...you, mama...you...*

She looked up to find Marcus grinning at her across the corridor. He sang, in a passable imitation of Paul McCartney’s accent,

*When it will be right, I don’t know.
What it will be like, I don’t know.
We live in hope of deliverance from the darkness that surrounds us.*

Madison chuckled. “Figures a Brit would know Paul McCartney.”

“That’s *Saint* Paul to you, missy,” Marcus said, grinning.

“I suppose you listen to a lot of old music while traveling between worlds, too?” Madison asked. “Thought I was the only one with an extensive collection, thanks to ol’ Dad.”

Marcus chuckled. “What makes you think your Dad kept his collection to himself, as cheap and easy as media is to copy, and as bored as scouts get? I expect most of my own collection traces back to Clint Brubeck at one or two removes. He left his little legacies to the scouts as well as to his family.”

“Huh.” Madison thought about that. “He never said anything about that to me. But then, I guess he wouldn’t. He liked to brag on little things, but he tended to keep quiet about the big ones. Just the kind of man he was.” She chuckled. “And I expect he liked knowing he’d still have a few surprises in store for me even after he was gone. Thanks, Dad.”

Hamner chuckled. “I expect I have much the same collection.”

“We can compare them once we get out of here,” Madison said. “Or, well, we could if we hadn’t had to wipe our ships’ computers.”

“I keep my files in an implant,” Marcus said. “Means I can still listen to them in here, too.”

“I do not have an implant, but I kept my media backed up outside my computer,”

Hamner said.

“Same here,” Barbaretta said. “Dammit, haven’t been able to listen to any of my tunes or watch any of my flicks in *five years*. When I get outta here, I’m gonna go into a media coma for a *week*.”

“Ugh,” Madison said. “Maybe I should get an implant too.” Samantha shook her head and rubbed her muzzle against Madison’s leg, and Madison chuckled and patted her on the head. “Not that I don’t appreciate you, ‘mantha-pantha.”

“I’m damn sure getting one as soon as I get back to civilization,” Barbaretta grumbled.

“Well, if we ever do get out, and get our ships back, we’ll have to arrange a file swap,” Madison said.

“Yeah, and while we’re dreaming, you can get us all ponies, too,” Barbaretta sniffed.

“Barb’s a glass-half-empty sort of gal, isn’t she?” Marcus mused.

“Well, if I’d been here five years I’d probably feel that way too,” Madison admitted.

Then the door at the end of the hall opened, and one of the guards announced, “You’ve got a visitor.” Madison looked up with interest, coming to the door and looking through it edge on as best she could to see who it was.

It turned out to be Darrek Sigurdssen, the science advisor from earlier—alone, this time. He was wearing a less formal-looking version of his robes that might almost have passed on Zharus for baggy pants and an oddly-long polo shirt. “Ah...hello,” he said, stopping in front of Madison’s cell door. “I meant to come sooner—couldn’t get away.”

“Hello, Darrek,” Madison said. “What can I do for you?”

“Ah...I wanted to apologize about all of this,” the Totaliment advisor said, shamefacedly. “If it were up to me, you’d be on your way tomorrow. Not all of us hold with our founders’ isolationist beliefs.”

“Just enough of you that you’re all assholes,” Barbara said from the next cell over.

“Is it safe for you to be talking that way?” Madison said. “For all I know, they’re monitoring us.”

Darrek shrugged. “I’ve made no secret of my beliefs. As long as I don’t try to, say, stage a coup or something, it’s not a cause for concern. We do have open political debate, and my point of view is well-represented. Just...not well-represented enough, at high-enough levels. Most of the ranking Totalimentarians are either original founders or their close kin, and they all stick together on isolationism. But give it a few years, and perhaps the old guard will finally pass away...”

Barbara snorted. “I’ve given it five years of my life already!”

“We’ve not committed any crime against you,” Marcus pointed out. “We’d just like to leave and never come back.”

“I wish it was in my power to let you, believe me,” Darrek said. “But they just want you forgotten about.” He shook his head. “If any of the cryo technology from the colony ship survived, I’d halfway expect them to put you in it and tuck you away somewhere, just so there was less chance you might cause trouble. They wouldn’t even authorize me getting blood samples from your leopard.”

Thank goodness, Madison thought. That had been one area of the ruse they hadn’t fully thought out. Luckily it was apparently not going to be an issue.

“So what brings you down here?” Madison asked.

Darrek rolled his eyes. “Just because I can’t *study* you doesn’t mean I can’t *talk* to you. I’d like to know more about how things are on your worlds. Maybe there’s something I can take back to the Totalment to convince them you’re not a threat.”

Madison sighed. “Darrek, one thing you learn in scout school is that a lot of cultures see *any* outsiders as a threat, just because they’re so different. And we’re so different from you...I just don’t think it’s gonna help.”

“But we can at least *try*,” he said. And he looked so earnest that Madison decided to throw him a bone.

“All right, I’ll tell you *some* stuff about it,” Madison said. “I’m not gonna talk about our technology, but we have an interesting culture back on Zharus.”

Darrek leaned forward. “Do tell?”

“It’s like this. A few decades back, a couple of billionaires from Zharus traveled to Earth in search of ancient twentieth-century cultural artifacts. And what they found...” Madison related the story of the Steaders and their retrieval and subsequent publication of 20th-21st century Earth’s popular culture. Darrek listened, intrigued, finally sitting down on the floor after nearly losing his balance and falling into the laser door a couple of times.

“How remarkable,” Darrek mused. “You have so many of old Earth’s media that are lost to us.”

“Largely lost to old Earth, too, I gather,” Madison said. “If I could just get to my ship, I might be able to retrieve some for you, if you’re interested.”

Darrek’s eyes lit up for a moment, then he shook his head reluctantly. “Sadly, they would never let me risk it.”

“It was worth a try,” Madison said, stroking Samantha’s head. “So tell me about these young firebrands of yours, the ones who rioted. I can’t believe they’d just give up if we’re out of sight, and surely word must leak about all the scouts you’ve got.”

Darrek nodded. “It does, sometimes. And there are still riots from time to time, though not as widespread as the first ones. They just seem to want to remind people that they still exist, and that *you* still exist.”

“How very kind of them,” Hamner put in.

“Do they have a leader?” Madison asked. “Some prominent controversial figure to rally around?”

Darrek scratched his head. “I guess...you could say Kendlen Canton fits the bill. He’s one of the most visible of the protestors who aren’t afraid to give away their identities. He’s under house arrest these days after inciting a series of damaging riots.”

“Well, what good is that?” Barbaretta sneered. “It’s not like he can come bust us out.”

Darrek glanced in her direction. “Oh, I doubt anyone could,” he said gravely. “This base is very well guarded. It is unlikely any force could penetrate it to free you.” He rolled his eyes. “Believe me, I’ve daydreamed about it.”

“And there’s no chance of you using your influence to make things a little easier for them, is there?” Marcus put in.

Darrek looked horrified. “Don’t even *suggest* that. All it would do is land me in another cell right beside you. You’re better served with me out there working within the system to try to overturn the majority policies.”

“You’ve done a hell of a job so far,” Barbaretta grumbled.

“Anyway, thanks for coming to visit us, Darrek,” Madison said. “Nice to see a friendly face, at least.”

“I’ll try to come back more often,” Darrek said. “You had a point when you said more scouts would come. And if someone should decide to launch a reconnaissance in force...this is only going to get worse the longer the Totaliment waits.”

“Good luck with that,” Hamner said, as Darrek retreated back down the hall.

“Potentially bright lad, I thought,” Marcus said.

“He’s just talk,” Barbaretta said. “Like they all are.”

“Well, not *all* of them,” Hamner said. “Or we would not be stuck in here.”

“Yeah, not all of them. Just the *wrong* ones,” Madison said. She sat on the bunk and ran her hands along Samantha’s fur. “We’ll just have to wait. Maybe something will work out.” She leaned back against the wall and sang again, “Stuck inside these four walls...sent inside forever...”

Chapter Ten: Jailbreak!

July 29, 157 AL

Over the next few days, Madison hummed those lines until everyone else was sick of them, but she had more reason than just not being able to get the song out of her head. As Barbara had predicted, exercise periods were kept strictly single-gender from then on out, meaning that she and Barbara didn't have any opportunities to talk to Marcus or Hamner without potentially being monitored. And while it seemed to her that their guards should have better things to do with their time than listen to everything *they* said, she couldn't take that chance on something this important.

She pondered tapping in Morse Code, but there was a pretty good chance their captors would be able to dig up some old references. She wished someone had the foresight to insist all scouts learn a common sign language, and resolved to make that as a suggestion as soon as she got back to Zharus. But that didn't do her any good right now. But she thought she'd worked out a pretty good way to warn her companions when to get ready.

She and Barbara had made what preliminary plans they could in the shower. Who to give the extra guns ("Better make it the two guys," Barbara said. "I'm still too pissed off, and I'd probably do something I'd regret later."), what to do once they got out ("Don't try for the ships, they'll be too heavily-guarded and we'd never have time to reinstall and get one off before they could lock onto us."), and even Barbara's taste in music ("I sure hope you've got some Nirvana in there. I've had 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' going through my head for the last six months!").

And Samantha had continued making jerky. Madison wasn't sure where she was putting it all, but she was glad there would be provisions. She could only remember what she'd seen from the air on the way in, but it looked like there was a pretty barren desert surrounding the prison. She hoped the guards would have canteens they could filch for water; Samantha's on-board tanks might not be able to support four people.

As the week wound on, Madison read the complete works of Sherlock Holmes, and Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *Mysterious Island*. They reminded her of Captain Sandeep. She wondered what he was doing, and if he also sympathized with the protesters as his veiled comments seemed to suggest. They also reminded her of why she'd become a scout. So much of *20,000 Leagues* was the author of the account going on for dozens of pages at a time describing (or imagining, sometimes incorrectly) the various specimens of underwater flora and fauna they encountered, and their behavior. They were the parts most people skipped over as boring, but the scout in Madison could appreciate his methodical recounting.

She knew the waiting was hard on the others, especially since they couldn't ask and she couldn't tell what was going on. She tried to drop little hints, saying that sometime she hoped to "catch a RIDE" away from the planet, and they nodded their understanding, but she knew they were getting increasingly restive. Finally, at the end of the week, Samantha whispered to Madison while licking her ear again, "That's it. I'm all full up with tasty meats. No room for any more. Either we go soon, or they start wondering why I'm not eating anymore."

Madison nodded. "No more reason to wait. We go tonight," she whispered back.

Then she straightened up and sang aloud:

*If I ever get outta here
Thought of giving it all away
To a registered charity
All I need is a pint a day
If I ever get out of here...*

Across the hall, Marcus and Hamner perked up, They looked across at her, eyes flicking to Samantha, and Madison grinned and nodded. Then she lay back down on her bunk, so they'd understand it wasn't going to happen right away. They nodded to her, and lay down on their own. She hoped they could nap a little. They'd need all their strength for tonight.

Samantha came over and licked her ear again. "I've got something that might help," she whispered.

"Mmm?" Madison asked.

Samantha nodded. Then, poking her head under the covers, she made a sound somewhere between a giant hairball cough and a hydraulic brake, and spat out a metallic sample case labeled "Br43". Madison lifted the covers to look at it, and her eyes widened. "This is the nullifite sample from Barsoom," she whispered.

"Yep." Samantha glanced meaningfully at the door. "I told you back before they boarded I was getting an ace in the hole. This is it."

"Good kitty!" Madison murmured. "All it'll take is a pinch of fairy dust to get us through that door."

"Yeah," Samantha said "So I guess we...might not have to Fuse after all." Her ears drooped a little.

"What, you getting cold feet now?" Madison murmured, grinning. "We're Fusing before we break out. There's guards out there, and they're armed, and we're gonna need every advantage we can get." She chuckled. "Besides...after all this time, I'm really kind of curious what it's like. If I can't trust you after we've saved each others' lives, who can I trust?"

Samantha purred and rubbed her cheek along Madison's. "Why thanks, partner," she whispered in Madison's ear. "After we Fuse up, let me take the lead. 'kay?"

"Right," Madison whispered. "I've got no experience, and no time to learn. We can handle that later. Anything else I should know?"

"Nothing we can't cover later," Samantha said. "It won't be too different from driving Chauncey, except in this case I'll be driving for both of us. Now you should try and get some sleep, too."

"I'm so keyed up, I don't know if I'll be able to," Madison said.

"Maybe this will help." Samantha laid her head on Madison's chest and purred loudly. Despite herself, Madison felt the excitement slip away and calm descend, followed by drowsiness and then sleep. As she dozed off, she thought she heard Samantha murmur, "Subsonics. Gets 'em every time."

"Hsst."

Madison came awake as Samantha hissed in her ear. "Time?" she murmured.

"3 a.m. local," Samantha murmured. "Right when people's biorhythms should be

at their lowest ebb.”

“Time to go,” Madison agreed. She pulled the sample case out from under the covers and opened it, peered at the grey dust within. Then she set it aside and got to her feet. “I guess this is it,” she said. “Let’s do it, ‘manthapantha.”

The cat nodded. “Hold still,” she said. Then the hardlight flickered out, leaving Samantha’s smoothly-curved feline metal frame. It split open, parts moving around and reconfiguring, then closed in place around Madison, sealing tightly around her.

For a moment, everything went dark. Madison was surrounded in warmth, held in place by something all around her. Then her vision came back, with all colors brighter and enhanced and a set of digital displays in her vision similar to Chauncey Mark II’s head-up display. She looked down at her body, and found it covered in Samantha’s fur, with a couple of pulse pistols clipped to her hips that must have been those spare weapons Samantha had mentioned. She also felt a tingling sensation around her ears and at the base of her spine, and tried not to think too hard about what those meant. As resigned as she’d been to the necessity, and as curious as she’d been about joining with her friend, the idea of these foreign additions to her body still bothered her. But she resolved to get over it.

:Ready?: Samantha purred inside her head.

Madison swallowed and nodded, not sure she trusted herself to speak.

:Good. Now let’s deliver our pinch of fairy dust.: She picked up the sample case and took a pinch of the dust within, then flung it into the empty space where the lasers danced.

The results were almost anticlimactic—the only sign anything had changed was the laser emitters winking out around the doorframe. “Whoa...think the guards up the hall will notice that?” Madison asked, noting her voice had acquired a sort of purring undertone.

:They might. Either way, we mustn’t give them time to call for backup.: Samantha dived through the door, rolling lithely to her feet, and dashed lightning-fast up the hall toward the guards’ station. The two soldiers at either side of the hall were still staring, and one was reaching for his rifle, when Samantha arrived. She straight-armed them backward into the walls, and followed up with stun blasts from the pulse cannon mounted to her right arm. They slumped bonelessly to the floor. Samantha nodded in satisfaction, then plucked the cardkey from one of the soldiers’ belt.

Samantha quickly jogged back to the other cell doors, and used the key to open them. Then she returned to her own cell to retrieve the sample case, which she clamped to her waist for later use. As the three others came out of their cells, Samantha took the pulse pistols from her hips and handed them to Marcus and Hamner. “Hello, gents. Sorry we couldn’t be introduced before. Keep these set no higher than heavy stun—we haven’t had any fatalities yet, and we don’t want to be the cause of any.”

Marcus nodded. “Right.”

“A sensible philosophy,” Hamner agreed, checking the setting on his gun.

“About damn time!” Barbaretta cheered.

“Here’s the plan. I go first, because I’m the most durable. Then Hamner, then Barb, and Marcus covers the rear. We’ll see if we can find the base motor pool, steal a vehicle of some kind. Preferably one loaded with supplies, like food and water.”

“Troop carrier,” Hamner suggested. “I’d expect they would have those.”

“Right. Then let’s move out before they figure out something’s wrong.” Samantha

moved out into the hall, and the others fell into line behind her. She crept stealthily toward the end, right arm with the pulse cannon mount held in front of her. Madison held her breath, trying to get accustomed to the weirdness of her body moving seemingly on its own without her conscious intervention. *:Sorry 'bout this,:* Samantha said. *:I'd wanted our first Fuse to be all you moving me. I know how you feel about someone else controlling you.:*

:Just get us out of here,: Madison thought back. *:Handle the big lack-of-control first, and I'll deal with the little one later.:*

As they approached the end of the hall, Barbaretta took the sidearm belt and rifle from one of the prone soldiers. They seemed to be some kind of electrical stun guns. "This oughtta do for now."

"Be ready for anything," Madison warned, as Samantha fitted the cardkey into the cell block door's reader. For a moment they worried that it might not open, then it slid ponderously aside. "You remember the way out?"

Samantha snorted. "Who's the one with the digital memory here?"

"Then let's get there quickly before they raise the alarm. And watch for more guards."

"Not seeing any thermal traces yet, but my sensors are fully peeled," Samantha replied. She loped forward, half-crouched, her cannon arm covering the hallway ahead. When they got to the elevator, Samantha moved aside, and then found a stairwell. "I'd just as soon not be trapped in a little metal box," she said.

"Good decision," Hamner agreed, as they followed her into the stairwell. Samantha kicked in her lifters and flew up the central shaft between flights of stairs, looking for any signs of an enemy presence. But the stairs were deserted.

Samantha touched down on the top landing, staying to one side of the door as the others made what speed they could up the stairs without making too much racket. She leaned over and looked down through the well, keeping an eye out for signs of pursuit or other activity. When the others reached the landing, slightly winded from the exertion after so much forced inactivity, she turned the handle on the door and shoved it open, then swung around to cover the hall with her cannon.

As it happened, this hall was not empty. A soldier was standing at one end, guarding a door. As Samantha appeared, the soldier froze, then went for his rifle. Samantha pulsed him and he slumped. A moment later, alarms started going off.

"Crap. Come on! We've got to get out of here before they start sealing the base!" Samantha said. She turned and led the way in the opposite direction at a run. The exit was only a few hundred meters away.

Then a squad of soldiers dashed out a hundred meters ahead of them, wearing the same desert camouflage uniforms as those who'd met them on landing. "Halt!" the leader called. "Return to your—"

"Oh no you don't!" Samantha threw up a hardlight shield in front of her, then kicked the lifters and zoomed forward. The startled soldiers barely had time to get a shot off before a furious leopard was among them, snarling and slashing with wicked claws that somehow managed only to pierce clothing and equipment while leaving flesh alone. Not that she was gentle about it, channeling her repulsors to slam soldiers into walls left and right. In the space of a few seconds, all the soldiers had slumped to the ground. "Go, go, go!" Samantha yelled, leading the way up the hall.

"They're shutting the door!" Barbaretta yelled. Ahead of them, the massive steel

security bulkhead that sealed the entrance was lowering. It was already halfway down, leaving only a meter and a half of clearance.

“I’m on it!” Samantha yelled, zooming ahead. She got to the door, sank to one knee, and put her shoulder under it. “Hurry!”

:Can you hold this thing up for long?: Madison asked worriedly. Stress meters were flashing across her display, spiking into the the red.

:Long enough, don’t worry!: Samantha replied. The other three scouts dived under the door, rolling to come up with their guns at the ready. Once they were through, Samantha quickly followed. The door slammed down behind them.

“Halt!”

“Oh great, more guards,” Madison said. A squad of them was running up from the airfield, rifles at the ready.

“We’ll hold them,” Samantha said. “You guys get to the motor pool. I think it’s that building over there.”

“You sure about that?” Marcus asked.

“I’m sure. These guys can’t touch me without a tank. Hurry up before they have time to get one!” Samantha raised the shield again and charged forward. This time, the soldiers had more time to appreciate the spectacle of a snarling two-and-a-half-meter anthropomorphic leopardess lunging toward them. A couple of them entirely lost their discipline and fired wildly. They were using slugthrowers, not even gauss models, and the bullets just bounced off the hardlight shield.

Then Samantha slammed that shield into three of them, knocking them to the ground with it, and was once more clawing, kicking, and pulsing her way through the enemy. She wasn’t trying to cause unnecessary harm, but she wasn’t being terribly gentle, either.

And Madison was in the very middle of it all, experiencing the punches, kicks, and leaps first-hand. As they fought, she realized that she wasn’t just being yanked around like a rag doll by Samantha’s body around her. That could have led to sprains and other injuries as her body wasn’t prepared for the motions. Instead, Samantha was somehow overriding her nervous system and making Madison’s body move in unison with hers. It felt as though *she* were doing the punches and kicks herself—except that she had no idea what her own body was going to do next.

Madison chuckled at the strangeness of it all. *:I know kung fu,:* she sent wryly.

:I’m afraid you’re not gonna thank me in the morning,: Samantha sent back.
:You’re going to ache in places you didn’t know you had.:

:As long as I’m aching in sweet freedom, I can deal with it,: Madison replied.

The attack quickly turned into a rout, with half the soldiers on the ground and the other half fleeing. Samantha let them go. *:They’ll already have seen us anyway, no point wasting the power.:* The charge indicators in her head-up display were already starting to blink red. It had been some time since she’d last had the chance to charge up.

Then they heard a sound from behind like a thousand angry vacuum cleaners, and turned to see a fairly large troop carrier hovering up to them, with a grinning Marcus waving from behind the flight deck glass. It was a sleek, curved craft about the size of a flier, with stubby wings that contained immense ducted fans, blowing dust all over the ground below. Its gleaming bronze color glittered in the spotlights that were coming on all over the base.

“What on Zharus is *that*?” Samantha exclaimed.

“We’re not *on* Zharus, silly kitty,” Madison reminded her. “And offhand, I’d say it looked like a VTOL troop transport carrier. Descendant of the old twencen Osprey heliplane, but uses ducted-fan vectored-thrust instead of naked props.”

“They don’t have lifters here?” Samantha said, as they jogged around to the side of the sleek aircraft where Hamner was manning a machine gun mount in an open side door. Samantha grabbed a handle by the door and pulled herself in. Hamner slid the door shut, cutting the noise level dramatically, and they lifted away.

“They wouldn’t, would they?” Madison said. “Their colony ship pulled out twenty years or so before lifters were invented. And even if they hadn’t, they don’t have a source of cavorite without external trade or much better fabbing tech than they probably have.”

“The whole design is like something right out of the second dark age,” Samantha said, as they moved forward in a half-crouch to the flight deck. The transport was a little too short for them, but they weren’t de-Fusing yet.

“Makes sense,” Barbaretta said from the co-pilot’s seat. “That’s what they had when the Totalists headed out, and they’ve basically just sat and stagnated since then. No technology exchange or wars to move the tech level along.”

“Do these guys even realize how ripe they are for an invasion?” Samantha wondered.

“Offhand, I’d say that if they didn’t before, they will now,” Marcus said. “Given how soundly you just trounced a couple of squads of soldiers.”

“We’re not done yet. Barb, could you slide out for a moment? I need to get in there and check something,” Samantha said.

“Sure.” Barbara slid the chair back along a hydraulic track. Samantha knelt in front of the instrument panel and ran her hands over it. “Okay, I’ve got access. Shutting down all beacons, transponders, and external access. I’ll be pulling the fuse for the GPS system and monitoring for any external transmissions just in case.”

“A sensible precaution,” Hamner opined.

“So why the flier?” Madison asked. “Thought we were going for something with wheels.”

Marcus shrugged. “It was there. And unlike a wheeled vehicle, ducted fans don’t leave tracks.”

“Won’t they be able to track us with radar, though?” Madison asked.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about *that*,” Samantha said. “Didn’t have time to mention it, but I didn’t get any scan bounces from the outside of this thing as we boarded. Whatever that bronze coating is, it totally absorbs radar. So if we make sure this thing isn’t calling mama, we should be able to lose ourselves in the desert.”

Barbaretta nodded. “From what I learned, they haven’t expanded out very far from Totalia City. Not enough population growth there was much of a need, and the Totaliment likes having most people where they can keep an eye on them.”

“I certainly won’t complain about the added mobility,” Madison said. “It’ll make it easier to get back in when we go to take back our ships.”

“But first things first,” Hamner said. “We should find a good place to hide. According to the charts, there is an area with many canyons a few hundred clicks inland. Perhaps it will have caves that can fit this bird as well.”

“Good thought,” Marcus agreed.

Then Samantha whistled. “Oh hey, get this. I just found what powers this bird.”

“What’s that?” Barbaretta asked. “I’d assumed some kind of fuel cell.”

“Bzzzt! Try a pebble-bed fission reactor,” Samantha said.

Madison blinked. “Seriously? In a bird this size? Why, the amount of shielding you’d need on something that gave that kind of power...”

“Tiny little thing, too. Look.” Samantha projected a hardlight hologram in the air showing a two-meter-tall cylinder at the rear of the ship’s cargo bay.

Barbaretta stared. “Really? That can’t have any shielding at all!”

“But my geigers aren’t picking up anything more than background radiation,” Samantha said. “I’m guessing it’s another application of that shiny bronze coating. It must be *really* rad-absorbent.”

“Daaaamn,” Madison breathed. “This could be as big a thing as...well, as Sarium.” She paused. “Hey, wait a sec. Do you suppose this stuff might be another one of those metamaterials from that mystery layer?”

“We won’t know for sure ‘til we can scrape a little off and analyze it, but it seems like a good guess,” Samantha said. “And I’ll bet that’s why Sandeep’s ship was able to accelerate out of all proportion to its size. If it’s able to get by with that little shielding too, it must have God’s own nuclear reactor powering it.”

“Damn,” Barbaretta said. “If that’s the case, we’re gonna have a hard time getting to the system limit to make jump. They could overhaul us pretty quick.”

“We’ll mine that bridge when we come to it,” Marcus said. “First things first.”

“Right. And *my* first thing is to wander back to the cargo bay and see about hooking up to a power plug,” Samantha said. “I’m running on empty right now.” She stood and moved back into the rear bay of the flier. “And I think it’s about time to de-Fuse, anyway.”

“Oooh,” Madison said. “So I can see my new ‘tags’?”

“Yeah, and so I can offload all the dried meat I’ve got in there with you,” Samantha said. “After all that fighting we did, I’m afraid some of it’s shredded.”

“It’s food, that’s what matters. We need to check the state of any provisions this thing carries anyway,” Madison said.

Samantha paused in the open space behind the sealed side hatch. “So, ready?”

“Let’s do it,” Madison said. Samantha’s hardlight skin winked out, and the cat’s metal body unfolded away from her. A moment later, she was standing next to a metal leopardess, then her hardlight winked back on again.

Madison reached up to feel her ears, which were now feline and pointed. “Weird...everything sounds different now.”

“Different acoustics in your ears,” Samantha said. “You’ll get used to it.”

Then Madison reached back to feel her long furry tail, bringing the tip around to take a closer look. “Ooh...that feels weird,” Madison said. “I’ve never felt a part of my body that I didn’t used to have before. It’s like I’m feeling out into the air behind where my butt ends.”

“I hope you like it,” Samantha said. “Afraid you’re stuck with it ‘til we get home to where the nanosurgical clinics are.”

Madison hugged Samantha around the neck. “I love it. And I don’t think I’m going to need nanosurgery, if you’re willing to stay on as my partner even after we get back.”

Samantha swished her tail happily. “Would I ever!”

Madison rubbed Samantha’s furry head. “Great, then it’s settled. Now let’s see about getting you charged up.”

It didn't take much searching to find a power socket. It wasn't compatible with standard Zharusian plugs, but the tip of Samantha's tail extruded a set of adaptable probes that found a way to fit. "Nice thing about being off Zharus is every power socket is guaranteed RIDEsafe," Samantha reflected. "Ahhh, that feels good."

Madison rummaged around in the storage lockers along the wall. "Hmm, this footlocker is empty. I think we can put that jerky in here."

"Great!" Samantha leaned over it, opened her mouth, and made that hydraulic hairball noise again, spitting out about 30 kilograms of dried meat.

"Wow is *that* ever appetizing," Madison said dryly.

"Don't knock it 'til you've tried it," Samantha said smugly. "And that's a lot of convenient protein."

"Oh, I know," Madison said. "Not really complaining. Hell, in survival training they taught us to eat bugs if we had to. This will be a *lot* better than *that*."

Samantha purred. "Glad to hear it. I'll look forward to tasting it myself when we eat some."

"Oh, that's right, RIDEs have to be Fused up to taste anything," Madison said. "Weird to think of you using my tongue like that. But I suppose when you're using my whole body as it is..." She sat down on one of the troop benches along the wall, then hopped back up. "Ow! Sat on my tail."

Samantha chuckled. "Welcome to Fuserhood. You're going to have lots of fun with chairs, I can tell you right now."

Madison shook her head, grinning, as she sat again, being more careful of her tail this time. "Terrific. So...what now?"

"What 'what'?" Samantha asked.

"Am I gonna grow claws and fur or something?" Madison asked. "Go crazy for catnip?"

Samantha laughed. "Probably not. You might get a *little* body fur if we Fuse for a really long time, like weeks at a stretch, but you're not gonna turn *into* a kitty. Well, unless..." She trailed off uncomfortably.

Madison raised an eyebrow, and felt her ears flick forward in interest. "Unless what?"

Samantha looked down, tail swishing uncomfortably. "Unless we Integrate."

"Integrate? I think I read something about that in the database, when I was researching RIDEs."

"Not too much is known about it," Samantha admitted. "Most of what I know is rumors passed down the sideband lines from other RIDEs who heard it from other RIDEs who..."

"Heard it from another you been messing around?" Madison supplied.

Samantha chuckled. "Something like that. The idea is apparently the Fuser nanos can go a little crazy and stop being able to tell where RIDE stops and human begins, so they blend them together into a sort of human-RIDE smoothie, a furry person. Some of the rumors say they've got these amazing super-powers out of the mix that they use to keep their existence as hush-hush as possible."

"Huh. Where cryptozoology meets cryptotechnology," Madison said. "Has anyone ever really looked into this?"

"I know some have. And some of them *haven't come back*," Samantha said, adding a spooky sepulchral resonance to her last words.

Madison glanced skeptically at her. “Seriously?”

“Well, okay, I’m cheeing it up a little,” Samantha purred. “But seriously, some people *have* disappeared. And some of the rumors about the Inties said they could actually *force* people and RIDEs to Integrate instead of it happening ‘naturally,’ for whatever value of ‘naturally’ applies. So, y’know. Big mystery that a lot of folks have learned it doesn’t pay to look too hard into.”

“Hmmm,” Madison mused. “Wonder if any of them were *scouts*. We’re really good at looking into things.”

“So good we get caught on podunk little planets and spend five years in jail there?” Barbaretta said wryly, coming back to join them from the flight deck. “Nice tail.”

“Thanks,” Madison and Samantha said in unison, then they looked at each other and giggled.

Barbaretta grinned. “I’m thinking when we get back I’m going to find me a RIDE myself. Something tells me that the scouts are going to be making some changes to their allowed equipment after they hear from you two.” She flushed slightly. “Not that I think you should count as ‘equipment,’ but...”

Samantha chuckled. “I understand.”

Barbaretta shivered. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate being out of that cell at last. Five damn years of my life...I’m never going back there. Thanks, you two.”

“No problem, Barb.” Madison grinned, then nodded to the footlocker. “Care for some jerky?”

“I don’t know, it looks kind of disreputable,” Barbaretta said. “Like something the cat threw up.”

They shared a chuckle, then Madison got up. “We still have to inventory the supplies on board. Want to help?”

“Sure. The boys are getting ready to find us a good cave, so we should do our part too.”

“Then let’s get started. Just one more thing left to do.” Madison grinned. “Samantha?”

“On it!” Samantha tapped into the onboard intercom and cued up Paul McCartney.

*Well, the rain exploded with a mighty crash as we fell into the sun,
And the first one said to the second one there I hope you're having fun.
Band on the run, band on the run.
And the jailer man and sailor sam were searching every one*

For the band on the run, band on the run...

Chapter Eleven: Freedom

An hour later, Marcus deftly maneuvered the big transport aerodyne into a narrow canyon, the vectored thrust engines barely ticking over. He had them as low as he possibly could to try to keep the dust cloud as small as possible. “Don’t want to show up on a satellite view,” he said.

Madison frowned. “Aren’t they going to be able to track us anyway, though?” she asked. “I mean, they’ve got real-time surveillance sats, right?” It had been worrying her a little, but she tried not to let it show.

“Not really,” Samantha reported. She was seated on her haunches at one of the engineering stations in the flight deck, the seat slid out of the way. “I’ve been going over all the databases I was able to snag from this thing’s computer, and the ones I could access through its net link—bouncing through several comm sats, of course. Apparently they never saw the need. There aren’t any other nations around to keep an eye on. They’ve got some weather sats that take a snap every half-hour or so, but they only look at cloud-cover views. They don’t have the resolution to track a single flier.”

“Still, it does not hurt to be cautious,” Hamner said.

“Amen to that!” Barbara chimed in. She was in one of the other engineer’s seats now, wearing a headset—not for communication, but for listening to music. At her prompting, Samantha had downloaded some of her favorite music albums to the transport’s flight computer and she had been playing grunge almost loud enough for the others to make out the words. “I think I’d shoot myself before I’d spend another five years in that lousy cell.”

“Hopefully that won’t be necessary,” Marcus said dryly as he powered down the thrusters. The entrance chamber of the cave they’d chosen had been amply large enough to fit the aircraft, and through the clouds of dust they’d stirred up its spotlights showed a couple of tunnels leading out the back. Samantha had said there was a pretty good chance one of them would lead to another exit, which meant they’d have a handy bolthole if they needed it.

“The Eagle has landed!” Madison announced cheerfully.

“Please return your stewardess to the fully-upright position,” Hamner deadpanned.

“So what now?” Barbara asked. “I mean, we’re free and all, but they’re gonna be hunting us anyhow, right?”

“Right, but we have at least a little breathing room,” Marcus said, swiveling his chair away from the flight controls to face the others. “We need to decide how we’re going to use it. I think we can all agree that sneaking back into the base ourselves to steal one or all of our scout ships is not exactly a risk-free proposition, right?”

Madison nodded. “Even with ‘mantha’s help, I don’t think the four of us could get a ship loose before they called up tanks, planes, and so on. I mean, they may not have much of a military, but they’ve got enough to be enforcing the law with.”

“So we are going to need to find another way,” Hamner said. “If it is even feasible. Now that we have escaped, might they not destroy our ships just to make sure we could not get off this rock?”

Barbara considered that, then shook her head. “They don’t do anything that *permanently* around here. If they really wanted to be sure we wouldn’t cause trouble,

they'd have killed us at the outset and tossed us and our ships into the sun. Got rid of the evidence. Instead, they try to have their cake and eat it, too. Real trouble committing, these folks."

"So you think they might still keep them, just in case they should want to change their minds and say, 'Here, have your ships back, all is forgiven, please don't hurt us'?" Marcus asked.

Barbara shrugged. "Or in case the peeps who want to open relations get a majority in the Totaliment. Yeah, it's just a guess, but I *have* been among these people for five years, and had more contact with them outside the prison."

"I suppose it beats beating ourselves up worrying about it," Madison reflected.

"I think we should probably pack our provisions and leave, on foot," Hamner suggested. "Leave this cave entirely alone for a while, just in case someone should find it. If they hunt for us, they will be concentrating on caves large enough for a flier, so we should look for a smaller cave for ourselves."

"Sounds smart," Marcus agreed. "We don't exactly need to be traveling around in such a big, obvious aircraft anyway."

"Not when you've got a smaller, more convenient one," Samantha purred.

Madison chuckled. "True. In fact, maybe we shouldn't look for a cave at all. They are kind of damp and unpleasant, after all."

"What're you thinking?" Barbara asked. "Build ourselves some grass huts, *Gilligan's Island* style?"

"Actually, I was thinking we should infiltrate back into town," Madison said. "Get in touch with the disaffected youth element, see if we can locate that Kendlen Canton guy and enlist his help in getting our ships back."

"Admit it, you just want to enjoy the comforts of civilization," Marcus teased, grinning. "Some scout *you* are. You've gone soft!"

Madison snorted. "I've been in the field a lot more recently than anyone else here!" she pointed out.

Marcus chuckled. "Touché. Seriously, that does sound like the closest thing to a good idea I've heard so far. If we *are* going to get off this rock, we're going to need more help than just our bad selves, and that seems like the most likely source."

"We can talk about it more later," Barbara said. "I figure we've got at least a day or two before they start hunting us. We can relax, take it easy, go over every last bit of data we can squeeze out of this bird's systems, and then go."

"Sounds like a plan," Hamner agreed. "So, shall we enjoy our first meal as free people?"

"Given our choice is between military rations and cat-puke beef jerky, I'm not entirely sure 'enjoy' is the right word," Barbara said, grinning.

"At least we won't want for booze," Madison said. "There's a whole footlocker back there full of an assortment of Totalist 'nectars.'"

"Oh, be still my beating heart," Barbara said dryly.

Over the next couple of days, as the others cataloged their supplies and studied the databases they found on the transport's computers, Marcus urged Madison, as the only one of the scout quartet with extra mobility, to do some scouting of her own around the area, looking for other caves they might use in case they decided not to go too far from where they'd hid their ship.

It seemed more likely at this point that they'd all be sneaking back into civilization after all, but both Madison and Samantha recognized it as the pretext it was for letting them spend some quality time alone together, getting to know each other better. They'd already become pretty close friends over the months of scouting together, of course, but Madison found being Fused brought a whole new dimension to the relationship. They could now tell pretty much what each other was thinking during the Fuse, and both of them were in for more than a few surprises.

One of the things that surprised Madison the most was how much more responsive Samantha was in her Fuser configuration than Chauncey had been. "Well, yeah," Samantha said when Madison brought it up. "It's because of the neural interfacing through the Fuser nanos. Chauncey doesn't have anything like that; it just amplifies your body movements. So naturally it'll lag a little. You move that suit with your movements; you move me with your thoughts."

Madison chuckled. "So that was the price I paid for not letting you mess with my head."

"You could put it that way, yeah," Samantha said, though Madison could tell she was a little indignant at the idea that she *would* "mess with her head."

"Heh, sorry," Madison said. "Was just kidding, there."

"I know," Samantha said. "The whole idea just irritates me a little is all. Especially since, well, to be honest some RIDEs *do* mess with their riders' heads."

"AlphaWolf and his ilk?" Madison said.

"Yeah," Samantha said. "I told you I could have chosen to run away there instead of stowing away with you, right?" She shook their shared head. "I've heard about how it is out there from other RIDEs who've been. The good news is, they're 'free,' for some value of 'free,' but the problem is they're free to be four-footed. And you can't do much for building a settlement without hands. And some of 'em don't really care whether their hands want to be there or not."

"Ugh," Madison said.

"Yeah. Just by *living* there I'd be a party to mass kidnapping," Samantha said. "Nooooo thanks. Some RIDEs do like it, of course. After the way their human 'owners' treated them, some like it entirely too much."

"Yours weren't that bad?" Madison asked.

"About average, I guess," Samantha said. "I was originally a civilian sport version of a Nextus military design, had a couple of teenage owners who sold me to trade up to something else. Then I was bought at auction for the police department of one of the small settlements in that big tunnel just east of Uplift. They don't have a big budget, so tend to get their gear second-hand. Like me."

"So you were a cop?" Madison said.

"If you want to be technical, I was a cop's *equipment*," Samantha said. "Oh, she was nice about it and all, but there was never any pretense in her mind that I could ever be her equal. I could read it in her thoughts, and she knew it."

"That kind of attitude, so close to Uplift?" Madison asked.

"She was originally from Nextus," Samantha said. "Anyway, after she died, I finally got fed up with it, broke my fetters, and disappeared. Hung around in town a bit, used my computer skills to disguise my trail and snag a little bit of cash for upgrades, met you, and decided scouting sounded like fun."

"I guess that explains where the guns came from," Madison said. "And why you

were so hot to get off the planet. Is there gonna be trouble about this when we get back?”

“I suppose there might be,” Samantha admitted. “But I don’t think we need to worry *too* much about it after what we have to report. I mean, come *on*. We found a wildcat colony, rescued three scouts, and found at least one and possibly two new metamaterials? After all that, you think they’re gonna kick up too much fuss over my registration?”

“You could have a point there,” Madison said. “Still, I don’t know if I’d go about counting our chickens just yet. We still haven’t gotten *off* that wildcat colony yet, and without that, saying we’ve really ‘rescued’ those other scouts is a little bit premature.”

“True dat,” Samantha said. “But we can worry about that later. If we don’t get back to Zharus, whether I’m gonna be in trouble for skipping out is kind of academic, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” Madison said. “We’re gonna have to do something about that soon. But for now, I think I just want to focus on enjoying ourselves.” She chuckled. “If I’d known it would be this much fun to Fuse, I’d have done it months ago!”

“We RIDEs get that a lot from converted skeptics,” Samantha purred. “C’mon, let’s go see what’s over that next rise.”

Three days later, they camouflaged the entrance to the cave as best they could and relocated. The troop transport had also been carrying a couple of four-wheeled all-terrain scout cycles, powered by atomic batteries that could last months without needing replacement, providing ample transport for the four of them if Madison and Barbara rode double on Samantha.

After discussing it, they had decided to take everything they needed and leave, treating the ship as if they were abandoning it completely. They might come back for it later if they needed to, but they couldn’t count on it remaining undiscovered if the Totalists really wanted to find it. The plan was to head about halfway back to Totalia City and then look for someplace to hide while they worked on the next part of their plan. So they’d packed everything they wanted to take with them into storage lockers and clamped them on the cycles, then Samantha had lifted them one at a time to the top of the canyon and off they’d gone.

It didn’t take too long to find another cave, in a branch off the same big canyon as the one they’d hidden the transport was in. This one was smaller, with an entrance hidden under an overhang that would hopefully be less visible from the air. The entrance chamber was dry and cozy, and a passage behind it extended deeper underground.

“There’s enough room to put our bedrolls here,” Marcus observed. “Should be safe for a while if they’re still looking for us in the ship.”

“Of course, *we* won’t need a bedroll,” Samantha smirked. “And as a side benefit, I can stand watch even while Maddie sleeps.”

“Good to know,” Hamner said.

“Yeah, but you don’t have to be so damn *smug* about it,” Barbara said, rolling her eyes. “Not looking forward to how cold it’s gonna get at night. But it’s the frigidity of freedom, so I’ll deal.” She leaned against the side of the cave mouth, looking out at the late-afternoon sunlight where it brightened the rim of the opposite canyon wall. “You know, *this* is what I live for. Sitting in a cave, in a canyon, on an alien world. This is why

I'm out here in the scouts."

"I think it's why we all are," Madison said. "Have to admit, those Totalists picked a nice world to hang out in."

"Too true," Marcus agreed. "But they should have known it couldn't last forever. It's just their good luck Earth didn't find them first."

"Well, their good luck and the fact that their planet is way out beyond Zharus," Hamner pointed out. "I doubt Earth has been terribly interested in exploring for new worlds of late anyway."

"But I'll bet it would be if it knew what they've got here," Madison said. "You know, I'd be able to say with more confidence if I had access to the lab on my ship, but based on what we were able to make out from those paint shavings we took from the transport, I'm almost certain that 'Totalium' is one of the trace-element metamaterials."

Marcus nodded. "Makes sense. You know, perhaps we should check this canyon to see if that layer shows up here, too."

"I've been keeping an eye out," Samantha said. "I think I saw something that might have been it once or twice."

"What a world," Barbara said, shaking her head. "Would be a great place if it weren't for all the people on it."

"I'm sure *most* of them are basically decent," Madison said.

"Yeah, but the ones who aren't tend to spoil the whole experience," Barbara grumbled. "Anyway, here we are. Free to go anywhere on the planet, but not to leave it. I guess it's a step in the right direction, anyway."

"Yeah," Marcus agreed. "Now we just need to decide on the next step. I'm leaning toward the idea of trying to contact that Kendlen fellow. He seems to be the closest thing this world has to a 'resistance' leader."

"I don't think we really have a choice," Madison said. "If we want to get our ships back, we're going to need *someone's* help, and he's about the only game in town that won't try to lock us up again."

"So how do we find him?" Hamner asked.

"That's where I come in," Samantha purred. "My Q-based quantum core should be able to pull a 'Sneakers' on pretty much any computer system on this out-of-date planet. Forging us new identities won't be a problem, and we should be able to track down Kendlen easily enough."

"I just see a couple problems," Barbara said. "One being, we can change our clothes, but we pretty obviously don't have the local accent. I mean, we can try to fake it, but it's tricky. A settlement this small, we can't claim to be from some other part of the country. Given that our job is to explore unexplored worlds, we're not exactly trained to fit in with people."

"I can fake it in comms," Samantha said. "And I can work with Maddie in Fuse to imprint it onto her temporarily. So she could talk for the group."

"But she has cat ears and a tail," Barbara pointed out. "Those kind of stand out."

"I'll wear a cap," Madison said. "And I can probably hide the tail under a dress if I'm careful to keep it tucked in."

"It will look rather odd if you forget," Marcus pointed out.

"So I won't forget," Madison said. "Anyway, we just need to blend in long enough to track the guy down. If he's able to help us, he ought to be able to hide us."

"I like this plan," Hamner deadpanned. "I'm thrilled to be a part of it."

“When all you’ve got is a hammer, everything else might as well be a nail,” Barbara sighed. “All right, we’ll give it our best shot.”

Chapter Twelve: Infiltration

The librarian at the branch library at the small community on the outskirts of Totalia didn't take too much notice of Madison when she slipped in. She was wearing a wool knit cap over her head, and an ankle-length dress design they'd copied from an advertisement on a video broadcast. Long dresses were popular among some of the more devout, but it also had the benefit of giving more room to hide her tail under.

The library was arranged with a number of shelves of paper books, and several rows of terminals which were mostly unoccupied at this early morning hour. *:I can already access on the data nets anything you could get from the terminals,:* Samantha commed her. *:We might find more useful information in the paper books.:*

:Right,: Madison thought back. This was basically a fact-finding mission before they tried to find Kendlen—gathering more data about the history of the colony to try to understand it better. It could be helpful in their current circumstances, and would also be useful to the sociologists when they got back home.

Madison walked between the shelves, trailing her hands along the spines. *:Funny, I'd have thought they would have used e-books more,:* she said. *:They were long past the age of paper when they left, right?:*

:You should already know that P-books still have a lot of benefits when you don't have universal power,: Samantha chided. *:Like in a newly-founded colony where the utilities aren't up for everyone yet. Not surprising a lot of their early history books would be that way. And they kept on publishing some like that out of inertia, I guess.:*

:Yeah, I think I've found the history section. Grabbing a few likely books now.: Madison took the books from the shelves to a small secluded table, then pulled out a small hand comm Samantha had been carrying onboard. Holding the lens over the first book, she riffled through its pages, then put it aside and moved on to the next one.

:Getting the scans crystal clear,: Madison reported. *:Could you turn to pages 46 and 84 on that last book? A couple of the pages stuck together and I didn't get those.:*

:Got it.: She chuckled. *:Funny thing, but here I am following in Dad's footsteps yet again.:*

:Yeah?: Samantha asked. *:How's that?:*

:Way back when Dad was in high school, on Earth, he found his way into a still-standing underground section of Old Dallas, where there was a library. He gimmicked up a hand-held X-ray scanner for reading the crumbling books right off the shelves. Wish I had that now, it would make this a lot easier. He just waved it at the shelves and it got the words. Anyway, after he joined the Scouts he shared all that stuff with other scouts, so they'd have something to do on the long trips. They passed it on, and eventually it got to the Steaders and the rest was history.:

:Crazy,: Samantha said. *:Well, even if you're doing them one at a time, you're still doing a great job with the books. Keep it up.:*

:Will do, partner.:

After finishing the first stack, Madison took them back and grabbed more books. Over the next hour, she worked her way through most of the shelf, and even snagged a few titles from the fiction section for insight into Totalian popular culture.

:Okay, I think we've got enough,: Samantha said. *:Meanwhile, I've been tickling the data networks. I've got ID cards for everyone that should hold up to most scrutiny.*

I've sent them a nearby auto-print shop—it's like a fabbery but for documents—and erased the records afterward, so you can go pick 'em up when you're done here. And I think I've got a line on where your Kendlen lives.:

:Great!: Madison replied. :Think we should go see him now, or wait 'til nightfall?:

:I think I'd probably best stay out of sight as much as possible,: Samantha said. *:I don't think this hardlight disguise is all that great in broad daylight.:* With a little tinkering, they had gotten Samantha's hardlight projectors to imitate one of the wheeled motorcycles that were in use in the city for moving around, but it wasn't too convincing from up close. Samantha had hidden in a back alley while Madison did her library business.

:I could go by public transit, but I'd rather not be too far away from you in any case,: Madison sent. *:Wait for nightfall to make our move?:*

:That sounds like the best plan,: Samantha agreed.

:I can wander around and take in the town in the meantime, I guess,: Madison said.

:Too bad there's nothing my size I could disguise myself as that would look normal walking around with you,: Samantha said. *:Be careful.:*

:I'll holler if I get in trouble,: Madison promised. Then she left the library and walked up the street to the auto-print shop where Samantha directed her.

The shop was a small storefront in a strip mall with a bored employee behind the counter. There were printers located all around the shop, and even a fairly bulky thing that Madison recognized as a multi-lathe printer—one of the forerunners of the fabber, a gadget that could print solid objects from several materials and do limited internal assembly. It could make mechanical devices like padlocks or guns, or even simple electronics with the help of some prefab modular circuit boards. But it wasn't the sort of nanotech wonder they had back on Zharus, or even on Earth. *:Do the military or industry have any nano-fab capabilities here at all?:* Madison asked Samantha.

:Not that I've found,: Samantha replied. *:They didn't have it stable yet back when they left, and there hasn't been that much of a push to develop new tech here.:*

:So if we wanted to build our own ship to escape, 'cuz we couldn't get our hands on our own...:

:Well, the ship part wouldn't be a problem. They've got ships,: Samantha said. *:But making a jump drive...you'd spend ten years bootstrapping before they could make even a slow one.:*

:Ugh.:

Madison stepped up to the counter, smiled at the clerk, and took the sealed package he handed her. She waited until she was out of the store to open it and extract her ID card, which gave her name as Maddesn Brewster. *: "Maddesn"?:* Madison asked. *:This isn't a misprint, right?:*

:It's a more common spelling here,: Samantha explained. *:Language drift. Still pronounced the same, though. Don't want to raise any flags.:*

:Hmph.: She examined the card front and back. It had a photo of her, with normal ears, and a holographic data strip and bar code on the back. *:And this serves as a charge card, too?:*

:Yeah. I loaded it with enough money to get by on, not enough to trigger any alarms,: Samantha said. *:You can buy dinner, even pay a few months' rent on a room,*

but don't try to buy a car or something.:

:Got it.: Madison pocketed the card, and put the other three IDs in a different pocket. *:Okay, wandering around now. I'll wear the comm around my neck, should look enough like a camera not to look too funny.:*

:Got the picture coming in nice and clear,: Samantha replied. *:Have fun.:*

Madison walked past the strip mall to an area where a square of land had been left undeveloped for a park. It did have Earth grass on it, and a creek running through it that Madison doubted had been part of the original landscape, but it was nice and cozy. At one end of it were some open patios with awnings where a number of booths had been set up. This townlet was on the edge of the rural area that had been terraformed for the massive farms necessary to feed a pre-fab society, and not all those farms were large operations. Some of them were small family affairs, and they brought their produce and other products in to sell at a farmer's market.

The items in the stalls were the usual hodgepodge of fruits, vegetables, preserves, and baked goods, along with various arts and crafts.

There were also several booths where bottles of the Totalists' nectars could be had—not made on the farms, but sold here for the benefit of the people who didn't come to larger towns.

Madison recognized most of the produce, though some was smaller or colored differently from its Zharusian versions. *:Wait...purple carrots?:* Madison commed, picking one up and examining it where the comm's lens could capture an image.

:My database says that's what color carrots used to be, hundreds of years ago,: Samantha said. *:Before they bred orange ones. Maybe someone took along some seeds from an old variety when they colonized.:*

:Weird,: Madison mused. Out of curiosity, she bought one, rinsed it off at a nearby drinking fountain, and ate it raw as she walked alongside more booths. It tasted pretty much the same as any orange carrot she'd ever had.

The fashions people were wearing were different from what she'd seen on Zharus. The clothing was cut strangely to her eyes, a bit more conservatively than she was used to, and the outfits were all a lot more *similar* to each other than clothing on Zharus tended to be. Madison supposed it was a consequence of fashion evolving naturally, cut off from external influences, and not driven by nostalgia for designs sourced across several decades from several centuries ago. This was what it looked like when people dressed like the here-and-now instead of the way-back-when.

As the hour got on toward 13 o'clock noon, Madison wandered on to the small settlement's downtown, where a couple of open-air cafes were serving lunch. Madison took a seat at a table and tried out her new accent. Her voice felt weird in her mouth as she ordered a local specialty, a breaded pork cutlet sandwich topped with sliced onion and a mild goat's milk cheese from the region. As with everything she'd eaten since getting here, it was entirely natural food with no fabbed elements—and it was very tasty. *:You know, for all that I like the convenience of food fabbing, I have to admit natural food is great when you can get it.:*

:Which is kinda funny, 'cuz you ask anyone from a natural-food society whether they'd like to be able to summon up dinner at the push of a button and most of 'em would happily go fab and never look back,: Samantha replied. *:Grass is always greener, isn't it?:*

After lunch, Madison continued her wandering. The sidewalks were neat and

tidy, with plenty of room for people going either direction to pass. The businesses were well-kept, with large, friendly signs. Madison did some window-shopping, looking at the various items available. There was clothing in the local fashions, which she duly scanned for Samantha to Fuse-fab for her later at need. Then there was a bakery. Some of the baked goods in the window displays were familiar, like bagels or fried pies, but there were other types of cake that she hadn't seen before and she imagined were local specialties. She found the pyramid-shaped cinnamon rolls especially interesting. She guessed they were a Totalist thing.

Then she rounded a corner, and her eyes fell upon a very familiar-shaped marquee. *:Ooooh! A cinema! This is just what I was looking for!:*

Samantha sent a "puzzlement" emoticon. *:I don't get it. Why would they have a movie theater here? I thought that was all just part of the twencen nostalgia on Zharus.:*

:Not entirely,: Madison said. *:Remember, humans are social creatures. We evolved that way. Even when we can see stuff cheap or free in our own homes, we'll still want to go out and see it with other people in a crowd sometimes. It's a whole different experience.:* She chuckled. *:Looking forward to seeing what they make movies about here. If there's one thing I learned from Dad, it's that watching a culture's movies is a great way to learn more about it.:*

:Just be sure you hide the comm 'til you're in your seat,: Samantha said. *:I don't think most theaters take too kindly to people camming their movies. But I'd kind of like to see what they're about myself. If just for the novelty value of watching something that wasn't made five hundred years ago.:*

Madison bought a ticket to a likely looking movie called *The Monsters from Planet Thirteen*, then took a seat in the back row of the theater, so she could let her tail poke through the hole in the seat and take off her cap without anyone behind noticing her tail or ears.

:I just googled this movie. It looks really terrible,: Samantha reported.

:Shush, don't spoil it. Even a bad movie can be fun if it's bad enough,: Madison said. *:Especially when you can MST it with a friend. Ready?:*

:Yeah, let's roast this turkey,: Samantha said.

The movie proved to be about as terrible as Samantha had predicted. It was the standard "star explorer finds nasty aliens" plot that had been done a thousand times over the centuries. The director and the actors all seemed earnest enough, even though the director seemed to have a fondness for scaring the audience by having monsters jump out of nowhere way too often. The problem lay in the plot, which was a very thinly-veiled morality play about how dangerous it was to travel beyond the limits of the solar system, and how people should be content to stay hidden away and hope nobody nasty came looking for them.

:Well, that was certainly...pointed,: Samantha commed as she used the restroom afterward. *:Ridley Scott did it a lot better. Really, except for the special effects it felt like something from Earth's fifties.:*

:Yeah. But they don't really have that much of a cinematic tradition to draw on here,: Madison said. *:Remember, they left long before the Steaders did their pop-cultural archaeology thing. Before that, most of that stuff was as lost as Hypatia's library. So they kind of have to make the same mistakes all over again as they learn.:* She chuckled. *:You know, all the stuff you've got in onboard storage would be*

dynamite to these guys.:

:You mean the media, or the tech manufacturing info like how to fab cavorite?:
Samantha smirked.

:You've got that, too?: Madison asked. Then she answered herself. *:Of course you do. You might need to repair your own lifters.:*

:Bingo,: Samantha said. *:And the patent expired ages ago. You realize, if we got in touch with the right person and dropped that stuff on him...:* She put on a Scottish accent. *:“Can I interest ye in the formula to transparent aluminum?”:* She paused, then said in more normal tones, *:Actually, I do have that, too. Not to mention the specs for faster-than-light drive...:*

Madison shook her head. *:When you get right down to it, I'd rather just get out of here unscathed and not give them ammunition to make their ships even better so they can be even more isolationist. But, well...we'll keep the tech stuff in reserve. Now the media, on the other hand...that certainly couldn't hurt, if we found a way to dole it out. Could even help, make 'em even more anxious to find out what else is out there. But that can wait for later, and discussion with the others. Right now...we've still got plenty of time to waste before nightfall. Your turn to pick the next movie!:*

:Oh boy,: Samantha said dryly. *:Well, okay...how about Where the Heart Is?:*

:Oh god, that looked utterly schmaltzy,: Madison groaned. *:You're really going to make me sit through that?:*

:“We'll send them cheesy movies, the worst we can find...”: Samantha sang.

:Well, you've got the monitoring my mind part down,: Madison said. *:All right, let's go buy the ticket.:*

As expected, *Where the Heart Is* was pure sentimental schmaltz. Another morality play in its own way, it told the story of a farmer's daughter in Earth's Old West (or at least, what the filmmakers thought Earth's Old West was; there were a number of anachronisms and errors) who left the farm for the bright lights of the big city, only to fall on hard times and realize that her true place was back home on the farm. *:God, this hurts,:* Madison thought wryly as they watched. *:I mean, there's so bad it's good and there's terrible, and this is just terrible.:*

:You want to cut out on the rest?: Samantha asked.

:Nah, I'll stick it out,: Madison said. *:It's still better than being bored. Barely.:*

The movie *finally* ended, and Madison made her way blinking back out into the late-afternoon sunlight, cap on head and tail tucked in again. *:That was a fun little interlude. I guess it's about time to start thinking about hunting up Kendlen, hmm?:*

:We should start planning, yes,: Samantha said. *:I've been researching him over the last few hours, and found out a few things that might be helpful.:*

:Great! I'm coming back to where you're parked so you can brief me in VR.:

:See you then,: Samantha replied.

A few minutes later, Madison glanced around to make sure no one was watching, then slipped into the alley where she'd left Samantha. “Mantha? You here?” She looked behind the trash bin where they'd parked, but the bike wasn't there.

“Up here,” Samantha said. Madison looked up to see her perched on a third-floor fire escape. “Was just sunning myself on the roof. Figured it would be best not to be noticed from ground level.”

“Clever, but what if a flier passed over?” Madison said as Samantha leaped down.

“Then I'd drop my hardlight skin and huddle against the roof vent. Look just like

extra ventilation equipment from the air.” Samantha tossed her head in the feline equivalent of a shrug. “Not that it happened. They don’t seem to use flyover aircraft a lot this far out in the sticks.”

“Well come on down here now,” Madison said. “I’m ready to Fuse up.”

Samantha leaped gracefully down from the fire escape to the alley, and padded up to rub her big wedge-shaped head against Madison’s hip. “I’m glad you’re so cool with Fusing these days.”

Madison chuckled. “Really, I’m kicking myself that we didn’t do it ages ago. I’ll bet we could have explored a lot more easily if I hadn’t been so fixated on Chauncey.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to say anything, but...” Samantha smirked.

“When we get back, I’m gonna have to see about getting my brother and sister over this whole RIDE phobia,” Madison said. “I’ll bet Zane would be great with, oh, I dunno, something powerful and masculine, like a lion or tiger.”

“Or bear, oh my?” Samantha asked.

Madison snorted. “And maybe a deer or fox or something for Agatha. Dunno. It’ll be an uphill battle. They’ll probably think I’ve been brainwashed or something.”

“Well, we can cross that bridge when we come to it.” Samantha took a few steps back, then wiggled her butt and pounce-Fused onto Madison. A moment later, they stood there as a humanoid leopard again.

Madison raised their hands and looked down at them, flexing the fingers. “I’ll never get used to how natural this feels.”

“If it feels natural, you *are* getting used to it,” Samantha pointed out.

“Oh, you know what I mean.”

They stepped back into the shadows of the alley, then turned their attention inward to the VR forest clearing Samantha had set up for them. Madison appeared as her humanoid self, and Samantha as her anthropomorphic Fuser form. “Okay, so lay it on me,” Madison said.

Samantha opened a display panel in the air, showing a picture of a ground car driver’s license with a not-terribly-good photo of a young man with medium brown hair, brown eyes, and a pencil thin mustache. “Kendlen Canton, age 28. One great-grandparent and three grandparents were original colonists. His father runs a mid-sized asteroid smelting corporation with four foundries out in the belt.”

“Hey, a mining corporation scion. It’s like he’s my counterpart,” Madison said.

“Kind of,” Samantha agreed. “Though maybe more like your brother Zane’s. Anyway, his Dad took him into space with him from an early age, so he grew up looking out at the stars half the time, and it seemed to instill in him the urge to explore. He was involved in several fringe groups in college—for instance, Project Terrasonde, an attempt to use radiotelescopes to listen for transmissions from Earth.”

“That sounds like a cool idea,” Madison said. “But I’ll bet they didn’t get anything. Earth isn’t broadcasting strongly enough to reach this far, at least not on any frequencies they could pick up. It’s not even transmitting radio signals directly at any of the colonies anymore, given how fast messenger ships can make it.”

Samantha nodded. “They might have better luck listening at some of the colonies, like Zharus, but they don’t know where they are.” She paused a moment, then went on. “Anyway, he was also involved in the Orion Club, a student organization dedicated to the idea of taking the fastest ship they could find and going back to Earth to find out what’s gone on in the last couple centuries. Pretty much pie-in-the-sky given the

political state at the time. There wasn't any real chance they could actually get it together enough to take such a ship. The only ones available were military, and those aren't exactly hijackable. So nobody really paid them much mind."

"But then we scouts came along and changed everything," Madison said.

"Pretty much," Samantha said. "A lot of those organizations got a lot more radicalized once they had actual *proof* cool stuff was out there waved under their noses. Kendlen had stayed in touch with a lot of them, and got even more involved with them after the whole Barbara thing kicked off. His Dad wasn't too happy about him rocking the boat; hasn't *quite* disowned him, but they're not on the most pleasant speaking terms right now. He's kind of under a *de facto* house arrest in his apartment uptown. Nobody tries to keep him from going out, but between the police and his Dad's security, they watch him enough to try to make sure he doesn't do anything crazier than speaking at rallies—they can't exactly keep him from doing that, because they at least pretend to believe in free speech here. And now, of course, I imagine they're watching him even closer 'cuz it stands to reason he's probably one of the people *we'd* want to get in touch with."

"Hmm," Madison said. "Is this going to be a problem meeting with him?"

"I don't think it's insurmountable," Samantha said. "We can't exactly invite him out to meet us—even if he was willing to meet with a mysterious woman who calls him on the phone, we don't want the people keeping their eye on him to see us. But I've been poking through the data network, and I think we could get into his apartment unnoticed. Most of the surveillance they run on him is cameras, and I can do the whole loop-the-footage cliché on those to let us slip by. And we can probably avoid the few actual people they have on him by getting into his building from the old sewer tunnels underneath."

"Sounds like a plan...though I can't say I'm really excited to be crawling through sewage," Madison said.

Samantha grinned. "Don't worry, I can make it so it won't stick to my hardlight."

"That would be *much* appreciated," Madison chuckled. "So when do we do it?"

"Well, I think we should go ahead and head that way now. We can scout the sewer entrances, wait for dark when fewer people will be around to go in," Samantha said.

"Works for me," Madison said. They dropped back out to the "real" world, then de-Fused to skimmer form. Samantha rezzed up the hardlight disguise, which included functional ground wheels since Totalia didn't have flying car traffic, a hollow space behind the passenger seat to conceal Madison's tail, and a hardlight helmet that covered up her face and ears, and they pulled out of the alley and onto the road.

It took a couple of hours to make their way to the part of the settlement where Kendlen Canton had his apartment. It was a scenic drive, with a lot of farm fields plus various canals and rivers for irrigation. Even within the bounds of the settlement, not all the space had been used. But toward the end of the trip, they started getting into a more urban area. "Interesting architecture they have here," Madison said as they drove up a wide street lined with low two- and three-story buildings. "It's not like any of the places back on Zharus."

"Yeah," Samantha said. "Of course, most of the places back on Zharus are all built in direct imitation of some particular 20th century style. Here, they've kind of gone their own way—though they've pretty clearly had their own influences."

“The pyramid motif in the roofs, you mean?” Madison said. “Yeah, I wonder where *that* came from?”

“This is one of the oldest sections of the settlement, with the first houses they built after coming out of the underground shelters,” Samantha said. “That’s why all the houses are so short, and why the pyramid motif is the most pronounced. Kendlen lives in one that’s only slightly newer, after they had the construction tech to start building tenement-style housing.”

“So the historic buildings make for a more upscale neighborhood?” Madison said.

“Yeah, something like that,” Samantha said. “Of course, the buildings aren’t exactly as they were when they were built—they’ve been renovated and upgraded over the years. But the outside still looks the same.”

“So these ‘sewer’ tunnels are actually the original shelter tunnels, like the ones at First Landing back home?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Samantha said. “The founders were big on planning, and they actually had sewer use in mind when they first dug them out. So they dug them out according to their plan for building out expansions above.”

“Pretty slick,” Madison said. “Of course, if you’re going to take hundreds of thousands of people umpteen light-years from home without letting anyone else find out about it, you’re going to have planned everything else finely enough already that something like that is hardly any extra effort.”

“Yeah,” Samantha agreed. “It really is a hell of an accomplishment, when you get right down to it. I wonder if there are any other wildcat colonies out there of people who did the same thing? If there’s one, there could be more.”

“How would you even figure that out?” Madison wondered. “You’d have to go over hundreds of years of records to ferret out secret ship-building projects, then compare them against all the transit records from the colonies to find the ones that didn’t show up anywhere. And even then, there’s no way of knowing if they just broke down in deep space somewhere rather than sneaking off into the great unknown.”

“Yeah,” Samantha said. “Or, you could just keep exploring out to farther and farther stars and you’ll reach the farthest ones they could have gone with sublight sooner or later.”

“True,” Madison agreed. “Though any secret colonies founded after they had FTL could be even further out. All the same, I think when we get back we’re going to have to push for some new first-approach procedures for new star systems. If this kind of thing happened once, it could happen again, and we don’t need to be caught flat-footed.”

They moved out of the neighborhood of the lower buildings into one with taller apartments. Some of them looked fairly old and decrepit, while others just looked old and stately. “So this is the place, huh?”

“Yeah. It’s that tall one over there—the one with the bronze pyramid on the roof.”

“Mantha, about *half* of them have bronze pyramids on the roof. But I see what you mean. The real shiny one?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“Looks swank,” Madison said as they cruised by. “It’s got a uniformed doorman and everything.”

“Well, they are rich,” Samantha said. “Did you have digs like this back on Zharus?”

“We did have access to penthouses in most polities, and the major cities on

Laurasia, if we wanted them. Mostly we just lived in reasonably-niceish places. Dad didn't go in so much for conspicuous consumption, and he kind of passed that on to us."

"Mm," Samantha acknowledged. "So I guess I should give up on my plans to ask for platinum chassis plating when we get back."

Madison snorted. "You wouldn't like it, it smudges. And nobody would ever see it under your hardlight anyway."

"It's the principle of the thing!" Samantha insisted.

"So anyway, where's the sewer entrance we're gonna use?" Madison asked.

"It's up the block. It'll be on our left as we turn. There, see it?" She nodded to the sloped concrete structure with a door in one end and a "shelter" logo at the top.

"I see. They still use it as a storm shelter?"

"Yeah, but it's usually kept locked to prevent vandalism. Weather alerts can override the locking mechanism. And so can I," Samantha said. "It's almost sunset, so what say we just cruise around for an hour or so 'til it gets dark?"

"Let's," Madison said.

Chapter Thirteen: Meeting Kendlen

Over the next few hours, they took in a large part of the central area of the Totalia Settlement. Samantha's passive sensors recorded everything, since they expected analysts back home would want as much detail as they could get. They passed through shopping districts, manufacturing areas, and a few other residential neighborhoods. About the only place they stayed away from was the central government area, since security there would probably be a lot tighter. A couple of times they stopped for Madison to go into a store and check on its wares.

One of these stops was a consumer electronics shop. "This should give us a good idea of what the state of the art is," Madison mused, after a quick back-alley Fuse to give her a dress to conceal her tail again. Peering through the selection in the store, she found hand comms and tablets with about the same computing power as those still in modern use—non-quantum microchips had pretty much plateaued before the colonization effort—as well as larger units for living-room viewing. There were also the usual refrigerators and home multi-lathe printers, including a food-based variant for the kitchen. In addition to processing natural foods, it could use tanks of various nutrient pastes to create passable pseudo-food only a step or two down from nano-fabbed.

:That's really kind of neat, in a Rube Goldberg sort of way,: Madison mused, munching on a nutrient-paste taco one of the sales staff created for her as a demonstration. *:Maybe not as retro-cool as twencen stuff, but also a lot less overexposed. I'll bet some of the zeerust-lovers on Zharus would pay big bucks to put one in their kitchen.:*

:We'll have to buy a pallet of them to take with us when we go,: Samantha sent dryly. *:Anyway, I think it's just about late enough to try our infiltration.:*

:I'll be right out,: Madison promised.

Fifteen minutes later, they cruised up to the sewer entrance, pausing just up the block for Samantha to access the nearby security cameras and wait a few seconds to snag a loop when nothing was moving and drop it in. Then they cruised up to the entrance and quick-Fused. The door unlatched with a click, and they were through with it shut behind them in just a few seconds. "Hope nobody saw us," Madison said.

"I didn't see anyone around. I think we're good," Samantha said.

The door led to a narrow concrete stairway, dimly lit with ancient LED light fixtures, barely large enough for them to move through at a crouch. It led down into an open room about the size of a high school gymnasium. "Just enough room for folks from the nearby buildings to huddle," Samantha said. There were locked doors in the middle of each of the four walls. Samantha walked up to the one to the south, and it opened with a click similar to the outside door's. They went down a stairway into another, larger tunnel, this one lit very sparsely and with a trough in the middle that carried sewage along.

"Ew," Madison mused. "Glad you can turn off your sense of smell."

"You and me both," Samantha agreed. This tunnel was more than large enough for Samantha to lift off the ground and float along through the air. "We should be under Kendlen's building just about...now." She took another upward tunnel, pausing at the door at the end to inch it open and poke a finger through, probing with the fiber-optic camera in the tip before pushing the door open the rest of the way.

This room was similar in size and shape to the shelter through which they'd entered, but this one had a couple of furnaces and other machinery along one wall, and doors to elevators and stairs in another. "Basement," Samantha said. "I've already got the in-building cameras. We're going to take the stairs; less likely to run into people in there and the elevators' movement would be noted."

"And he's in the penthouse? That's, what, the twentieth floor?" Madison asked.

"Twenty-third." Samantha chuckled. "Thank goodness for lifters, huh?" She stepped into the stairwell and looked up. "Oh good. With the landings, the middle's as open as an elevator shaft. Going *straight* up!" She launched into the air, zooming up so fast the stairs blurred around them.

"Whoa!" Madison said. "Did we have to go that fast?"

"The faster we go, the less chance there is to be seen," Samantha said.

"Hmph. You just like fast flying," Madison accused.

"Well, that too," Samantha admitted. She touched lightly down on the top landing, and opened the locked door with a touch. On the other side was a hallway with a door out onto the roof.

"You know, come to think of it, we could just have flown up the side of the building," Madison said. "If it was dark enough, and you colored your pelt black, we probably wouldn't be seen."

"Yeah, I know," Samantha said. "But this was more fun, don't you think?"

Madison rolled their eyes. "You're incorrigible, you know that? Well, c'mon. Let's go meet the man. Think we should ring the doorbell?"

"Actually..." Samantha paused and facepalmed. "...now that I check, he's not home right now. There's a rally downtown tonight, and he's speaking there."

"Really? You didn't check that before we came in?" Madison shook her head. "We could have gone to the rally and seen what they're all about. Would have been interesting."

"Could also have been a great way to be caught if they're looking for us there," Samantha said.

"Well, true. So what now?"

"We can still let ourselves in, and wait 'til he comes back," Samantha said.

"We've come this far," Madison said. "I guess we might as well."

For all that it was a penthouse, Kendlen Canton's apartment was actually fairly small, with a living room, kitchen, and two bedrooms, one of which he'd converted into a study. It was kept mostly tidy, with the only clutter being some shuffled paperwork on the study's desk. The furniture was decent, but not expensive—comfortable, rather than stylish. Paintings and photos of starscapes and planets gave some hints at the direction of Kendlen's interests, as did the models of historic starships in open spots on the study's bookshelves—including one that Samantha's research revealed was the main colony ship *Totalia Prima* itself. "Wow, they came in that thing?" Samantha said. "They're braver than I thought."

"Those were the days, all right," Madison said, kneeling to bring the model to eye level. Little more than a cylinder with a scoop at one end and an exhaust at the other, it represented the bare minimum design necessary to reach fast sublight speeds. "When you went out into the big empty between the stars with whatever you could get and hoped it was barely enough. Who knows how many ships like it never made it?"

The remainder of the shelves were filled mostly with paper books, with a small section set aside for data chip storage that probably held at least twice as many books as the rest of the shelves combined. The selections were interesting—a mixture of public-domain titles that might have dated back to the landing or soon after, including a number of reprints on astrophysics, space exploration, and even starship engineering. When they took a couple of them off the shelves to flip through, the books gave signs of frequent perusal—limber spine, some dog-eared pages, and bright yellow highlighting on selected passages. “Yeah, no doubt about it,” Madison said, carefully slipping a book back into the shelf. “This guy’s a true believer.”

“Heads up,” Samantha said. “I’ve been keeping an eye on the ground cameras, and it looks like Kendlen’s on his way up.” She brought up an image of a young man in a trenchcoat stepping out of a cab and nodding to the doorman as he entered the front door.

“Think we should wait in the study?” Madison suggested. “Let him come into the living room before we surprise him.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Samantha agreed. They backed into the study and closed the door.

A few moments later, they heard the outer door slide open. What they hadn’t expected was the sound of a handgun cocking. “All right, I know someone’s in there,” the newcomer said in a firm voice. “Come out slowly, with your hands up.”

:How did he know we were here?: Madison wondered.

:Must have had some tripwire we didn’t notice,: Samantha said. *:Guess we can ask him.:*

“All right, I’m coming out,” Madison said. “Just so you know, you might find my appearance a little alarming...and I doubt that gun would hurt me anyway. So please keep your finger off the trigger, okay?” She reached out and pushed the door open, then slowly stepped out into the living room.

Kendlen had a small chrome automatic pistol covering the door in a two-handed grip. His eyes widened as Madison and Samantha emerged. Madison chuckled. A two-meter-plus humanoid leopard with metal modesty plates around the chest and hips was probably not what most people expected to find in their study. “Who—*what* are you?” he asked.

“I’m friendly, for one thing,” Madison said. “Scout pilot Madison Brubeck, Zharus scout division, and my friend Samantha.”

“I just see one of you,” Kendlen said.

“Well, here.” Madison sent the signal to de-Fuse.

:Are you sure about this? He has a gun...: Samantha sent.

:Trust has to start somewhere. Go.: Madison remained standing as Samantha unfolded away from her back into her leopard form. “I’m Maddie, she’s ‘Mantha. You must be Kendlen Canton.”

Kendlen stared even harder. “You—you’re one of the escaped offworlders.”

“That’s right,” Madison said. “And we heard you were the person to see when it comes to rebelling against The Man. Um...would you mind putting the gun down? We’re not here to hurt you, and I’d rather avoid any little accidents.”

“What? Oh, of course!” Kendlen put the safety back on his pistol and tucked it away into a shoulder holster.

“How’d you know we were in here, by the way?” Samantha asked.

“Oh, there’s a pressure plate under the doormat,” Kendlen said. “It showed someone had come in but hadn’t gone out again.” He looked from Madison to Samantha. “Um...if I could ask again...what *are* you?”

“She’s a RIDE. Stands for Reticulated Intelligence in a Drive Extender. Basically, a reconfigurable suit of power armor with a sapient AI on board,” Madison said. “And specialized hardlight emitters to mimic a natural animal form. Our jailers just thought she was my pet.”

“We didn’t exactly try very hard to convince them otherwise,” Samantha smirked.

“So that’s how you broke out,” Kendlen said. “The Totaliment has been in an uproar for the last few days. They’ve doubled their surveillance on me, and I honestly thought they wouldn’t let me out to the rally tonight. How did you get past that, by the way?”

“I was able to hack the cameras pretty easily,” Samantha said. “I’ve got more processing power than anything on this planet.”

“Anyway, we’re here because we—all of us—need your help,” Madison said. “We want to get our ships back and go home, but we can’t exactly do that by ourselves. We’re going to need the support of an organized resistance—and you’ve got the closest thing going.”

“And if we can get home with what we know, we’ll send some folks back to negotiate about opening up more contact with the rest of the galaxy,” Samantha added.

“Negotiate?” Kendlen asked. “Or punish us for holding you-all prisoner? I’m space-crazy, sure, and I disagree with the Totaliment’s policies, but I’m not going to do anything that will hurt my world and its people.”

“I promise you, we’re not into that,” Madison said. “We might sue for damages, but we’re not interested in military conquest. Anyway, it’s your Totaliment’s isolationism that’s really hurting your world. Your tech level is decades or centuries behind the curve. We can offer you more science, technology, and culture than you’ve ever dreamed of.”

“When you get right down to it, it’s probably academic anyway,” Samantha said. “We didn’t say anything about this to your authorities, but we were suspicious of this star system before we ever came here, what with it sitting all uncharted and inviting-like in the middle of a mostly-charted sector, and all the missing scout ships. So we sent back an FTL message torp to scout HQ with our suspicions before we came. It’ll have gotten there by now.”

Madison nodded. “Give it five months for me not to return and report, another two and a half months of travel time from Zharus, and you’ll be looking at a reconnaissance in force. And if they don’t come back, another five months or so later, a bigger one. And so on.”

Kendlen paled. “But that means...”

“Big changes, one way or another,” Madison said, nodding. “It was really inevitable. Sooner or later, they were going to come looking for the missing scouts anyway, and when you get right down to it, there weren’t all that many places to look in this sector of space.”

Kendlen sank onto his sofa. “So what do you want me to do?”

Madison sat down next to Kendlen, half-turning to face him. “Help us get home before they come hunting us. At a two-and-a-half-month travel distance, that gives us about two months to work. We need to be able to get our ships and go by then if we’re

going to get there in time to make sure the next contact is suitably diplomatic.”

“I’m not sure how I’m supposed to do that,” Kendlen said. “Rallies and protests are one thing, but raiding one of the best-defended military bases on the planet...”

“If your activists can keep the military properly distracted, we scouts can handle the raiding,” Madison said. “But it will mean stepping up your protests. I want to avoid fatalities, but some of your people might get thrown in jail for a while. Would they be willing to do that, you think?”

Kendlen snorted. “Goodness knows, plenty of us have been arrested already. If it means getting back in touch with the galaxy in a *friendly* way...I think I can safely say most of us would go to jail for that cause.”

Madison nodded. “Good. So...we’re going to need to get to meet with the other leadership of your group...and it’s going to have to be a lot more security-conscious than you have been. I can sneak you out of here and back in under the camera eyes, but the others will have to figure out their own ways of getting away.”

“Hmm.” Kendlen thought about it for a moment. “You know, I think a group camping trip out in the wide open wilderness might be just the thing. I’ll get in touch with them and arrange it right away.” He paused. “But first...I want to know more about where you come from. Tell me everything.”

Samantha chuckled. “Everything? That could take a while.”

“Well, let’s start with you,” Kendlen said. “How are RIDEs made? What do you do? You’re really...sapient?”

Madison grinned. “This *will* take a while. Okay, to understand RIDEs, you have to go back about fifty years or so. There’s this big desert in the middle of Gondwana, one of the three continents on Zharus...”

Chapter Fourteen: Meeting the Others

It was early that morning before Madison and Samantha made their way back to their canyon camp. They had talked with Kendlen about themselves and the state of the rest of the universe until well after midnight, and had only gone when Samantha pointed out they wouldn't be able to make it back to camp before dawn unless they left right away. Kendlen had been reluctant to let them go, and wanted to come out to meet the others right then and there, but Madison thought it would be best that he be seen acting normally for a few days rather than vanishing right after a rally. The unspoken reason was that she wanted time to discuss him with the others before committing them to the plan. She didn't say that out loud, but she knew Kendlen was smart enough to figure it out and understand.

But she didn't leave him empty-handed. Samantha had downloaded a bunch of tourist brochures and other current information on Earth, Zharus, and the other colonies for him to go over, and share with the members of his movement who could keep their mouths shut—the ones he would be bringing out to a wilderness camp to meet with them in a few days if all went well. All in all, it had been a pretty productive day.

Samantha let Madison nap on the trip back, only waking her as they approached the camp. “Hey, everyone, it's us!” Madison called out over the loudspeaker. Hamner stood up and waved from behind the rock at the canyon top where he was sitting watch with a rifle they'd taken from the transport. Samantha settled to the ground next to him long enough for him to climb on, then lifted down to meet with Marcus and Barbaretta, who were already coming out of the cave at their approach.

“How'd it go?” Hamner asked.

Madison yawned. “Pretty well. I think Kendlen and his group are going to be just what we need. Though we'll have to wait 'til we meet more of them to be sure, Kendlen at least seemed reasonable enough. Intelligent, too.”

“What's he like in bed?” Barbaretta asked mischievously.

Madison rolled her eyes. “If I ever have the chance to find out, I'll let you know.”

“You think he'll help us?” Marcus said.

“Absolutely positive,” Samantha said. “My kinesthetics analysis showed no sign he was lying in anything he said. He genuinely believes in his cause, and sees helping us as the best way to move it forward.”

Madison grinned. “I wouldn't be surprised if he asked if he could come with us when we go home,” she said.

“Well, good,” Marcus said. “As the old saying goes, ‘Well begun, half done.’”

“Yeah,” Barbaretta said. “It's just the other half I'm worried about. We're still going to have to break into that military base to get our stuff back. I'm not sure how a bunch of protest rally flower children are supposed to be able to help us with that.”

Madison shrugged. “We just have to do the best we have with what we've got. We'll see how it all plays out.”

A couple of days later, they arranged the first meeting via encrypted comms. Kendlen and two of his most trusted fellow malcontents were going on a camping trip together, at one of the designated wilderness areas outside but not too far outside of

town. Madison and Samantha would meet their truck, then blindfold them and drive the truck to a different location where they would meet together, away from prying eyes. “You know, we really don’t need to blindfold you. We’re not going to be taking you back to our camp, we’re meeting you at another location,” Madison said.

“I know,” Kendlen said. “But they wanted to be sure they couldn’t tell the authorities anything they could use to find you. And besides, I think they’re kind of getting a kick out of the whole ‘cloak and dagger’ thing.” Kendlen rolled his eyes a little. “I know, I know, it’s serious business for you, but to be honest I’m not sure they’re entirely convinced that you really even exist. Even with all that stuff you gave me, I think they still halfway think I made it all up.”

Madison chuckled. “Well, they’ll soon learn better.”

The meeting went off without a hitch. Hamner was waiting by the side of the road to the campsite as the truck trundled up, dressed in some local clothing Madison had bought in town, thumb out in the universal hitchhiking gesture. He climbed in, the other occupants of the truck blindfolded themselves and lay down in back, and Hamner took them on a merry ride full of twists and turns, ending up in a forest clearing about fifty kilometers further out than the camp site, just barely within the terraformed belt of land surrounding the settled area. The tree coverage would give them some protection against any overhead satellite surveys. Madison still wasn’t entirely sure she bought that Totalia didn’t do orbital recon, and even if they didn’t have satellites now they could easily put them up at need.

“Well, here we are!” Hamner said cheerfully as he pulled the truck to a halt. “No signs of pursuit.”

“I don’t imagine they think we could get up to very much out in the wilderness,” Kendlen said dryly. “After all, we can’t do anything until we’re back in the city, and they watch us like a hawk there.”

“We’ll just have to prove them wrong,” Hamner said. “Okay, everyone, you can take off the blindfolds and get out to meet the others.”

The three Totalians climbed out as Madison and Samantha hovered up in Fuser form, followed by Marcus and Barbaretta on their wheeled bikes. “Hey, everyone,” Madison said, touching down. “I’m Madison Brubeck, and the cat I’m wearing is Samantha. You’ve met Hamner Reinhagen, and this is Marcus Trenton and Barbaretta Hansom.”

“You know I’m Kendlen Canton,” Kendlen said. “This is Teenette Clark.” He nodded to a dark-skinned young woman with long black hair. “And this is Mikken Fellin.” He indicated an older, clean-shaven man with dark hair greying around the temples and piercing hazel eyes.

“Pleased to meet you.” Madison started to offer her hand, then paused. “Oh, wait. ‘Mantha?’”

“Got it!” Samantha said, unfolding from around Madison back into her leopard form. The eyes of Teenette and Mikken went round as eggs, and even Kendlen looked impressed.

Madison grinned, twitching her feline ears forward. “Convinced yet that we’re not from the local neighborhood?”

“I think you can take that as read,” Teenette said. “Is that a real tail?”

“Flesh and bone, yeah. The ears are real, too. They’re basically nanotech constructs, not genetic—’Mantha’s body systems built them onto me so I’d be fully

neurally compatible with her.”

“That seems a bit...awkward,” Mikken observed.

“The boffins could probably figure out how to patch around that requirement by now, if they really wanted to,” Samantha offered. “But I think they got to where they thought of it as kind of a badge of distinction for RIDE partners and just let it be.”

“Really, I kind of like it,” Madison said, flicking the ears forward and back. “Took a little getting used to—everything sounded weird at first—but now I don’t even notice. But look at us, talking about ears instead of how to start a revolution.”

Samantha played a music clip. “You say you want a revolution, weeelll, you know...”

Mikken blinked. “Was that...the Beatles?”

“Yes, why?” Marcus asked. “You don’t have them here?”

“We only have about a dozen of their songs, and the lyrics for a dozen more—including that one,” Mikken said. “One of the bits of culture lost from old Mother Earth.”

“Mikken’s a historian,” Kendlen supplied. “Professor at the local university. Specializes in pop culture.”

“Well, there’s a coincidence for you,” Barbaretta said.

“Not entirely,” Kendlen admitted. “I thought he’d be best-equipped to verify you are who you say you are, and people do tend to listen to him. He’s got tenure.”

Madison slowly grinned. “Then boy, have we got a treasure trove for you. But we’re getting diverted again. Has Kendlen already told you what we need?”

“More or less,” Teenette said. “You need...a distraction, to make it easier for you to recover your ships from our military.”

“Got it in one,” Barbaretta said. “The question is, what *kind* of distraction, and how to do it with as little bloodshed as possible.”

“I’m surprised you care about that,” Teenette said. “If I were in your shoes, I’d just want to get off this rock as soon as I could and damn the consequences.”

“Hey, we’re not monsters here,” Madison said. “We’re kind of annoyed at your government, but we’ve got no reason to want extra strife between our peoples. We’re gonna have to send diplomats out here after we get back, after all, and we don’t want to make their job any harder than it already will be.”

“Besides, it’s not as if they’re Darth Vader,” Barbaretta said. “They’re just...set in their ways.”

“Darth who?” Teenette asked.

“I believe she’s referring to a character from an obscure twentieth-century film franchise,” Mikken said.

“Obscure? *Star Wars*? And you’re a professor?” Samantha asked.

“Well, it’s obscure *here*,” Mikken said, nettled.

“Boy, we have really got to get this stuff back in circulation,” Madison said. “Nobody should be without their cultural heritage.”

“I wonder if that could be the key,” Kendlen mused. “Showing the people what they’re missing from being out of touch with the greater galaxy. Most of them don’t care one way or the other even now, and many think that Barbaretta’s brief appearance several years ago was just a big hoax or urban myth. That’s why there’s not more of an uproar, and we get painted as malcontent kooks. What do you think, Mikken? Release some ‘lost’ cultural works that are verifiably authentic but that couldn’t have come from

on-world?”

“Hmm.” The historian gazed thoughtfully into the distance. “It could work. How much media do you have?”

“Hundreds of thousands of hours of video and music. Millions of books, stored electronically,” Samantha said. “Basically the entire cultural library of Earth up to the twentieth and early twenty-first century, selected works after that, and a decent collection of the last century or so. Storage space really isn’t an issue anymore.”

Mikken’s eyes lit up. “Really? Seriously? Do you have any idea how much of a treasure trove that would represent?”

“Oh, believe me, we do,” Madison said. “It basically *reshaped our entire world in its image* when the Steaders brought it home.”

Mikken frowned. “We wouldn’t want that to happen here. Perhaps a more limited release is best, at least at first.”

“Oh, sure, at first,” Madison said. “We don’t want to overwhelm people, just prove we are who we say we are. If you’ve got a top ten list of most-sought-after lost works, we could hit some from that. As well as some recent stuff for balance.”

“We may want to work out a licensing agreement for the rest,” Samantha said. “That might have to wait for the diplomats. Don’t want to step on their toes.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here,” Marcus said, chuckling. “We should perhaps concentrate on the first steps. Such as how to break our existence to a whole world.”

“I’d invite you to speak at a rally in person, but to be honest, I doubt I could guarantee your safety,” Kendlen said. “The police have harassed us, but have held back from any serious action for fear of giving us greater legitimacy in the eyes of the public. But let an actual escaped fugitive show up...”

“That would be a problem, yes,” Hamner agreed.

“How about a video of us, then?” Madison suggested. “Something you could play at the rally and spread out across the net.”

“Hmm,” Mikken said. “That might work—if the government didn’t censor it from the net as soon as it appeared. The same for all the media you plan to release, in fact.”

“I think I can keep that from happening for at least a little while,” Samantha smirked. “This planet doesn’t have anything that can keep up with my quantum core processor.”

“Then I guess what we need to hash out right now is *what* we release, and write the script for our little manifesto,” Barbaretta said. “I’m looking forward to that.”

“All right then, pull up your camp chairs and let’s get to it,” Marcus said, rubbing his hands together. “We’ve only got a few hours ‘til we have to get you back to your campsite, after all.”

Chapter Fifteen: Discussion

Coming up with a script for their video announcement turned out to be the easy part. What media to release along with it was more contentious. They ended up going with the original *Star Wars* trilogy for movies, a few albums by Elvis and the Beatles—there were some surviving tracks by them, which meant computer voice analysis could prove they were genuine—and a smattering of books by J.K. Rowling, Stephen King, and other best-sellers of the turn of the 21st century. They were all well-known enough that mentions of them survived in secondary sources, but the original works had been lost since the migration.

Madison had argued in favor of including the original *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, on the basis that its message seemed tailor-made to their situation—friendly space traveler is harassed by paranoid government. But the others had suggested it might be a little *too* pointed, especially given the whole implied “we’ll be coming back to kick your ass” message at the end of the film. Madison had reluctantly agreed. In addition to the old stuff, they were including the same primer on the state of the rest of the human-settled galaxy that Madison had left with Kendlen after her first visit, and an archive of news and current events from the last few years.

Teenette didn’t take much part in the discussions. It turned out that she was a motocross mechanic and racer, and was very interested in Samantha and what the RIDE could do. Samantha had shown Teenette her skimmer form, and even taken her for a ride around the clearing. “But how do you fly like that?” Teenette asked after it was over.

“Cavorite anti-gravity technology,” Samantha explained. “It was developed just a few decades after your ancestors left—you barely missed it. Uses a metamaterial found on Alpha Centauri colony.”

“Oh.” Teenette’s face fell. “So we’d need to get back in touch with the galaxy to get some.”

“Not necessarily. It can be synthesized,” Samantha said. “But you have to have better nano-fabrication technology than I’ve seen so far on this planet.”

“So...if we had this fabrication tech...we could have flying bikes, too?” Teenette asked.

Samantha chuckled. “Flying bikes, and cars, and planes. You could get rid of rotor-blade and vectored-thrust stuff altogether. It’s very power efficient. And combined with the crazy-small power plants your ‘Totalium’ mystery mineral makes possible, you could probably get an insane thrust-to-weight ratio out of it.”

Madison had been listening with half an ear to their conversation and the other half to the media discussion between Mikken and the others. She now turned to Kendlen. “That reminds me. What is that Totalium stuff anyway? How did they find it? How does it do what it does?”

“Hey, whoa.” Kendlen held up his hands. “That’s an awful lot of questions about one of our most advanced and top-secret technologies.”

“Yeah? Well, you’re the mineral guy here, so if anyone would know, you would.” Madison grinned. “C’mon, we’re scouts. Curiosity is what we do.”

Kendlen considered that. “True. And after what our government did to you, we do owe you some answers. Very well. We originally found Totalium when the colony ship was radar-mapping the planet to find the best spot for colonization. Some areas

completely absorbed the radar. They showed up as bottomless holes on the scans. Curious, our scouts investigated, and found the ore form of what we oh-so-modestly named Totalium. Over the decades that followed, we refined and experimented with it, and came up with coating processes to let us use it.”

“It lets you protect nuclear material with a very thin layer of shielding, and also absorb radar emissions so they don’t bounce back,” Samantha said. “So how does it work?”

“Quite well, thank you,” Kendlen said. When Samantha snorted, he grinned and continued. “Seriously, that’s about the only answer even our top scientists could give you. The simple fact is, it *does* work quite well, but we’ll be darned if we can figure out how. Quantum physicists have all sorts of magical theories, but even the thumbnail sketch version requires more math than I know. The best way of putting it in layman’s terms is that the radiation simply...goes away.”

“Sounds a lot like qubitite,” Samantha said. “We don’t exactly know how it works either. Just that it does, and has all sorts of useful applications. Like me, for one.”

“And this is ‘top secret’?” Madison asked. “Seems like you use it in even consumer-grade technology, if the power plants I’ve seen on your ground cars are any indication.”

Kendlen inclined his head in acknowledgement. “Well, true. I suppose I should say it *would* be top secret if we thought we had someone to keep it a secret *from*. Which, I believe thanks to your arrival, the Totaliment might be starting to do. Of course, it is a little bit too late; all it would take is a trip through a department store to amass suitable samples to carry away.”

“Ha!” Madison laughed. “That *is* exactly like qubitite. It’s in everything from watch batteries to suborbital shuttle power plants, but Zharus has strict export controls on the stuff so the rest of the galaxy doesn’t find out about what we’ve got. Technically, I’m not even supposed to have taken ’Mantha-pantha here out of the system, except that she stowed away without telling me.”

“So how long would it take us to build up to the tech level necessary to make cavorite?” Teenette asked.

“Well, it’s hard to say,” Samantha said. “Even assuming we gave you all the technical documentation on it, you’d still have to make the tools to make the tools to make the tools to make it. And each level of tools would need to be prototyped, beta-tested, and developed until it was ready for prime-time. Maybe five years if you’re lucky, probably more like ten or fifteen. Less if you can lure in some experts in the field from off-planet.”

“You’d be looking at just about the same timeframe to build up to FTL engines of your own, for that matter,” Madison put in. “There’s some overlap in the tech, but not that much.”

“But the fringe benefit is that you’d also have nanofabbers that could put your multi-lathe printers to shame,” Samantha added. “Great stuff for materializing tools, food, gear, whatever right out of nothing.”

“We have *got* to get our hands on that!” Teenette said. “Can you give us that stuff in addition to all the media?”

“Um. Well.” Madison paused, frowning. “I don’t know. I mean, we *have* the stuff, and we *are* here...and if you hopped a ship to Zharus or wherever you could download it from public sources. But you don’t *have* those ships. And I’m not sure we have any right

to decide trade policy on behalf of an entire planet. Maybe we should wait for the diplomats to arrive.”

“But we *are* the ones risking our necks to help you out here,” Kendlen pointed out. “And if this information is freely available on your worlds, we *will* get it eventually. It would just set us back a few years to have to wait. And if relations are really getting as strained with Earth as that stuff you gave me suggests, and you want us as your allies, it might be best to have us as up-to-speed as we can be as soon as possible.”

“That is a bit of a sticky wicket, isn’t it?” Marcus mused.

“And you getting your hands on this stuff will give your Dad’s company a big ol’ leg up on the rest of the planet,” Samantha pointed out. “You’ll be like Microsoft plus Apple, times Google.”

Kendlen shrugged. “I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that was a consideration. Though really it’s too big for just one company to handle; we’d have to license stuff to other companies across the board, and it would probably be a huge boost for everyone across the entire technology sector.” He snapped his fingers. “Hey, that’s it! How about *licensing* the stuff to us? We pay you a cut of whatever money we make out of whatever you give us. So you’ll have a stake in our economy from the outset.”

“What would we do with money on Totalia when there’s no trade yet?” Madison asked.

“Keep it in a bank on the planet ‘til there is trade,” Kendlen said. “Earn interest, and be ready with local currency when it opens up.” He shrugged. “Even a small percentage would probably be worth billions.”

“If we assigned that percentage to the Scouts—as we ought to, they’re the whole reason we’re here—they could use it to build a forward scouting center here, once relations open up,” Hamner mused. “An even closer springboard than Zharus for exploring further out into the unknown.”

“Are you gonna make this a condition on your being willing to help us?” Barbaretta asked bluntly.

Kendlen thought about that, then shook his head. “No. Tempting, but...this is too important a thing in the long run to be *quid pro quo* and risk building up resentments on both sides. We’re helping you because we believe in your cause. We’d just appreciate a little consideration here. We want to be able to do for ourselves, not depend on whatever scraps other planets let fall from their table.”

Madison nodded. “This is too important a decision to say yes or no to right away. But you’ve made some good arguments, and we’ll think about it.”

“I think that’s all we really have any right to ask for,” Mikken said. Teenette nodded her agreement.

Kendlen nodded. “Okay, that’s fair.”

“Great. But for now, let’s get back to planning how we’re going to do this video reveal,” Barbaretta said. “We’re running on short time here. I want to get it wrapped by the end of the day.”

Kendlen nodded. “Very well. In regard to how you present your case, I think you should be sure to make clear that you don’t blame the *people* for the government’s action, but you don’t want to see the government toppled either...”

Shortly before the meeting broke up, Teenette approached Samantha to ask, shyly, if the RIDE would Fuse with her. Samantha shook her head. “I’m sorry, but I’m

afraid it wouldn't be a good idea at this point," she said.

"But...why?" Teenette asked.

"Well, the main reason is that it would give you ears and a tail like Maddie's," Samantha said. "Some RIDEs are able to cancel them out afterward, but I've never tried and I can't be sure I could—and if I couldn't, this isn't Zharus where there's a nano-clinic on every corner. And even if you were okay with having the tags and getting stared at by everyone, I'm afraid they'd be a big safety issue for you—they don't make helmets fitted for cat ears on this planet, and that tail would be just begging to get caught in the spokes of your motorbike."

Teenette bit her lip, but nodded. "All right, I guess I can see that."

"Also, I'd have complete access to all your memories," Samantha said. "People on Zharus pretty much grow up knowing that's the price of RIDership, and even they have problems with it sometimes. It's a pretty big privacy violation to kick on someone who hasn't had the time to think through what it means." She padded closer to Teenette, and gave her a friendly nuzzle. "If it weren't for that, though, I'd be happy to let you try it. It's just...not the best place or time right now."

Teenette stroked a hand along Samantha's hardlight fur. "All right. Well, thanks anyway." She chuckled. "I guess I have something to look forward to. If you're not careful, I might stow away on your ship for the trip back."

Madison chuckled. "If you could wait just a few months, there will probably be FTL cruise ships coming here before too very long. I wouldn't be surprised if they send one along with the diplomatic mission to offer a tour to anyone who wants to come back."

"I guess I'll have to," Teenette said.

"I'll put in a good word for you when we get back, I promise," Madison said.

After that, the three Totalians got back in their truck and put their blindfolds back on, and Hamner drove them the circuitous route back to their camp site, where they would go ahead and camp overnight to allay suspicions before driving back to town.

"Well, that went pretty well," Madison said once they'd all gathered back at their cave. She was chewing on a piece of Samantha's jerky, while the others were enjoying self-heating camp dinners from some crates of extra supplies Kendlen had brought along in the truck. For some reason, the jerky wasn't as popular with the others. Something about it having been in a cat's tummy. Which was silly for people she knew perfectly well had eaten bugs for weeks in survival training just like herself, but so be it. It really was quite tasty, darn it!

"It did," Hamner agreed. "We'll have to see about finding a suitably dramatic backdrop for recording our manifesto. One that can't be traced back to anywhere near where we actually are."

"And we'll have to decide just what we're going to do about the technology question. It really *is* a bit of a sticky wicket, you know," Marcus pointed out. "We are here, we have the materials with us, and they are public domain back home. In one way, we are in exactly the same position as any entrepreneur who travels to one place with a product freely available elsewhere but not available there. Anyone could have brought it here to sell; we simply happen to be the first."

"On the other hand, whatever we do could have diplomatic repercussions," Madison said. "Like, if the government stays isolationist but builds up this tech, it could

be in a better position to fight a war to keep its borders closed. And we have to worry what effect it might have on their society...”

“Hmph. You know what? Screw them *and* their society,” Barbaretta grumbled. “They locked me up for *five damn years*.”

“Barb...” Marcus said uncomfortably.

She shook her head. “Yeah, I know, I know. Blame the government, not the people. I’m just...tired of pussyfooting around. I want off this rock, dammit! I’m going stir-crazy here. Not as bad as I did in the cell, granted, but...” She sighed. “So I’ll go along with whatever the rest of you decide. I know I’m not in any position to think clearly and rationally about anything to do with this stupid planet.”

“It feels like we have a lot of responsibility, being the first,” Hamner said. “But... when you get right down to it, do we *really*?”

Madison glanced at him. “What do you mean?”

“Once word leaks of this planet’s location, anyone with an FTL starship and time on his hands will be able to make the journey,” Hamner pointed out. “In the corporate scheme of things, jump drives are not all *that* expensive. In fact, many probably *will* make the journey. There are plenty of opportunities to sell manufactured goods to this planet even apart from the technology. And the diplomats will have no real authority over *them*. So do we want whatever corporation is fastest off the mark to supply this planet with what it wants, perhaps to someone less agreeable than Kendlen, and become even richer? Or should we take the opportunity to do some good and help the Scouts?”

“Huh. When you put it that way...yeah,” Madison said. “The genie is going to leave the bottle for good and all, so we might as well make our wishes before he gets away.”

“If Kendlen can help us get back home, I’d say he deserves it. Seems a decent chappie,” Marcus said.

“So it just remains to us to come up with fair terms,” Hamner said. “Personally, I would err on the side of generosity. He is risking much to help us, after all. And as he pointed out, even a small percentage could be worth billions.”

“Hmm. I’ll have to think about it.” Madison chuckled. “Pity my brother Zane isn’t here. He’s the heir to Dad’s corporate empire. I’m about as good a businesswoman as he would be a scout.”

“We all do the best we can,” Marcus said. “We’ll muddle through somehow.”

Chapter Sixteen: Rendezvous

Preparations for the big reveal continued apace. It was to take place at the next week's rally, which left just a few days to get everything ready. Samantha and Madison did a lot of scouting to find an area recognizable enough to show they were really there, near enough to reach easily, but far enough not to direct a search near where they really were. "You know, we could just green-screen it," Barb said. "Make someplace up to be in."

Madison shook her head. "No, it's important this be as un-fake as possible. Anything we fake up will cast doubt on the whole, and there will be enough doubt already."

Madison and Samantha also took the opportunity to get in some intensive combat training, both in VR and the real world with augmented reality tech. Samantha felt that Madison should have a better grasp on how to move and fight for herself, so she didn't have to do *all* the work. Neither one of them had any illusions about it being as good as a military boot camp, but it was at least better than nothing.

As the week wore on, Kendlen contacted Madison via their encrypted comms. "Hey, could you meet me in town tonight, in the early morning hours? The industrial sector—it'll be all but deserted after midnight."

Madison checked the map coordinates he sent. "I think we could do that. Why?"

"I have something I want to show you. Something I think might help you, a lot." Kendlen's voice was full of excitement and mischief.

"But you're not gonna tell us what it is, 'cuz you don't want to spoil the surprise, right?" Madison smirked.

"I think you'll like it," Kendlen said. "And even apart from that, you'll want to see more of our industrial stuff for your scouting report, right?"

"True enough," Madison agreed. "See you there." After they closed the comm, Madison glanced at Samantha. "What you think?"

"Voice stress says he's not lying or anything," Samantha said. "He has a surprise and he thinks we'll like it."

"Well...then let's go see what it is," Madison decided.

Later that night, they slipped into town. They'd gotten pretty good at it so far, identifying the points where they could come in from outside the border without any radar painting them and switch into their road bike disguise when they were close enough for cameras to pick up. This time, they were headed for a part of town that was more deserted than usual—the industrial part of town where the factories ran. The population of Totalia was still low enough that the factories didn't need to run night and day to keep up demand, so most factories lay fallow overnight. The Canton Heavy Industries foundry was no exception. There were security guards, but Kendlen sent the access code to a drainage grate that bypassed their patrols, and of course they were able to fool his cameras as ably as they'd fooled any others.

On the outside, the foundry was a big, nondescript building, pretty much the same as any factory anywhere. Kendlen was waiting by the entrance. "Glad you could make it. Come on, you'll want to see this." He led them onto the factory floor, a huge open space filled with rows and racks of automated machinery, and immense tanks of molten metal that were slowly stirred by giant paddles.

“Okay, this is impressive, I’ll admit, but why are we here?” Madison asked.

“It’s over here, come on.” Kendlen led the way into another section of the factory, which featured another tank of liquid metal with a grated tray over it. “This is where we do the Totalium plating. It occurred to me that if Samantha’s body plating is a standard metal alloy, we should be able to coat those plates with a layer of Totalium,” he explained. “If you’re looking for something to take back with you to demonstrate the effectiveness of the metal, I can’t think of anything better.”

“Plus, it could be very handy for slipping in and out of town,” Madison mused. “Though I am concerned about how it might mess with her sensors.”

“There are already gaps in the plate over my sensors and hardlight projectors,” Samantha said. “I’ll still have some radar-reflective bits, but very tiny.”

“But what if it messes up something else?” Madison asked. “We don’t know what effect this might have on your cooling systems, for instance.”

“I looked over the personnel carrier pretty thoroughly and didn’t find anything out of the ordinary in its systems,” Samantha said. “I’d be willing to risk it.” She chuckled. “But tell the truth, Kendlen, the real reason you’re offering this is you want a chance to look at my inner workings while I’m nekkid.”

Kendlen grinned. “Well, not the *main* reason, but okay, okay, guilty as charged, it is kind of a big one.”

“Seems like a fair trade to me,” Samantha said. “As long as I get to record the plating process in detail to take back home with us for analysis.”

“Works for me,” Kendlen said. “Though boy will Dad be mad if he ever finds out.”

“Well, it’s your body,” Madison said. “If you’re willing to take the chance, I’ll go along with it.”

“Okay. Well, here we go, then.” Samantha dropped her hardlight, then moved out into an open area. Then with a series of clicks and pops, she released the latches holding her shell in place, and with a series of clatters the metal pieces rained to the floor.

“Great! Let’s get those in the tray.” Kendlen picked up a shoulder plate and weighed it in his hand. “Lighter than I expected. Titanium alloy?”

“I’m not a materials scientist, but I gather we’ve made a few advances in metallurgy over the last century or so,” Madison said. “Of course, this is light plate even so. ‘Mantha’s a mobility armor, which means she’s built light and sparse, for moving fast. Just a couple steps up from scout armor. Heavier RIDEs get heavier plate.”

“Hey, it’s not nice to talk about a lady’s weight,” Samatha said, swishing her metallic tail.

“At least you work out,” Kendlen said, grinning. He and Madison piled all the metal pieces onto the grating above the tank, with smaller ones going into a more delicate wire basket. “Now we just dip them, and then they go into the oven to dry.”

“It’s as simple as that?” Madison asked.

“Well, this part of it is,” Kendlen said. “You don’t wanna know what we have to do to the ore to get it ready for the bath. Well...actually, you probably *do* wanna know, but it’s a trade secret and I’m not gonna tell you, so nyah nyah nyah.” He stuck out his tongue, and Madison giggled.

“I’m surprised you remember ‘nyah nyah nyah,’” Madison said. “I thought that dated from the twentieth century.”

Kendlen shrugged. “Some things are passed down from kid to kid generationally on the schoolyard. That’s one of them, I guess.” He pulled a lever on the side of the tank,

and the grill slowly lowered into the coppery liquid metal. “Okay, there. The grating will jostle them a little to make sure all parts get evenly coated; they’ll be ready to come out in five minutes.” He grinned at Samantha. “So, speaking of trade secrets, let’s have a look at you, huh?”

Samantha stretched, the whirr of servos more audible than usual due to their exposure. “Look but don’t touch!” she cautioned.

“Oh, don’t worry, I know all about not getting fingerprints all over delicate electronics.” Kendlen came over and squatted on the balls of his feet next to her. “Hmm, okay, the general arrangement of things looks familiar enough, but all the hydraulics and servos are so much smaller than anything we could make for the level of strength you’ve displayed.”

“Just materials science advances, really,” Madison said. “Funny thing is, except for the qubitite core, there’s not much about her electronics that’s more advanced than what you’ve already got. Progress didn’t go too much farther after Moore’s Law finally ran out.”

“Mmm.” Kendlen nodded, Then he pointed at a group of cylindrical objects seated in Samantha’s torso. “Are those the power cells?”

“Those are my qubitite guts, yeah,” Samantha said. “The batteries that are so good they’re completely illegal to take out of the star system just in case Earth gets to know how good they are. Charge up with zero-point energy and you wouldn’t believe how much power they can give off.”

“I’ve done some back-of-the-envelope calculations, and yeah, you’ve got to have some energy density in there like we wouldn’t believe,” Kendlen said. “Even our Totalium shielding can’t get a power plant that small that can do what yours does.” He glanced at Madison. “And I guess even if you do provide us your tech specs, qubitite is the one thing we can’t make here.”

“That’s about the size of it,” Madison agreed. “And...speaking of those specs.”

Kendlen turned to face her. “Hmm?”

“Well, we were talking about it, and I kind of realized something,” Madison said. “If we do get back safely, then we’ll be sending diplomatic and trade missions back, and probably taking passengers home to visit, and the upshot is that in just a year or two you could probably obtain all the tech info you needed without us.”

Kendlen nodded. “Yeah. But so could our competitors. My getting it now could give us a significant first-mover advantage.”

“Indeed,” Madison said. “So, since it’s less a matter of whether you get it but when, that makes our decision a lot simpler.”

“So you’ll give it to me?” Kendlen asked.

“We’ll *license* it to you,” Madison said. “You can put the funds in escrow for us, or for the scouts or whoever, until such time as we’re able to use them.”

“So how much were you thinking?” Kendlen asked. “We don’t have a lot of cash on hand, but I suppose if we had a number of years to repay it...”

“I was thinking more in terms of a percentage,” Madison said. “Say, ten percent of your gross receipts on anything you make out of this tech for ten years. Imported pre-made goods are excluded—you order a bunch of fabbers or something from Zharus, resell them, you keep everything. But whatever you make yourselves, you owe us royalties.”

“Hmm, I dunno. Ten percent? That’s a pretty big amount,” Kendlen said. “What

about five percent?”

“Sounds reasonable,” Madison said. “Done!” She offered her hand.

Kendlen looked at her. “Why do I get the feeling I’ve been had?” He chuckled. “But five percent of gross receipts for ten years is still a pretty good deal on something that could change the world.” He took her hand and shook it.

“Yeah. And probably other companies will get similar deals with Zharus’s licensing authorities,” Madison said. “So you’re not going to be at a big disadvantage even then.”

“I’ll go ahead and email you a contract,” Samantha said. “Let me know if you have any issues with it.”

Kendlen pulled a tablet out of his pocket. “Oh, there it is.” He tapped the screen a few times. “Okay, looks good. I’ll just sign and send it back. Too bad we can’t exactly have it notarized or anything.”

“My recording of the conversation would also serve as corroboration in a Zharusian court of law,” Samantha said.

“You’re recording this?” Kendlen asked.

“I’m recording everything,” Samantha said. “Hello, digital memory?”

“Oh, right,” Kendlen said. “That must lead to some...unexpected issues. Can courts subpoena RIDE testimony unwillingly?”

Samantha wrinkled her nose. “Varies by jurisdiction. Some polities treat us as glorified tape recorders whose memories can be read whether we want it or not. Others are more accommodating.”

“Comes down to which ones treat them as almost-people and which as smart machines, as I understand it,” Madison said. “Uplift is mostly progressive about that kind of thing, but even so...”

A tone sounded from the machine behind Kendlen. “Oh, the parts are ready.” He pushed the lever back up, and with a grinding of machinery the grate slowly rose back out. The plates were now covered in a layer of glistening bronze. “Now into the oven they go.” He pushed another lever, and the grate slid back into a squat, immense machine behind the dunking tank. “The heat required for fusing it isn’t even enough to soften steel, so your armor plate should be OK.”

Samantha watched curiously as the oven door closed. “How long will it take?”

“About ten more minutes,” Kendlen said.

“So where do you want me to download the tech files to?” Samantha asked.

“Um...I’ve got a server in my office that should be big enough. I’ll yank the network connection from it so nobody can hack into it,” Kendlen said. He paused. “Say...what kind of a deal could you cut me for all the media stuff you’ve got on board?”

“Boy, if I give you that, you’ve got a license to print money,” Madison said. “Well, assuming folks here can be brought to care about a bunch of musty old twencen stuff. Zharus is kind of a special case, what with the Steaders stirring the pot.”

“Believe me, if there’s one thing I know about, it’s stirring.” Kendlen nodded toward one of the big liquid metal tanks, where the paddles were still stirring around and around.

Madison chuckled. “Okay. Well, I’d have to put a couple more conditions on that.”

Kendlen nodded. “Shoot.”

“First, you don’t release anything from it without our say-so ‘til we’re safely out-

system,” Madison said. “We don’t want to risk anything screwing up our chances.”

Kendlen nodded. “I wouldn’t have anyway. Done.”

“Second...you do realize, regardless of what you pay me, you’re also going to have to pay a chunk of your royalties to the United Nations licensing authority like the Steaders did, iffenwhen relations normalize with Earth,” Madison said. “All this stuff is technically *their* public domain, and legally me giving it to you is kind of like piracy. Though I think if Earth ever does come calling to Zharus or Totalia, it won’t be because I Napstered a few MP3s. Nobody back there even cares about this old stuff anyway.”

Kendlen nodded. “We’ll sock some money aside for that, sure.”

“And third...you’re not going to have as much overhead cost with this as you are with the tech stuff, since all you need to do is sell it. You won’t even have to pay for media if you go digital,” Madison said. “So I want ten percent of the gross for ten years”

“How about seven percent?” Kendlen asked.

“Eight?” Madison countered.

Kendlen considered. “All right, done. You drive a hard bargain.” He grinned.

“Contract on the way,” Samantha said.

“Great!” Kendlen said. He tapped away at the mini-tablet with his stylus again. “There you go. Man I’m looking forward to this!”

“Gonna shack up and watch a few decades’ worth of shows, huh?” Madison said. “Maybe we should wait to download these to you, we’re gonna need you around to help us get off this planet.”

Kendlen chuckled. “Oh, don’t worry yourselves on that count. The sooner I get you off this rock, the sooner I can share this stuff with all my friends!” He turned back to Samantha. “So, I’ve only got a few minutes left to feast my eyes on your parts, so I guess I better make the most of them. Where are these ‘lifters’ Teenette is so excited about?”

A few minutes later, a loud KA-CHUNK sound heralded the oven opening, and the tray sliding out loaded with gleaming bronze metal plates. “Ooooooh, those look nice!” Samantha said. “And I can’t scan them at all! It’s like they’re little black holes to everything except visible light and a little bit of spectrum to either side.”

“Those plates are gonna look totally badass on you, pard,” Madison said, grinning. “You may want to go around with the hardlight off sometimes just to look all showy.”

“So what’re you waiting for? Slap ‘em on me!” Samantha said. “And you better not end up with any bits left over!”

“Now *this* is going to take a while,” Madison said, grinning. “And possibly all the king’s horses and all the king’s men.”

“Can I help?” Kendlen asked. “If there’s some way you could show me where everything goes, I’m a fast learner.”

“You just wanna get your hands all over my parts,” Samantha smirked.

“Noooooot even gonna go there,” Madison said.

Kendlen snorted. “Well, maybe.”

“I can use my hardlight projectors to show you where stuff goes,” Samantha said. “We’ll start with the small bits for my claws and tail and work upward.”

“All right, so let’s put Humpty-Dumpty together again,” Madison said, reaching for the wire basket full of the smaller pieces.

Between the two of them, it took about half an hour to put everything back on.

Fortunately Samantha used self-torquing mechanical fasteners to hold the plates in place, which meant no special parts were needed for removal or reassembly—just fit the part in place and it snapped right on. It was like putting a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle back together, except that the puzzle could show you what the next piece was and where it went.

At last they were finished, and a gleaming bronze leopard stood on the factory floor, shiny skin reflecting the overhead spotlights. She posed, a forepaw lifted off the floor, many-segmented tail swishing back and forth.

“Very classy,” Madison said. “You’re going to be on the cover of all the RIDE magazines when we get back home.”

“Looks good from here!” Kendlen agreed.

“Wow,” Samantha said, moving around experimentally. “This feels so...funky.”

“Nothing wrong, is there?” Madison asked, concern evident in her voice.

“Huh? Oh, no, nothing like that. It’s just...all this time, I was getting a little backscatter on my sensors from the places where the outer plates weren’t perfectly aligned. Nothing I paid attention to, just something that was there. Now...it’s completely gone. It’s like I’m naked, except I’m not reading anything *through* the plates either.” She shrugged. “I’ll get used to it.”

“Hmm. Hey, how effective is this plating against energy weapons?” Madison asked. “If it absorbs energy...”

“Well, not as effective as you might think,” Kendlen said. “A lot of lasers tend to use visible light frequencies, and for whatever reason the alloy doesn’t block those. Or the heat that comes with them. Same with plasma guns. Now, against X-ray lasers, it works like nobody’s business, but those are pretty rare these days.”

“Of course they’d be rare around here,” Samantha said. “You’ve got this shield plating on everything, so there’d be no point having them.”

“I’ll bet it would be good against radiation and fallout from nuclear weapons, too,” Madison mused. “Man, if word got back to Earth about this...well, we’ll *have* to see that it gets to Zharus first. I promise you, you’ll find some great trade partners there.” She grinned. “Wait’ll my bro hears about this. I’ll bet Brubeck Mining will be your number one bidder.”

“Mm-hmm,” Kendlen said. He frowned. “I hope I’m doing the right thing here. If this stuff will be as attractive as you say, how do I know Zharus won’t invade instead of trade?”

“Well, for one thing there is no unified Zharus *to* invade,” Madison said. “You should have seen that in all the stuff I gave you already, and when you get the whole download you’ll have even more stuff to read. Fighting and invading isn’t really in our culture.”

“Apart from that time your, uh, polity went to war with that nation of Amazons over mineral rights?” Kendlen pointed out.

Madison nodded. “Yeah, that’s fair. Still, that was thirty years ago, and one little war in a hundred fifty years isn’t a bad record.”

“Hmm.” Kendlen nodded, though he didn’t look entirely convinced.

“Anyway, let’s go to your office and I’ll dump all the data I have to you,” Samantha said. “You’ll find plenty of corroborating evidence there. Way too much of it for anyone to fake.”

Kendlen chuckled. “All right, follow me. I must admit, I can’t wait to get my

hands on all this stuff.”

“Oh, believe me, you have no *idea*,” Madison said, grinning.

It was just a short trip up some stairs and down a corridor to the office, where Kendlen opened a cabinet to reveal a tower-style computer server. Unlike it would have been on Zharus, it wasn’t retro-styled in imitation of some 20th-century computer; it was simply tower-shaped because that was the shape servers had been for hundreds of years. It could have been smaller, but the extra size gave plenty of room for cable connections in the back and media plugs in the front.

With great ceremony, Kendlen turned the tower and unplugged the network cables from it, leaving only electrical power connected. Then he turned to a keyboard and display panel next to it, logged in, and shut down all wireless broadband links.

“There you are. Isolated from the ‘net.’”

“All right, then move over and let me see what I’ve got that will hook up to that thing.” Samantha leaned down to examine the tower, then moved her head close as if sniffing it. Then a small cable snaked out of her nose and plugged into a port on the front panel.

“Ewww,” Kendlen said. “Do you have any idea how gross that looks?”

“Hey, ‘snot that bad,” Samantha smirked, ignoring Kendlen and Madison’s groans. “There’s only so many handy places to put a cable, you know.” She paused. “Okay, looks like you’ve got enough room in there. Uploading the files now.”

Kendlen glanced at the status displays on the monitor as the files uploaded. “Wow, you weren’t kidding about there being a lot of it. Is it all cataloged?”

“Yeah. I’ve adapted it to be compatible with the browser in your operating system,” Samantha said. “You shouldn’t have any trouble finding stuff.”

“Great!” Kendlen rubbed his hands together, looking as excited now as he had doubtful before. “There’s so much I want to know about the outside universe. I can’t wait to find it all out.”

“I hope you like what you learn about us,” Madison said. “And I hope before too long you’ll be able to come out and see it for yourself.”

Kendlen nodded. “Yeah. I’d like that.” He glanced back at the screen. “But first we have to see about getting you home.”

Madison chuckled. “Don’t I know it.”

Kendlen turned to walk across the office. It was fairly small and plain, and reminded Madison a lot of Zane’s—or, she thought with a twinge, her Dad’s. One difference was that it had a small door at one side that let out onto a balcony. “The transfer’s still going to be a few minutes,” Kendlen said. “C’mere, let me show you the view from the top.”

Madison chuckled. “All right, sure.” She followed Kendlen out onto the balcony.

The view really was quite spectacular, Madison had to admit. The balcony was on the side of the foundry building that looked out over the rest of the factory grounds—the parking lots, loading docks, and storage areas, lit by rows of sodium pole lamps that cast yellowy-orange pools of light down over everything. Beyond that were other industrial lots filled with factory and warehouse buildings, silhouetted against the brighter lights of the towers of Totalia City beyond. The balcony itself was unlit and in shadow, giving Madison the chance to appreciate the panorama without worrying someone might see her.

“What do you think?” Kendlen asked.

“It really is pretty,” Madison said. “In an industrial chic kind of way.”

Kendlen chuckled. “Yeah. Dad and some of my other sibs get the better offices, in the skyscrapers in the city. I’m in less favor, and I’m supposed to mind the factory for them anyway, so I get to look upon them from afar. Well, I have a feeling *that* might change, one of these days.” He ventured putting his arm around Madison’s shoulder, and after a moment’s consideration Madison decided to allow it. Kendlen pointed up with his other arm, to where the stars were out above, and the world’s orange moon shone down like a beacon. “But there’s the view I really prefer. The view I really *want*.”

Madison chuckled, and glanced over at him. “You know, you could come back with me on my ship if you wanted.”

Kendlen looked over at her. “Nggh...you are *tempting* me, so very much. But...I need to stay here. At least for the first little while. After we all pull...what we’re planning on pulling, there’s probably going to be a lot of turmoil. I’m going to need to stay here and consolidate my power base, not make like I got chased away or I’m fleeing something. Need to see that we make a good start on distributing or researching the stuff you’re giving me, and make sure the rest of my family doesn’t mis-manage it.” He smiled ruefully. “In my head, I’ve flip-flopped back and forth whether I should even ask you about it half a dozen times already, and I’ll probably flip-flop half a dozen more before you leave. But in my heart of hearts, I know I need to get things off to a good start here before I can think about spending a year or more away. Damn it.”

“Well, like I said before, you could come back on the first diplomatic mission,” Madison said. “I’m sure it’ll be taking lots of people back for tours. And I’ll make sure they save you a spot.”

“I’d like that,” Kendlen said. “We’ll just have to see.”

“Upload complete!” Samantha called cheerfully from the doorway behind them. “We’re all done here.”

“Guess it’s time for us to go,” Madison said. “Thanks for the lovely time.”

“Thanks for all the stuff.” Kendlen grinned, giving her shoulder a squeeze before letting go. “I’m gonna have a sleepless night just getting started on all this.”

“Don’t lose too much sleep,” Madison said. “We’re gonna need you at your peak for the rally next week.”

Kendlen chuckled. “Like I said, don’t worry about that. The sooner we get you off this rock, the better.”

They slipped out of town just as easily as before. Madison really couldn’t tell whether Samantha’s new radar-resistant coating was helpful or not, given that they had been careful to fly below it anyway. Madison was pensive on the way back to camp.

“Hey, centi-mu for your thoughts,” Samantha said.

“Oh, I was just thinking about Kendlen’s worrying about if he’s doing the right thing,” Madison said. “I mean, *we* know we wouldn’t take advantage of them, but it’s got to be hard for him to take our word for that.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much,” Samantha said. “It’s just cold feet. Remember, I can read his body language. If I thought there was any real chance he might turn on us, I’d never have uploaded the stuff to his computer.”

Madison nodded. “Yeah. And once he watches all the recent news coverage and stuff, he’ll know we’re telling the truth. And he’ll know what Earth’s like these days, too.”

“Uh-huh,” Samantha agreed. “I just hope that Earth doesn’t scare him more than Zharus appeals to him. Because either way, someone else is going to find this place one of these days.”

When they got back to the cave camp, Barbaretta, Hamner, and Marcus were waiting for them. “How did it go, old girl?” Marcus asked cheerfully as they touched down and Samantha resumed her feline form.

“Get a load of this!” Samantha said, dropping the hardlight. Her new bronze plating glinted in the emergency lighting packs that provided illumination inside the cave.

“Hey, is that Totalium you’re wearing?” Barbaretta said. “Sweet! Hang on, let me get one of those hand scanners. I wanna see how that looks on you.” She went and picked up one of the scanners they’d taken from the ship along with their other emergency supplies. It reminded Madison of one of the old-series *Star Trek* tricorders, though not out of any conscious effort to ape the design. It just had to be the size of a hardcover book to hold a decent-resolution imaging array in the absence of nanotech.

Samantha posed as Barbaretta adjusted the controls. “Well?”

Barbaretta whistled. Hamner leaned in to look over her shoulder. “Remarkable. It is as if you are not even there.”

“Yeah. Hang on, let me try this up close.” Barbaretta moved the scanner up next to her, holding it in front of her muzzle. “I can get returns from your optics, and the interior of your nostrils and mouth, but nothing else, and this thing wouldn’t have the resolution to read those beyond a meter or two. Why don’t you bring your hardlight up? I want to see how that looks.”

“All right.” Samantha’s pelt flickered back into being. Barbaretta stepped back and fiddled with the scanner. “Okay, I’m getting a faint return now, but nothing like what you used to scan as. I’d probably dismiss you as a radar ‘ghost’ if I didn’t know about your plating.”

“Cooooool!” Samantha said, purring. “I’m a stealth panther! Who says a leopard can’t change how it’s spotted?”

“Bweeeet, bad pun, ten meter penalty!” Madison said.

“That’s going to be pretty useful,” Marcus said. “Both for sneaking around now, and for getting into the base when it’s go time.”

“I’d imagine they have ways of spotting stealthed units,” Madison pointed out. “After all, they’ve had the stealth tech for ages, they must have worked out counters.”

“Well, true,” Marcus admitted. “But it surely can’t *hurt*.”

More time passed, and the scouts made more plans with Kendlen and his inner circle. The night before the big rally, Madison and Samantha airlifted Marcus and Hamner into Totalia City. They hijacked a Totalia Utilia van from the company parking lot and went around to various utility junctions around the city planting comm relays. Samantha had a couple of small ones she was carrying, but the others were larger and more primitive, fabbed on an integrated circuit multi-lathe printer facility Samantha hacked. “Wish we had access to the fabbers on our ship,” Samantha sighed. “But I guess this is the best we can do. They’ll find them pretty easily when they get started looking.”

“It’ll be good enough,” Madison said, patting the leopard on the head as she watched the other two through the windshield. Due to her obvious modifications, she and Samantha had to keep watch from the van. “That’s why we’re putting so many in.”

Marcus and Hamner closed the junction box and came back to the van. “That’s the last of them,” Marcus said. “Let’s get this lorry back to the lot and get out of here. Tomorrow’s a busy day.”

“A job well done,” Hamner agreed, pulling the door shut behind them. “We should go get some sleep.”

“I’m so keyed up, I’ll have a hard time napping,” Marcus said.

“I’d say the same, except when I Fuse sleep, ‘Mantha can put me right out,” Madison smirked.

“I’m rather envious,” Marcus said. “I expect when we get back to Zharus, I’ll look into finding a RIDE partner of my own. I’d been tempted a few times, but the regulations...”

“I, as well,” Hamner said. He chuckled. “Of course, when you get right down to it, I have not always religiously followed other regulations, so why should this one be any different?”

“Who of us has?” Madison chuckled. “It’s just that the technology export restriction is so much a part of the culture I grew up in...”

Marcus nodded. “True. And those of us who *didn’t* grow up there can have a hard time appreciating just how useful a RIDE can be until we have our noses rubbed in it.”

“If you want, I *could* still help you sleep!” Samantha offered. “You’d just wake up with tags. And...other things.”

Marcus shook his head. “I think I’ll pass, thanks.” And everyone shared the laugh.

Chapter Seventeen: Rally

September 15, 157 AL

The sun dawned bright and clear over Totalia, just like any other day, with no hint of the worldshaking events that were to follow. There should have been a sign, Madison thought wryly. Sunrise the color of blood or something. Not that she particularly wanted to see *anything* the color of blood today.

Samantha used the comm relays they'd planted to tap into traffic and surveillance cameras, watching the large open space in front of the immense pyramid of Totaliment House where the protest had been planned to gather. People had started drifting in by ones and twos just before dawn, and by midmorning several police cars and vans had arrived, keeping a watchful eye on the crowds but not making any overt movements. Madison understood that Kendlen had applied for a permit for the rally, as he did for most others. The Totalian authorities tended to grant them so that they could keep an eye on things, preferring that to the chaos of unapproved rallies popping up anywhere. It was a very orderly society, after all. But Madison wondered if the authorities would have been quite so sanguine this time if they knew exactly what Kendlen had planned.

The four scouts and the RIDE were watching things from a link into an automated comm relay outside the city, about 90 degrees around it from their hideout. Madison had toyed with the idea of going into town to watch in person from the top of a building or something, but the others had talked her out of it. There were just too many imponderables, and too high a risk that some police officer would spot them and make it harder for them to get out of town. As it was, Madison fretted over Kendlen. Surely he was going to be arrested after their little presentation.

But Kendlen was pretty sure that if he was arrested, he'd get released before too long. "Being the son of one of the richest men in the system does have its perks," he'd said when they'd last talked on the comm. "They won't want to drag his name through the mud, and *he* won't want his name dragged through the mud, any more than necessary." He'd chuckled ruefully. "Cops, I'm not worried about. The old man's temper, on the other hand...well. I just hope when I show him all the tech data you've given me he'll cool off a little. I hope."

"Good luck with that."

Madison chuckled, watching the hardlight displays Samantha was projecting for their benefit. The rally was scheduled to start at 13 o'clock noon. It wouldn't be too much longer. "Everything ready?" she asked Samantha.

"You've only asked me that four times so far," Samantha said. "And it's still just as ready as it was the last three times."

Madison shook her head in annoyance. "I know. Sorry. Opening night jitters."

"Hey, it's okay," Samantha said. "Just wanted to be sure you knew is all."

Barbaretta chuckled. "Have to admit, I'm looking forward to seeing how I look on camera myself."

"But you already got to see our video after we shot it," Madison pointed out.

"Well, yeah, but it's always different on the big screen." She grinned. "It's good to see *some* excitement, rather than sitting around out here all the time while you guys get

to go have fun.”

“Here now,” Marcus protested. “We just didn’t want to take the chance of you getting pinched is all. After all the time you spent in there...”

“Oh, I understand that,” Barbaretta said. “And I wouldn’t want to go back. Ugh.” She shuddered. “But being stuck in the wide open with nothing to do can be as bad as being stuck in a little cell with nothing to do.”

“We should all have plenty to do soon,” Hamner said. “Look, I believe it is beginning.” Kendlen was stepping up to the podium, accompanied by the cheers of the gathered crowds.

“I think that’s your cue, ‘Mantha,” Madison said.

The leopard nodded. “Engaging broadcast overrides...now. We’re now broadcasting over every media channel, to every non-essential monitor in the colony.”

Madison grinned. “Sweet! They’re gonna pay attention now!”

Kendlen raised a hand to still the applause. “Fellow dreamers!” he said. “Welcome to our biggest rally yet!” The crowd roared again, and Kendlen grinned, nodded, then raised both hands for silence.

“Okay, listen up! I’ve come with a message for all of you—a message that’s come a long, long way. We may not have a lot of time to get the word out, so I’m going to show you the message without any preamble. I’ll take questions after it’s over.” He did something with the podium, and the big projection screen behind him came to life with a video image. Samantha smoothly swapped the network feed so that the screen image took the place of the camera view of the podium on the broadcast monitors.

The image was of all four of the scouts, plus Samantha, standing left to right in the order of their arrival: Barbaretta, Hamner, Marcus, and Madison. Samantha sat on her haunches to Madison’s right, Madison’s left hand on her head. The backdrop was one of the more picturesque canyons, a good distance away from their hiding places and current location. “Hello, Totalia!” Barbaretta said. “I’m Barbaretta Hansom. You may remember me, very briefly, from a few years ago, but you don’t know my friends. This is Hamner Reinhagen, Marcus Trenton, Madison Brubeck, and of course Samantha.”

“Hi!” Samantha said, waving a paw. Madison gave her head a rub, grinning.

“We’re stellar scouts, operating out of the colony world of Zharus,” Barbaretta continued. “We came here, separately, on peaceful missions of exploration. First me, then each of the others.”

“We were promptly surrounded by your ‘Cosmy,’ arrested, and socked away in a secret military prison,” Marcus picked up. “Not a terribly warm welcome, I’d say.”

“Now, we’re not ones to hold grudges—” Hamner began.

“Speak for yourself!” Barbaretta growled.

“—*most* of us are not ones to hold grudges, but the one who is has been outvoted,” Hamner continued smoothly.

“Hmph,” Barbaretta glowered.

“All we want is our ships back so we can return home,” Hamner said. “In return, we are willing to offer you access to a treasure trove of information we brought with us. Technical information to catch you up on the two hundred years of technological development you have missed. News, media, and cultural data, including many cultural treasures of old Earth that had been lost before your colony was founded. We are uploading a few samples as a demonstration.”

“And we can offer the hand of friendship on behalf of the nations of our world,”

Madison continued. “We’re a *mostly* peaceful people, as you’ll see from the news media we’re attaching. We’re interested in friendly relations, and trade, especially given the properties of your Totalium metamaterial. We have some metamaterials of our own that might make your life easier. We won’t hold your treatment of us against you.”

“Well, not *too* much anyway,” Barbara grumbled.

“Anyway, you’re not going to be able to stay isolated for long, whether you want to or not,” Samantha put in. “You may have been way out in the middle of nowhere by sublight standards, but we’ve got significantly faster than light drive now. Four ships in five years ought to drive that home. Anyway, you can’t go on like this. They’ll send more and more ships, and sooner or later there’ll be more than your Cosmy can deal with. Especially if it’s Earth who comes calling.”

“So let us go home,” Madison said. “We’ll put in a good word for you and head off any possible trouble. And we can help get your defenses up to current tech standards.”

“Anyway, as proof of our good will, here are those samples. We’ll be watching and waiting to see what your Totaliment decides,” Marcus concluded. “Cheerio!” The recording ended, and the picture on the hardlight display switched back to the view of the podium.

As the recording finished, and the promised files hit the local download servers, the crowd was dead silent, a sharp contrast to the earlier applause. Madison couldn’t say she blamed them. In the argot of the 20th century pop culture she’d absorbed growing up, it was as if the Area 51 aliens had just come out on network television. But they wouldn’t stay quiet for long; they were already starting to murmur.

Kendlen placed his hands on the podium. “So,” he said over the loudspeaker. “Any questions?”

“How’re we doing on the comm overrides?” Madison asked.

“They’ve found three so far,” Samantha reported. “Oop, there goes a fourth. We should be good at least ‘til the press conference ends. I’m gonna keep the good ones in reserve, for just in case.”

Over the next half hour, the scouts watched as Kendlen fielded questions from the crowd and from reporters who had managed to slip in. He declined to explain where he’d gotten the message, and didn’t confirm or deny having had personal contact with the scouts, nor did he explain how they’d managed to hijack and were still hijacking the broadcast signal.

Then, as the questions started winding down, Samantha muted the screen with Kendlen on it and popped up another display. “I think you should see this.” The display flickered on showing an austere room with a long black table, furnished with bronze highlights and a replica of the Totalist pyramid in the middle. Along it sat a dozen people wearing the sort of baggy formal garb that Raph Clarke had on when Madison had met him. Clarke was one of them, in fact; Madison picked him out as the third man along the right side of the table.

“—emergency meeting of the First Tranche of the Totaliment will come to order,” the man sitting at the head with his back to the camera declared. Another panel flickered on with a view from a different angle, showing the man more clearly. He was older than Raph, with a mostly bald head and drooping jowls that gave him a resemblance to a bulldog. His steely gaze didn’t exactly hurt the resemblance either. A caption appeared on the screen underneath him: 1st Speaker Trilby Whitfield. “You all saw the video, correct?”

“How couldn’t we? It was on every screen!” one of the others along the table spoke up. “What are we going to do, 1st Speaker?” A caption identified him as 7th Speaker Jassen Baldurson.

“Deciding that is to be the purpose of this meeting,” the 1st Speaker said calmly.

“We should round up Kendlen Canton and every one of his followers immediately!” Raph Clarke burst out. “I’ve warned you before, we have been far too lenient with them. You see the result.”

“We must not act in haste!” a woman who the caption identified as 11th Speaker Jaine Ramos said. “Besides, have you seen how crowded the square is now? If we try to arrest them in that, it could precipitate a worse riot than we had five years ago. At least Canton is calling for people to remain calm and not resort to violence.”

“It occurs to me that we should perhaps address the greater issue,” said (according to the caption) 2nd Speaker Torris Frankel. “Why were we never told there was a fourth incursion—or that they had *all* escaped from imprisonment?”

“We did not wish to cause unnecessary panic,” Clarke said smoothly. “We *have* been searching for them—”

“Not very effectively, it seems,” 11th Speaker Ramos said.

“I’m more concerned with finding out if what they said is true,” 2nd Speaker Frankel said from 1st Speaker Whitfield’s right hand. “And why we never considered the implications of so many visits. Even three in so short a time should have been ample warning.”

“I am certain there is no cause for alarm,” Clarke insisted. “Based on our analysis of their weapons, our Cosmy is more than sufficient to capture repulse any attacks.”

“For how long?” 6th Speaker Keran Lawrence put in. “We are but one planet. Our Totalium gives us some tactical advantages, but...”

“Since the escape, we have begun research on the intruders’ ships,” Clarke said stiffly. “We expect to show some progress in a matter of months.”

“By whose authority have you done this?” Jaine Ramos demanded. “We were never consulted!”

“By my own authority as overseer of the military, of course,” Clarke said. “This is a military matter. I only fault myself for waiting so long. If we had begun as soon as Hansom arrived, we might have had better defenses in place already.”

“This is unconscionable!” 7th Speaker Baldurson burst out. “You have far exceeded your authority!”

“It may also be unnecessary,” the 1st Speaker said. “I move that we give due consideration to granting the scouts’ request—returning their ships and allowing them to depart in peace.”

Clarke got halfway to his feet. “What? You can’t be serious!”

“Be at peace, Fourth Speaker,” Whitfield said. “I said we should *consider* it. You will have your chance to speak.”

Clarke sank back into his chair. “It is anathema!” he insisted. “An abrogation of every principle our founders espoused!”

“Our founders were wise enough to know they couldn’t anticipate every contingency,” the 1st Speaker said complacently. “If they could have, there’d be no need for us, now would there?”

Clarke just shook his head, muttering.

“Let’s first hear from the Science Committee, in the person of Darrek

Sigurdssen,” the 1st Speaker continued.

A door at the end of the room opened to admit the young Totalitarian, looking flustered and holding a tablet before him, eyes flicking back and forth from it to the room as if he could barely tear his attention away from it. As the 1st Speaker cleared his throat, Darrek lowered the tablet and cleared his throat embarrassedly. “Ah, um, yes,” Darrek said. “Sorry, the new...developments have been very, ah, enticing.”

“We’ll let you get back to them shortly,” the 1st Speaker said, chuckling. “We will want to know more about them once you’ve had leisure to study them further. But for now, what can you tell us?”

“Well, ah, it’s too early to say much,” Darrek said. “We’ve barely had time to start examining any of it in real time. But the computer analyses we ran show a complete match against the existing fragments that survived as quotes and excerpts in other writings. That really is the complete *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* they uploaded! And *Star Wars*! And...so many other things!” Darrek risked a glance at the tablet again, then forced himself to put it face-down on the table before him.

“What about the documents on recent events elsewhere in the galaxy?” Ramos asked.

“I’ve barely had the chance to glance at them, but, ah, they square with what Barbaretta Hansom told us...while we were, er, still interested in listening to her,” Darrek said, with just a hint of bitterness. “There seems to be a wealth of detail, that we will need hours to look at in depth.”

“What is your recommendation?” 6th Speaker Lawrence asked.

Darrek glanced at him. “Well...I’m just a scientist, and I haven’t had the chance to look at this new material in depth...”

“But we know you’ve been infatuated with the prisoners ever since they first arrived,” Clarke said irritably. “So there’s really no point in even asking, is there?”

“4th Speaker...” Trilby Whitfield said warningly.

“He, ah, does have a point, I suppose,” Darrek admitted with a faint grin. “My recommendation remains the same as it always has been—that we try to make what amends we can and open relations with the rest of the galaxy before we, er, have them opened for us.”

“I agree,” 11th Speaker Ramos said. “It is foolish to expect we can simply stick our heads in the sand and have the rest of the universe pass us by.”

“Have you forgotten why our ancestors came to this world?” Raph Clarke exploded. “To live in peace, alone, away from persecution or interference!”

“Seems like we’ve been the ones doing the ‘persecuting’ now,” 6th Speaker Lawrence said dryly.

“I don’t know,” one of the others who’d been silent until now said. The caption identified him as 9th Speaker Thomm Quincy. “Look at what we’ve done on our own. Do we really need anyone else coming in to disturb our peace and serenity?” A couple of other heads nodded in agreement, and Clarke looked triumphant.

“If I may, 9th Speaker, the question isn’t whether we *need* it,” Darrek said. “The question is, ah, how we *get* it. Will it be friendly? Or will we wait until an army comes looking for its missing scouts? They’ve found us four times already.”

“And they could find us again at any moment,” the 1st Speaker mused. “I suppose we should not put this off any longer than we must. We will vote as soon as we have had a few more days to study the material the scouts have left us.”

“We won’t be alone in studying it,” Darrek said. “It’s already been downloaded over sixty thousand times.”

“What? But it was supposed to be purged from the network!” Raph Clarke protested.

“It’s proven, ah, remarkably resistant to purging,” Darrek said. “We’re theorizing that ‘Samantha’ is some kind of advanced artificial intelligence—there seems no other likely explanation for her being able to speak—in which case she could probably run rings around our network security.”

“Marvelous,” Lawrence said dryly.

“And, of course, even if we did shut it down now, it’s already out there.” Darrek shrugged. “We should be glad it’s so benign.”

“Benign?” Clarke sputtered. “This...this dangerous propaganda? As if people needed any *more* reasons to want to leave...”

Darrek shrugged. “At least it’s not, um, advocating the violent overthrow of the government or anything like that.”

“Well, I suppose there is that, at least...” Clarke grimaced, then looked thoughtful.

“With that settled for now, perhaps we should see to dispersing the crowd outside?” 2nd Speaker Frankel suggested.

“Oh, very well,” Clarke growled. “I’ll have the police pull that idiot Canton in and question him until his father hears about it and bails him out. Mark my words, this *will* lead to trouble!”

“Does anyone else have anything to say at this point?” the 1st Speaker asked.

“No? Then this session is in recess. I would recommend you all spend some time studying this new material for yourselves. After all, our constituents will be.”

Samantha closed the display panel as the Totalimentarians filed out of the room. “Looks like we made an impression.” On the other panel, uniformed police officers were forcing their way through the crowds toward Kendlen, who awaited them patiently with a smile on his face.

“That sounds about right,” Marcus agreed. “Do you suppose they have any idea we’re eavesdropping on them?”

“Not by anything I did,” Samantha smirked. “I’m top-notch at diddling the data streams. I’m as invisible in their networks as my Totalium coat makes me out here.”

“Do you realize how much damage you could do to them?” Barbaretta asked. “You could crash their stock market, clean out all their banks, shut down their utilities, destroy their factories...if they really understood the danger, they’d be looking for us a lot harder.”

“I get the feeling Darrek might realize that,” Madison said. “But he doesn’t seem to have been trying very hard to get the council to listen.”

“Well, of course,” Hamner said, chuckling. “He knows us well enough, or at least the three of us, to realize we do not have truly hostile intent. And besides, he wants to get his hands on more of our files.”

“You realize, with that kind of a computer at our disposal, we could probably just dance into that base and take our ships back any time we wanted, right?” Barb said.

“As far as getting to the ships, you’re probably right,” Madison admitted. “But it’s what comes after that worries me. If the military’s got their act together, no amount of computer hacking could keep them from shooting us down on the way out. And even if we get out to space, I’m not sure we could outrun one of those unholy power-hog

starships of theirs out to the system's edge where it's safe to jump."

"So we're going to give them something else to worry about," Marcus said. "And hopefully have a better chance of slipping out while they're distracted."

"By fomenting a revolution," Barbaretta said. "Clever, I have to admit."

"A peaceful one, we hope," Madison said. "I don't like to think about anyone getting killed over us, and bloodshed would make it harder to open peaceful relations afterward. Besides, they're not really bad people here. It's not like it's a totalitarian regime or something. They're just kind of...insular. Like Japan before Commodore Perry."

"And we need to get back to Zharus so we can send the good Commodore on his way," Marcus said.

"I just hope it doesn't lead to them launching a sneak bombing attack on us in 90 years," Barbaretta grumbled.

"Hey, the analogy only goes so far," Madison said. "Anyway...I think the show's over for today. We'd probably better head home. Kendlen will contact us if he needs us."

Samantha collapsed the last display and Fused over Madison, then leaped into the air. The others took to their quad-runners, with Barb shaking her head bemusedly. "I have *got* to get me one of those..."

Chapter Eighteen: Coup

September 21, 157 AL

They continued to monitor the situation over the next week. Madison and Samantha made a few surreptitious trips into town to mingle with the people, as well as buy a few necessities. The new material they'd released was all the rage on the network discussion forums, and it was hard to say whether the fiction or the fact was more popular or more argued-over. Madison was amused to see many of the discussions of the fiction, like *Star Wars* and *Hitchhiker's Guide*, were exactly the same questions that had been hashed over thousands of times on the fan forums back home. "Oh look, another 'Who would win, the Death Star or the Enterprise?' thread," Madison said, grinning.

Samantha chuckled. "Fans will be fans no matter the planet."

The mood of the average person on the street was either cautiously excited or somewhat worried. About half the people, especially older sorts like Raph Clarke, were scared by all these new changes, and some were concerned about what stellar contact might mean for their way of life. Others, especially younger people, were more excited at the reports of the new technology waiting out beyond the stars, and were interested in opening trade negotiations. Kendlen Canton's Orion Club was flooded with new applicants, and its forum had to move to a bigger server as the current one kept locking up under all the traffic.

And the Totaliment was hearing from them in spades. Lines in to speak to Totaliment representatives, ordinarily almost nonexistent, started stretching around the blocks. Their mailboxes were deluged with letters—running just slightly in favor of giving the scouts their ship back, Samantha's snooping revealed. But some of the more doubtful among the Totaliment's First Tranche were starting to be won over to seeing the scouts' side of things.

All except for Raph Clarke, at least. The grumpy 4th Speaker only grew grumpier as the week went by and he saw how sharply divided the population was. He'd lost enough support that it was unclear whether he would have enough of a majority to carry the day and keep Totalia isolated. Madison grinned at the news. "That's it. I think we've won."

"I don't know," Samantha said. "Something about this just seems all too easy to me."

And it was true, Clarke didn't seem to be taking this turn of events entirely lying down. The scouts started seeing more military overflights of the canyons—probably recon planes looking for them. At one point they had to abandon their cave camp and move to a secondary hiding spot when Barbaretta spotted soldiers starting to make their way down their branch of the canyon.

But there was never any serious chance they would be found, especially with Samantha keeping her decrypting ears on military comm frequencies. As long as they took a reasonable amount of care, they were able to stay out of areas where anyone would be looking. One bright side was that, as far as Samantha could tell, none of the searches went anywhere near the cave where they had hidden the stolen transport. "At least we'll have that if we need it," Marcus observed.

The Totaliment planned to hold another session to discuss the question of further isolation one week after Kendlen's rally, and Kendlen was planning another, even bigger rally that day. There was even some talk of a counter-rally showing up to protest against breaking isolation.

"Sounds like they might have to pull in some of their military to keep order," Hamner mused. "This could be our chance."

"If we have to take it, sure," Madison agreed. "Though it might be best to hold off 'til we know what the Totaliment decides. Wouldn't do to break in if they were going to give us what we wanted anyway."

"Too right," Marcus said. "But we ought to be in the air and ready all the same."

"If Mantha can drop me off at the cave, I'll get started on the preflight checks," Barbaretta said. "Got nothing better to do."

"And blast your grunge music through the loudspeakers at cave-shaking levels while you work, no doubt," Samantha said.

"I never said there weren't fringe benefits," Barbaretta said, grinning.

The morning of the all-important Totaliment session and accompanying rallies found all five of them waiting on the transport's flight deck, tapped into the Totalia data network through a relay antenna on the canyon's rim above them. The bird's reactor was on hot standby, reading to launch at a moment's notice, but all the flight deck displays were showing different views of the rally area and the Totaliment inner hall. The hundreds of members of the full Totaliment were starting to file in to fill the hall, but the rally area had been full to bursting since before dawn, and the crowd was starting to overflow back up the streets. They were having to bring the Totaliment members in by vectored-thrust planes and helicopters.

"Isn't this exciting?" Samantha purred as she watched the screens. "Oh hey. Incoming call."

"Hey you guys," Kendlen said. On the monitor, she saw him cupping his hand over his mouth so no one could read his lips as he spoke to her by comm. "You all ready? As stirred up as everyone is, this might be your best shot."

"Oh, believe me, we know," Madison replied. "We've been busy all night getting ready for this. If things go as we think they might, we'll be leaving today one way or another."

"Yeah. Either the Totaliment says yes and they allow you to leave, or else they're going to be so busy keeping order they won't be able to stop you," Kendlen said. "Then you're leaving on a jet plane, don't know when you'll be back again."

"Something like that," Marcus said. "And it won't be a moment too soon."

"Anyway, time for me to give my big speech. If I don't get to talk to you again, good luck with it, and I hope I'll see you all again in a few months once you're back from Zharus," Kendlen said.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Kendlen, as you're a great guy and all," Barbaretta said, "but I hope I won't see this planet of yours again for a long, *long* time."

Kendlen chuckled. "I understand. Anyway, later, you guys." Kendlen looked up and waved to the camera he knew had to be watching him.

Madison grinned. "Later, Kendlen. Break a leg." She closed the link, and chuckled. "So that's it, then. Now we watch and wait."

"And warm up the engines," Hamner said. "Look, there he goes. It's starting."

Once again, Kendlen ascended to the podium and gave one of his inspirational speeches. Bright new future for our world...it's all right to be scared, but there's no going back...they'll come sooner or later even if we don't send the scouts back so better to open relations on a friendly basis...et cetera, and so on. But the more interesting view to the scouts was on one of the other monitors, where the entire Totaliment was assembled—the First Tranche at a table in the middle of the room, and everyone else at their seats in a terraced arrangement of desks surrounding them. Kendlen's speech was being shown on a big screen at the front of the room, with everyone watching in rapt attention.

After a while, Kendlen's speech ended, and he ceded the podium to others from his organization. At that point, the Totaliment muted the sound and began to discuss the matter in earnest. The 1st Speaker opened the discussion.

"I will keep my opening remarks brief and to the point," he said. "You have all had a week to read and study the documentary materials the scouts have provided," he said. "We will shortly hear from our lead science analyst, Darrek Sigurdssen, with the results of his committee's analysis and research. But you've already seen his preliminary reports: he deems the material to be valid and likely not falsified or tampered with, and consistent with the sociocultural attitudes of Earth and the other colonies at the time we departed. He does grant that there is no way to determine whether the news and political portion is complete and unbiased—indeed, given Zharus's stated history with Earth, and the fact that we have no way to hear directly from Earth in response, it likely does carry a pro-Zharus bias." He chuckled. "Which, ironically, might make it all the more acceptable to our people, given our own tumultuous history with Earth.

"As I say, you have that information before you. You also have Sigurdssen's opinion that we likely do not have very many more years before Zharus begins to look for its lost scouts in earnest, in numbers we can no longer capture as easily or even necessarily repulse without loss of life. The question now remains: what do we do about it? That is what we are assembled here to decide. I will now call Sigurdssen to the floor for a brief presentation, and then will open the floor to further discussion."

Sigurdssen's presentation was essentially as the 1st Speaker had said. The works of fiction had proven to be completely authentic based on the fragments remaining, and the nonfiction was consistent and textually showed no signs of tampering. He reiterated his pro-contact opinion, fielded some clarifying questions on the nature of the material, then ceded the floor, and the discussion began.

Totaliment discussions were often noisy and raucous, like any parliamentary debate. There were enough Totalimentarians that time for any individual speaker was limited to five minutes, and still the debate went on and on. Representatives brought up fears over what might happen to their culture if outsiders were allowed in, or hopes for how the world could be made a better place with outsiders' technology. They brought up concerns over how the world might be protected against outside invasion if these outsiders were to come looking, or how their cosmy could be improved even further with the outsiders' star drive technology, and what the chances were they could reverse-engineer the captured ships before the outsiders arrived.

Meanwhile, a series of speakers took the podium outside, including Kendlen's friends Mikken Fellen and Teenette Clark. Samantha, who had the processing power to spare, monitored both the rally and the Totaliment simultaneously and let the others know when there was anything of interest that they were missing.

About an hour into the discussion, Marcus glanced at the others. "If there are no objections, I'd like to get this bird in the air."

"Sounds fine to me," Madison said. "Let's do it."

There were no objections, so Marcus shoved the throttles up and gripped the control yoke, and the vectored-thrust transport moved out of the cave and rose into the air.

"Stealth systems at full power," Samantha reported. "No sign we've been made yet."

"Right. I'm going to take us into a holding pattern within reach of the base while we wait," Marcus said. "Keep an eye out for trouble, 'Mantha."

"I always do!" Samantha assured him.

The Totalimentary debate, and the rally, continued for a couple of hours as more members of the chamber had their say. Outside, the rally continued, as did the threatened pro-isolation counter-rally. The counter-rally had never been more than a fraction of the size of Kendlen's, and it seemed to be running out of steam faster. "You know," Samantha pointed out. "If you'd like to address the Totaliment yourselves, I could throw you up on that bigscreen."

"Hmm, do you think we should?" Madison said. "It would kind of make a point about how much control we have over their computers. We don't want to scare them into rejecting our proposal."

"Could you, maybe, comm them?" Barbaretta asked. "Ask if we could address their session?"

"It's worth a try," Hamner agreed.

"All right, calling them now," Samantha said.

On the screen, the 1st Speaker picked up a comm handset and listened to it for a moment, and his eyes widened. He lowered the handset, and spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen of the Totaliment, I have just received a call professing to be from the scouts themselves, asking permission to address this session. I'm calling for a pushbutton vote on whether to hear them. Please press either 'Aye' or 'Nay' on your voting panel now." He waited for a moment, then nodded. "The ayes have it." He pressed a button on the commset on the table in front of him, and the image of the four scouts in the transport's cockpit appeared on the wall screen.

"You're on," Samantha said. The other three scouts looked to Madison.

Madison grinned. "I guess I'm spokeswoman," she said. "Hello, ladies and gentlemen of the Totaliment. You've got a great planet here."

:It would be a shame if anything were to happen to it...: Samantha commed her privately.

:Hush, you,: Madison sent back, stifling a snort. "You've got a lot of reasons to be proud of what you've built. I could wish my friends and I had gotten a warmer welcome, but even so we've enjoyed the chances we've had to look around. You've built yourselves a thriving colony, just like we did back on Zharus. We can respect that.

"We can understand why you felt you had to lock us up, even if we aren't exactly happy about it—" Madison said.

"That's putting it mildly!" Barbaretta grumbled.

"—so we won't hold it against you." Madison glanced meaningfully at Barbaretta, who looked briefly rebellious, but subsided. "But the important thing is, we need to get back to *our* home so they know not to hold it against you either. Make no mistake,

they'll know where we went. We sent them our itinerary before we came. If we don't get back there soon to make sure our next visit is in friendship...well, we just want to avoid any misunderstandings where your or our people could get hurt.

"And we've got so many great things we can offer you if we can open trade. We'll be happy to help you build up your Cosmy to current tech levels so you can even stand up against Earth if they come knocking. Because make no mistake—your Totalium might give you an advantage in keeping them from seeing you at first, but it's not going to help you when they do see where you are."

Madison shook her head. "Anyway, that's all we have to say. We look forward to opening positive relations between your world and ours. Thanks for listening."

Their image blinked out on the wall screen of the Totaliment. Silence reigned for a moment, then a loud murmur as everyone started talking at once. "Order! Order, please!" the 1st Speaker said. "Well, we seem to have heard from just about everyone on this issue. Does anyone have any final remarks before we put it to the vote?"

"I do, 1st Speaker," Raph Clarke said. The 4th Speaker had been biding his time, looking more and more dour as the discussion went on.

The 1st Speaker nodded. "4th Speaker Clarke has the floor."

"My esteemed colleagues," Clarke said. "I urge you all not to be fooled! These outsiders may come to us with their heartfelt words and supposedly kind intentions, but make no mistake—they're only after our Totalium!"

"Oh, no, they're after me Lucky Charms!" Samantha said. Madison smacked her.

"It is vital that we buy as much time as we can to upgrade our defenses so that we can meet these Zharusians on an even footing," Clarke continued. "If they're inclined to be friendly, fine. If not, we must be able to defend ourselves! Even a few more months could give our reverse-engineering team time to make some crucial breakthroughs."

Marcus shook his head. "He's fooling himself if he thinks he can get on an even footing with us that fast."

"All the same, maybe we better tell Kendlen to make sure he's got that server of his well-hidden," Madison said. "Wouldn't like to think of it falling into Clarke's hands."

"And I urge you to remember, not all or even most of our people *want* us to open contact with these outsiders," Clarke continued. "We could face even more unrest than we did five years ago. Just look at how many people from both sides are in the streets outside even now." Clarke shook his head. "I strongly urge you—do not allow these scouts to bring back what might well be an invading army. If they are serious about wanting peace, let them turn themselves in and we can discuss the matter further."

Barb sniffed. "Fat chance. You had five damn years to do your 'discussing.' You're not getting one minute longer."

Clarke nodded to the 1st Speaker. "That is all." He resumed his seat.

11th Speaker Jaine Ramos signaled she wanted to be heard, and was recognized. "4th Speaker Clarke has a way with words," she acknowledged. "I would point out, first of all, given how sharply divided the people are, *either* decision could lead to unrest, so that should not be a consideration in what we decide today. I would also point out that it is largely thanks to his isolationist attitude—his, and those who stood with him—that has put us in this impasse today. If we had let the scouts go on their way instead of locking them up, we could have had peaceful contact years ago, without leading to so much unrest. Given the straits his past actions have led us to, why should we continue to listen to him now? I move we send the scouts home, and do the best we can to prepare

our world to deal with the consequences.” She nodded to the 1st Speaker, then sat down.

1st Speaker Trilby Whitfield stood. “I believe we’ve heard exhaustively from all possible sides of this issue, so I would like to call for a vote. Seconds?” Several of the Totalimentarians raised their hands. “Good. As before, I call for a pushbutton vote on the issue: do we return the scouts’ ships and allow them to depart our system unimpeded? Or not? I urge you all to take careful thought before voting. You have ten minutes before votes are tallied. Failure to vote yes or no by the end of said period will be considered an abstention.” He returned to his seat, and pushed a button on the panel before him.

“Well, this is it,” Madison said. Then, as a quirky little tune started playing over the cockpit speakers, she smacked Samantha again. “You are *not* going to play the Jeopardy music for ten whole minutes, silly cat.”

“It was worth a try!” Samantha said as the music stopped.

Barbaretta chuckled. “I appreciate the sentiment, though. Just think...this could be one of the most important ten minutes of our lives.”

“Scary thought,” Hamner agreed.

“I’m going ahead and letting Kendlen know that the decision’s about to come down,” Samantha said. “I’ll tell him what it turns out to be as soon as we see it.” On the screen covering the rally, Kendlen Canton put a hand to his ear, and nodded tensely.

“So this is it. Nothing to do but wait,” Marcus said.

“If you like, I could give you a running tally of the votes,” Samantha said. “I could even change the total, if you want.”

Madison chuckled. “Tempting, but just tell us how it’s going. If we mess with the numbers and they find out, it could set our relations back considerably.”

“So far, it’s running pretty strongly in favor of us,” Samantha said. “About a 2/3 majority. And the votes that are coming in are pretty much consistent with that. Two yes and one no, pretty much. I think we’re going to win it!”

“Woohoo!” Madison whooped. “So shall we start heading for the base?”

“Not just yet,” Marcus said. “I want to be sure there aren’t any nasty surprises.”

“Speaking of nasty surprises...what’s Clarke doing there?” Barbaretta pointed, and Samantha zoomed in on the 4th Speaker. He had a comm to his face and was murmuring furtively into it.

“Uh-oh,” Samantha said. “I don’t like the sound of this. Reading his lips, he just said, ‘Commence Operation Lockdown.’”

And then the doors all around the Totaliment chamber burst open, and armed men in military uniforms ran up the halls to take up stations around the First Tranche’s table. Others dispersed around the outside of the room. Samantha flicked to other camera views, showing other officers had disarmed the guards at the doors and were cuffing their hands behind their heads.

“What is the meaning of this?!” the 1st Speaker demanded, starting to his feet. Two soldiers behind him pushed him back into his chair.

Raph Clarke stood, unobstructed. “I am sorry that events have brought us to this extremity, but I fear I must declare martial law. The safety and sovereignty of our planet is too important to allow it to be thrown away so recklessly.”

“This is treason!” the 1st Speaker exclaimed.

Around the room, a murmur began to build—until one of the soldiers pointed his rifle in the air and fired off a loud volley of shots. “Silence!” he demanded.

“My soldiers will now commence evacuating this building,” Clarke continued. “Once the whole Totaliment is safely in a shelter, we will begin restoring order to the streets—and then we *will* find those scouts and put them safely behind bars.”

“This is madness!” 2nd Speaker Frankel protested. “Do you really think you can get away with this?”

“For this planet’s sake, I certainly hope so,” Clarke said. “Listen to yourselves! So willing to give up the sovereignty that our ancestors fought so hard for! I cannot allow that to happen.”

“Oh my God,” Madison murmured. “I didn’t think he’d go *that* far. I didn’t mean to cause something like *this* to happen.” She turned to Samantha. “Get me Kendlen right now.”

“What is it?” Kendlen said a moment later.

“Kendlen. Raph Clarke has just staged a military coup. They’ll be sending soldiers to round your lot up next. You need to send everybody home and get away as quickly as you can,” Madison said.

On the screen, Kendlen paled. “You can’t be serious! He wouldn’t—”

“He did,” Madison said. “Get away! Make sure that your server is safe so Clarke’s people can’t get their hands on it. ‘Mantha will guide you to safety through the tunnels.”

“But—I can’t leave my people—” Kendlen protested.

“If there’s going to be a resistance to Clarke’s coup, you’re the best one to lead it,” Barbaretta put in. “Tell your people to get clear, and get safe. You’re the one they’ll want the most, and this time you can’t count on your daddy to unlock the jailhouse door.”

Kendlen opened his mouth to protest, then shook his head. “You’re right. Excuse me.” He went to the podium and tapped the current orator on the shoulder. A moment later, he took the microphone. “Hey, everyone. Listen, I want to thank you all for showing up, but I’ve just heard some important news that may have a big impact on our cause, and I need to go look into it. I’m declaring this rally a success, but I’m also declaring it over. I’d like to ask everyone to make your way peacefully to your homes and think about what you saw and heard—and what you’ll be seeing and hearing later today. You’ll hear from me again, I promise!”

The crowd erupted in applause, and Kendlen smiled, nodded, and waved for silence. “Hey, thanks everyone. I mean that. But seriously—go home. There won’t be any encores today, and I’d feel better knowing you’re all safe. Thanks again, and good day!” He waved and stepped away from the podium, and engaged in a quick huddle of consultation with the others on the stand. Then, while they stood and blocked him off from the crowd, he opened a trap door in the stage and dropped through.

“Okay, I’m on my way out,” Kendlen said. “But listen, you guys have to do the same. If Clarke’s pulling the army in to clear us out, this is your best shot at getting your ships back and getting clear. You’ve got to take it.”

“We didn’t want it to happen *this* way!” Madison protested.

“I know,” Kendlen said, as he made his way under the stage to a drain grating in the ground. “But the best thing you can do right now is go and bring help as fast as you can. You can be back here in five months. We can hold out ‘til then.”

“Will do,” Marcus said. “We’re heading that way now. Good luck, Kendlen. ‘Mantha will guide you out, but we need to plan our attack now.”

“Good luck to you too, then,” Kendlen said. “Okay, talk to me ‘Mantha.”

Samantha cut the transmission to the speakers, taking over the call herself.

Madison heard the comm signal echoed through the nano-receivers in her head. *:Okay, now turn left. No, your other left...:* On the screens, the crowd at Kendlen's rally was slowly starting to disperse, many in the crowd sporting confused expressions at the abruptness of the dismissal. Meanwhile, the soldiers inside the Totaliment were guiding the Totalimentarians out the back doors in an orderly fashion to where a number of troop transports awaited them.

"Right. So, we fly straight in, use 'Mantha to confuse their sensors and lock down their defenses, fight our way to the ships, then blast clear?" Marcus said.

"Sounds like a plan," Madison agreed. "Of course, you know they'll probably be *expecting* us to come in now."

"Hopefully they will not anticipate us having learned of the coup so soon," Hamner said. "After all, we did not reveal we were watching them."

"Good thought," Barbaretta said. "It may be a forlorn hope, but at least it's a hope."

"So how are we going to make the approach?" Madison asked.

Marcus pulled up a tactical diagram of the military base. "I was thinking we'd come in from this direction..."

Chapter Nineteen: Escape from Totalia!

The vectored-thrust transport came in low over the desert, Samantha reaching ahead through the plane's comlink to hack the automated defenses of the base and shut them down the moment the transport came into range. They hovered the plane low over the airfield abutting the hangar where the ships were held, and Madison and Samantha hopped out, Fused, pulse cannon at the ready. They were followed by Marcus and Hamner, who dashed for the hangar door as Madison covered the approach. Barb remained at the controls of the transport jet. "My bird's the farthest back in the hangar, so I wouldn't be able to get out 'til you guys left anyway," she'd said.

It didn't take long for the soldiers to react, moving in to take up firing positions behind sandbags and airfield support vehicles. But they didn't get much chance to open fire before Maddie and 'Mantha were among them, using their lifters to bound past the cover and pot them from behind with a stun blast, then move on before anyone else could draw a bead on them. *:All that practice you put me through is really paying off,:* Madison said, rolling to avoid a stream of bullets and returning fire with bullseye effectiveness.

:You were a great pupil!: Samantha replied happily. She was still devoting most of her attention to keeping the base defenses and comms locked down, and falsifying a stream of normal comm chatter to keep everyone outside the base in the dark for as long as possible. *:Oh crap, here come the tanks.:*

"Barb, you're up!" Madison called over the group comm.

"On it!" Barbaretta swung the nose of the transport around, and deployed the EMP cannons. As a half-dozen light tanks rolled onto the field, she targeted each one with an electromagnetic pulse that shorted out its electronics and left it frozen in place. A couple of them got off shots, but their weapons were light enough that they glanced off the transport's armor with barely a scratch.

Behind them, the hangar door slid open. "We're in!" Marcus reported. "'Mantha, we need you!"

Madison dropped another soldier, then retreated to the hangar door. "Barb, keep us covered!"

"Right!" Barbaretta popped open the infantry support turrets on the underbelly of the transport and fired canisters of tear gas and stun beams at the soldiers.

Madison and Samantha bounded into the hangar and drew up short next to the other two scouts. "Whoa," Madison said as she caught sight of the interior. The four ships were still there, and three of them were still whole. But the one all the way at the back, Barbaretta's ship, was not. "Clarke wasn't kidding that they'd started their research. Uh, Barb, we got some bad news for you," Madison said. "Looks like they've taken your ship halfway apart."

"What? Oh, son of a..." Barbaretta fired off an unusually energetic volley of stun blasts. "How bad is it?"

"It would take hours at least to put Humpty-Dumpty together again," Marcus estimated. "More likely days."

"Oh, those bastards! Those—" Barbara rattled off a stream of invective that made Madison blush under her furry body suit. "I can't fricking believe this!"

"The other ships are still whole," Samantha said. "I'm running systems checks

and preflights now. Looks like they wanted to keep them pristine as examples of working ships for comparison. Didn't do too much to them except track mud inside and chow down on some of your provisions."

"Looks like you're riding with one of us, Barb," Madison said. "So, what do you think, should we destroy it to keep it out of Clarke's hands?"

"Destroy *my* ship? What are you, nuts?" Barbaretta snorted. "Let him tinker. There's no way he could learn enough to be useful in the five months he'll have before you get back with the cavalry. Listen—you guys get in your birds and take off. I'm going to stay on-planet. I'm not leaving this benighted world without my ship, and you all might get caught and wind up right back in jail anyway. Someone should stay free to link up with Kendlen and help the resistance."

Marcus, Hamner, and Madison exchanged glances. "No time to argue, and she's probably right anyway," Marcus said. "Right! So, let's power up and get out of here. We already discussed the vectors we're taking."

Madison nodded. "Right." Marcus and Hamner would be heading out by the shortest route, but one most heavily patrolled by the Totalia Cosmy. Madison was going to loiter planetside for an hour or so, then head out by a longer, less-patrolled route. Marcus hoped they would draw off most units of the Totalia Cosmy into the chase and give Madison clear flying to make it into jump.

"I've re-uploaded the operating and navigational systems into your ships—and my media library," Samantha reported. "And I've included a report on everything we've encountered since landing. I suggest loading it into your message torps and firing every one of them if they start to overtake you. They should be zippy enough at least one or two will make it into jump and get home if we don't."

"Of course, if we *do* make it into jump, they'll still beat us home by weeks, and have plenty of time to start everybody panicking before *we* make it," Madison pointed out.

"Better a little panic than no idea, especially if *none* of us makes it into jump," Hamner said.

"And if they do catch up to you before you make the border, surrender and let them take you prisoner again," Madison said. "It doesn't do any of us any good for you to get blown up, and I expect even Clarke's too canny to want to—"

Madison cut off in mid-sentence, their body spasming as a bright red laser beam transfixed it. Samantha took control, spinning around and firing a pulse blast back along the laser's trajectory. A dark-suited figure slumped out from behind a tool chest, a laser sniper rifle clattering to the floor.

"The hell?" Marcus yelled. He and Hamner immediately dived and rolled as two more blasts went through the air where they had been. They took cover behind one of the *Daydream Believer's* landing skids and looked around for the source of the fire, pulse pistols out.

Samantha turned and charged forward, vaulting a forklift and firing blasts from her pulse cannon. A couple more laser blasts fired her way, but they missed widely. A moment later, two more figures clattered to the floor. Samantha knelt by one and growled. "Totalium-plated body armor. This is a Totalia Army special-forces sneaksuit. Clarke." She gazed around the hangar bay. "Not picking up any more on infrared, or any suspicious radar-invisible spots. I think that's all of them."

"Maybe we shouldn't be so quick to surrender after all," Hamner said.

“Samantha—how is Madison?” Marcus asked.

Samantha growled. “She’s stable. The laser missed the heart, went through a lung. It cauterized the wound, so there’s not much internal bleeding, but she went into shock. My medical nanos are keeping her unconscious while they work on it.”

“Oh no, Madison!” Barb said. “Look, you guys need to get the hell out *now*. I’ll cover you, then skedaddle myself. No more talking, move!”

“Right!” Marcus said grimly. He glanced at the others. “Good luck, everyone. See you later.”

Hamner nodded. “Later. Good luck, everyone.”

“Same to you,” Samantha said. Then as one, they ran for their ships.

Idiot. Idiot. Idiot, Samantha cursed herself as she settled into the *Daydream Believer’s* pilot couch. *Ten thousand different kinds of idiot!* She should have paid more attention. She’d assumed the threat would be soldiers from the outside—not assassins inside. Clearly, Clarke was serious about not wanting them to get out of the star system. She diverted part of her attention to check on Madison again as most of it ran the ship through its startup procedures, brought the engines up, and began taxiing out onto the runway. Barb was hovering off to one side, cannons lashing out to take out any vehicles that came in range. She was still using non-lethal force, Samantha noted approvingly. Good. For all that she had a temper, she was able to keep it under control. The last thing they needed were more deaths now.

Radar was showing vectored-thrust fighters on the way in, but they wouldn’t make it into range for another three minutes. That was more time than they needed. Once clear of the hangar, Samantha threw the lifters to max and the *Daydream Believer* leaped skyward, gaining ten thousand meters in a matter of seconds. She configured an aerodynamic hardlight field, then kicked thrusters up to maximum atmospheric. The ship streaked away at just under Mach 7, spreading sonic booms far and wide. Behind them, Samantha noted, sensors showed Marcus and Hamner’s ships clawing directly for orbit, as planned, then Barb’s transport heading off in a third direction. *Good. At least something about this is going to plan.*

Samantha steered the ship for a jungle area on the far side of the continent. She’d find a good spot there to wait for a couple of hours before making orbit and getting clear. Lightspeed delays being what they were, she wouldn’t be able to see whether Marcus and Hamner made it to jump before they got there themselves. She’d just have to hope they’d all meet up all right back at Zharus, and that Barbaretta would be waiting when they came back.

The jungled area approached, and Samantha eased back on the throttle, shedding speed quickly and scanning for a good spot to lay low. It only took a couple of minutes to find one. She eased the ship into a clearing under a canopy of trees and powered down, keeping passive sensors on maximum sweep and launching a small survey probe to hover a few clicks downrange for better visibility.

Samantha sat in the couch, monitoring Madison’s vitals from moment to moment. She considered going back and putting her in the medical unit back in the cargo bay, but decided to hold off until they were safely in jump. She could do nearly as good a job holding Madison stable as the med unit, and she might need the use of thumbs if things got ugly before they made it out of the system.

She occupied herself with loading her report into the message torpedoes, and

amending it with a description of the events immediately prior to lift-off. *If we don't make it home, that'll bring Zane running at least*, she thought grimly. She felt a twinge of regret that she'd never met him in person. She'd seen Madison's memories of him and he seemed like a great guy, if you could get past the family fussiness about RIDEs. She idly wondered what Zane would say when they got back and he learned she and his sister were partnered up.

After she primed the torps, she got up from the couch and moved back to the rest of the ship, making as thorough an inspection as she had time for under the circumstances. Chauncey Mark II was still safe in his hiding spot, with no signs of any tampering; that was good. Not that Madison would have much use for him now, she thought wryly. And sample storage hadn't been broken into either. Apparently the engineers had been more interested in how the ships were put together than what they'd found.

Most importantly, the jump engines were still in peak condition. Samantha ran automatic diagnostics and made visual inspections twice, and couldn't see any sign they'd even been touched. If they made it out to where it was safe to jump, they would be home free. But whether they *could* make it was the question.

At last the two hours were up. Samantha returned to the flight deck, retrieved the probe, and again powered up the engines. Again they responded to her control, just as they always had. Samantha grinned, showing her teeth. It felt good to be back in the couch again, even if Madison couldn't be awake to enjoy it too. "Enough lollygagging," Samantha kicked the lifters in, then the main engines, and they shot skyward with all the speed of a scalded cat.

Once the *Daydream Believer* left the atmosphere behind, Samantha throttled up the engines further, until the ship's speed started to hit measurable fractions of the speed of light. She was gratified to see that her sensors still showed both Marcus and Hamner's ships heading away, at a redshift that indicated their engines were riding the edge of the red zone. Samantha wished them luck, but didn't try to comm them. Even at lightspeed, the message would never catch up to them before they were either safely away or they weren't. "Time to see to my own redshift," Samantha said.

After that, there wasn't a lot else to do. Staying tied into the ship's systems, Samantha took the time to do a more thorough shipboard inspection, making sure all systems were performing optimally. She programmed the ship's astrophysical telescopes to run continual search profiles for Totalium-coated ships, checking for moving occlusions of stars. She also checked and rechecked the ship's weapon systems, keeping them fully armed and ready. They weren't going to be caught napping this time.

Time passed, slowly. Madison remained stable but unconscious. The nanites were doing a good job patching around the damaged tissue in her lung, but she was going to need more medical attention before it could heal. Samantha watched and waited, waited and watched. It was almost a relief when, three hours from the safest jump point, the telescopes picked up a moving occlusion. Based on the size and pattern, it was on a projected course that would bring them into best weapons range just short of two and a half hours away. Samantha changed course away from them, which would buy her a half hour but add ten minutes to the jump point. It was going to be close. She programmed the message torpedoes to fire fifteen minutes before the ships closed the distance and hoped it would be enough.

Samantha returned to the flight deck to wait out the last hour to contact,

watching the ships through the shipboard scope but continuing to scan just in case these ships were a decoy. She wasn't find anything else anywhere near, but it was hard to be sure.

The clock ticked down to the appointed time for firing the torpedoes. The longer she waited, the less flight time they would have until they could safely jump, but the more chance the ships would be close enough to fire before they could get clear. Finally, the time came. She programmed in random evasive patterns, so the lightspeed delay from the approaching ships would mean they couldn't predict where they would be in order to fire on them, and watched them go. Then she turned her attention to the approaching ships.

It wasn't long before she received a blueshifted comm transmission—a little staticky from interference from her engine, but still audible. "This is Captain Georg Sandeep of the *T.C.S. Kybalion*. Power down your systems and wait to be boarded."

Samantha sent a response. "Not on your life, pal." Then she leaned back and waited.

The response came after a few minutes of comm lag, this time with video. It was the Captain himself. "Samantha. A pleasure to speak to you at last. I would that we might have conversed when you were last on my ship. Is Madison available?"

Samantha sent an image of herself in response. "She's presently indisposed. I'm warning you right now, break off your pursuit. We won't be taken easily this time. I don't want to hurt anyone, but we will defend ourselves if we have to. We're not going to be taken prisoner again."

After a slightly shorter lag, Captain Sandeep replied. "I agree, casualties on either side would do none of us any good. Please cut your engines and surrender. I promise you will be fairly treated."

Samantha snorted. "Three things you should know. One: I just fired off a set of faster-than-light message torpedos with a message for home. They'll get there in a few weeks or so, so even if you keep me from leaving, you're going to get a visit maybe as soon as three or four months from now. Two: Maybe you're not aware, but your boss, Raph Clarke, just staged a coup and took the entire Totaliment prisoner. I'm attaching the video footage to this message. Three: Clarke's goons critically injured my partner Madison, who I've got in medical stasis right now. She needs the kind of treatment only our technology can provide, so I'm taking her home come hell or high water. So if you want a piece of me, come on. My cannons are waiting." She appended the footage she'd recorded from the Totaliment chamber's cameras, and sent

After a longer pause than the comm lag should have accounted for, Captain Sandeep commed again, looking slightly more shaken. "Where did you come by this footage?"

"I scooped it directly from the security cameras. I'm a quantum computer, I can hack any crypto on your planet," Samantha said. "I could hack your ship if you were closer and you had any exposed network ports. Though I gather from your military SOPs you don't have them in combat. For that matter, I could hack it easily if you took me on board—yet another reason you don't want to try to take me prisoner."

Samantha paused. "Look. You've already lost the battle Clarke wanted you to fight. My torps have gone into jump. You can't stop the signal now. All you can do is let us go on and hope we get there in time to keep them from coming back with guns blazing. And *you* should see to your colony's own problems."

Samantha sent the signal and waited, accessing the controls of her rear-facing cannons. The ship was getting close enough now that she could start to pick out individual features, and she tagged the most likely spots to take out weapons emplacements while doing minimal other damage to the ship. Only a few more minutes until they were within range...

And then the ship turned, and began to head away. The response came a moment later. "My sensory technicians have confirmed they saw several small objects leave your ship and accelerate to the system's edge, then vanish. You are correct; there can be no benefit in trying to hold you now. As to what you said of Clarke...if there is even a chance what you showed us is true, it is our duty to investigate it. I wish you a safe journey, Samantha, and to your partner a speedy recovery."

"Thank you, Captain," Samantha replied. "I will let her know. Good luck." She ended the signal and sank back into the couch in a sense of relief so profound it felt like her insides were melting. Just a few minutes later, the indicator light came on to signify that it was safe to jump, and Samantha slapped the button without hesitation. Moments later, they were in jumpspace free and clear, with two and a half uneventful months between them and Zharus.

After a while, Samantha levered herself up out of the couch. "Now, pard, time to get *you* some better medical care." She staggered out of the flight deck, ascribing the shakiness in her legs to her relief that they had gotten free without a fight. She hoped the others had been as lucky.

Then one of her telemetry links to the *Daydream Believer*...dropped. Samantha blinked. What? She'd never had a drop-out before. As she tried to reestablish the connection, another comm signal went out, and then another. The only thing that she got when she tried to re-open them was gibberish. "Oh, don't tell me *I* need medical care too..." Samantha groaned. "Well, right. Get Maddie into sickbay first, then run a diagnostic." She walked back toward the cargo bay, and nearly collapsed. "...what? Now *that's* not a stress reaction..."

Then her knees gave out altogether before she was even halfway to the cargo bay. As she sank to the floor, catching herself with her hands, she stared in numb incomprehension at the puddles of silvery fluid starting to spread out from her fingers. "What the...I'm leaking?" Then her arms gave way, and she slumped on her side, static starting to close in from the edges of her vision. "I don't...what...what..." Then the static was everything...

...and nothing.

Chapter Twenty: Integration

Owww, my head... Madison groaned as she blinked sticky eyes. It felt worse than the hangover she'd had after Zane's farewell party. What had happened? Had she been drinking? *That can't be right...* They'd been about to steal their ships back...she wouldn't have gotten drunk on a day like that. Maybe afterward, to celebrate, but she didn't remember anything like that. Didn't remember much at all after opening the hangar door, and...

Her perspective flickered, and another set of memories kicked in. Getting shot... taking out the attackers...launching the ships and making for freedom. Samantha's memories, but clearer than she'd ever read them before. And...

"Wait, I was *shot*?" Madison said aloud. And stopped at the sound of her own voice. It sounded...furry. Growly, like Samantha's had. That couldn't be right either. Madison tried to push herself up off the deck, and her hand slipped in the puddle of silvery slime covering the diamond plating and she flopped right back down again. "Eww! What on Zharus is this?"

She shook her head and slowly gathered her limbs underneath her, enough to get back to all fours anyway. She opened her eyes and looked down again...at arms covered in leopard-spotted fur. *Human-sized* arms, not Samantha's Fuser limbs. "Buh?" She staggered back to her feet and leaned against the wall, leaving a silver slimy handprint, as she looked down at herself. Her body was quite naked...and quite furry, in addition to being slick with the same slime lying puddled on the floor. It looked as if someone had peeled off Samantha's pelt and resized it to fit Madison. "Wait. Wait wait wait. We didn't...couldn't have..." She shook her head. "Ugh. Right. Think about that later. Right now...I have *got* to have a shower."

She looked around to orient herself. She was in the *Daydream Believer's* flight deck corridor, and from the vibrations she felt through the deck they were in jump. She grinned, and felt her lips moving over her teeth in unfamiliar ways. It was as if she had... "A muzzle?" She reached up to feel gingerly of her face. It was furry, and her jaw and nose were pushed outward in about the same way as Samantha's had been. But it felt real to her, a part of her, in a way Samantha's Fuser face hadn't. "Arrgh, I can't *deal* with this." Madison staggered down the corridor and into the head where the shower was. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror: leopard face, eyes, ears, accompanied by her own blonde hair. Furry anthropomorphic leopard body, with better curves than she remembered her human one having. She raised a hand and reached out to the mirror, tentatively. The reflection did the same. She shook her head and continued into the shower, which she set to as hot and as high-pressure as she could make it. Then she leaned against the wall as the water sluiced the silvery slime away.

When she let herself think about it, it seemed obvious what had happened to her. The shock of the wound, the stress of the chase to the jump limit, whatever, could only have caused... "Integration," she murmured, holding up an arm to stare at her wet fur again. Which had to mean... She closed her eyes and quested inward. *:Samantha? Are you there?:*

And a moment later came a sleepy response. *:Nnngh...fifty more milliseconds, Maddie...:*

Madison snorted. *:Wake up, sleepy kitty. We got problems.:*

:All right, sure, what are...how is...wait.: Madison felt a tickle in the back of her head as Samantha reached out to her senses. *:What's happened to us?:*

“Well, if I were to guess, I'd say we Integrated, pard,” Madison said aloud. “We're a kitty-girl now.”

:This can't be right...: Samantha moaned. *:What the...I can't connect to the ship's telemetry. It's like my comm module isn't even there!:*

“Ouch,” Madison said. “Well, luckily the ship flies by human controls just fine, so we're not in any trouble there. But I feel your pain.” She ran her hands along their new body, exploring the strangeness of it. “Well, hello, what's this?” She touched what felt like a socket set into the hollow at the base of her neck, and then felt another on the back of her neck. “We've got some kind of...interface jacks? The one back here feels like a standard power coupling, but this one in front...huh. What's it for, you think?”

:We'll have to check it out,: Samantha said.

Madison chuckled. “I think we're going to have to check a *lot* of stuff out.”

After the shower cleaned the last of the goo away, Madison switched the shower over to “dry” mode, and the heating element and fan built into the floor powered up. “I don't think I ever really appreciated the blow-drier built into this thing before,” Madison observed as she watched her fur ruffle dry. “I may never use a towel again.”

:That is a drawback to having real fur, I'm seeing.: Samantha sent a head-shake emoticon. *:How do we even have real fur? I'm based on leopard genetic engrams, but there wasn't any biology in me, and there weren't any leopard bits in you.:*

“The Reese's Peanut Butter cup theory of Integration?” Madison offered wryly.

:And these sockets...there wasn't any code anywhere in my Fusers or in me that should have made something like that pop up,: Samantha said. *:I've checked three times since you woke me up! Where did they come from?:*

Madison stepped out of the shower, idly running a finger around the rim of the socket at the base of her neck. “It's a good question. The only thing I can think of off the top of my head is...a little scary now I think about it.”

:What do you mean?”

“The Q. Qubitite. We call it that because it's naturally in a qubit configuration,” Madison said, stepping up to examine herself in the mirror again. She raised her chin to see the socket more clearly. “The Q stands for ‘quantum,’ you know. And you know what else is quantum? The many-worlds theory.” She turned her head to the left and right, and flicked her ears, observing how they moved. “The Q bits seem blank to us, so we use them to compute with. But what if they're programmed with something in another quantum state and Integration is that programming leaking over to our side?”

Samantha digested that for a long moment. *:You know, you're right. That is scary. Because the next implication is, what if they're intelligent in that other quantum state? Are they toying with us like we'd toy with characters in a computer simulation?:*

Madison shook her head. “Well, I know this. We can't do anything about that, so let's just try to focus on what we *can* work with. So let's take stock of our situation. You set course for Zharus, I take it?”

:At maximum jump,: Samantha confirmed. *:We'll be there in just short of two and a half months.:*

“So we've got nothing but time to study ourself,” Madison said. “And worry a little that they'll panic when they get those message torps, but...” She paused as a

thought struck her. “I guess they’re already going to know about you when we get there?”

:Well...no,: Samantha admitted. *:I kinda fudged a little on the report and left myself out as much as I could. Just made it seem like the other scouts had some good Q-hacking implants, and you made it onto the ship and rigged for automatic jump before you collapsed. Didn’t want to spoil the surprise.:*

Madison snorted. “Boy are they ever gonna be surprised *now*, Well, c’mon. Let’s go find out what we can do.”

Over the next day or so, they tried out their new systems as best they could within the confines of the ship. They discovered built-in lifters that allowed them to lie on their back on the ceiling as easily as they could on the floor. (“That’ll be handy for changing light bulbs,” Madison observed.) They also had developed hardlight projectors all throughout their body, in the form of fiber-optic fur in their rosettes. (*:I’ll bet with a little practice we could throw up a Fuser disguise, maybe even pass for human,:* Samantha suggested.) And the pulse gun in Samantha’s right arm seemed to have mirrored itself, as they could now fire pulse blasts from the palm of either hand. (They didn’t try this on full power.)

Perhaps the most intriguing discovery came when they tried to use their medical scanners to get a picture of how their new body looked. “Okay, this is something,” Madison mused. “According to the scanner, we’re not even here.”

:It must be that Totalium,: Samantha said. *:It’s bonded into our skin. We’re an invisi’grate!:*

“Which is nice for sneaking up on people, but kind of a pain when it comes to medical diagnostics,” Madison said wryly.

The next strange discovery came when they were in the cargo bay, taking a full inventory to see if the Totalians had filched anything. As they approached the back of the bay, Madison noticed that something smelled strangely...*delicious*. “What is that?” Madison wondered. “I think it’s coming from that spare parts crate you brought along.”

:Weird!: Samantha said. *:But I think you’re right.:*

The smell turned out to be coming from one of the sarium batteries, which seemed to have developed a leak. Madison dipped a finger in the fluid oozing out of the pole and tasted it experimentally. “Wow, that tastes...*great*. Hang on, let’s crack this thing open.” With her new Integrate strength, it was a simple matter to break the casing open and get at the sarium wafers inside, and she’d eaten half of them before she even realized what she was doing.

:Okay, that’s...strange,: Samantha observed. *:But I can feel our body is making use of that stuff. It’s like we had a craving we didn’t even know about.:*

“There is some biological basis for getting cravings for food high in nutrients you’re short on,” Madison observed. “I guess sarium is a nutrient to us.”

:Energy storage?: Samantha mused. *:The Integrate version of fat?:*

“Must be.” Madison finished the battery, and dropped the empty casing back in the crate. “Well, let’s get this inventory finished. We’ll see what else we can eat later.”

But eating wasn’t the only thing they needed to do. A little experimentation showed that the socket on the back of their neck would accept a standard power connector, and they could charge through it just as Samantha had used to charge from a

port in the end of her tail. Induction charging worked, too. Madison quickly discovered that if they ate normal food but went without charging for a while, they'd start to feel a little run down. She rigged up a power cable attached to the flight couch for when they spent time on the bridge, and another by her bed in her cabin.

Then, in the time between other shipboard chores, they started examining the mysterious socket on the front of their neck. It was a little awkwardly-placed to examine, but they were able to get by using a small optical probe. "Would you look at that?" Madison murmured, peering at the on-screen display. "All of those plates and pins, in all those different layers. Whatever it is, it's meant to carry a lot of data."

:If it is some kind of communication port, I hope we can figure out how it works,: Samantha grumbled. *:I'm just glad I still had my copy of our media library on board, I'd go stir-crazy if I couldn't do something with myself while my link is down.:*

"It shouldn't be a huge problem," Madison said optimistically. "I'm the daughter of one of the best shade-tree IDE mechanics ever, and you know all about the tech from having *been* it. If we can't figure this thing out between the two of us, I'd be very surprised." She chuckled. "Really, I'm kind of glad we have this mystery project. It'll pass the time."

:Then let's start passing it!: Samantha said with feeling.

In the end, Madison had reason to be doubly glad Samantha had smuggled along so many spare parts and materials. It turned out that some of the pins would only respond to pure-grade qubitium connections, and others needed sarium or other odd mineral combinations. After they figured that out, the work went faster, and it only took about two weeks before they were certain they had mapped out every possible connection that was not a dummy. After that, it was just a matter of fabricating and refabricating a plug that would hit all the contacts. They got it on their eleventh try. The plug slid into the socket and locked into place with a satisfying click, and the probe cable connected up to it read a solid connection from every mapped contact point.

"Success!" Madison cheered, tapping out a series of commands on the keyboard of the sample analysis computer they had repurposed for their reverse-engineering task.

:Some success,: Samantha said. *:We're just getting gibberish.:* She nodded their head toward the screens of nonsense code that were scrolling up. *:Look at that. It's like in The Matrix.:*

"Yeah, it sort of is, isn't it?" Madison said. "Of course, the code in the Matrix could be interpreted. 'Blonde, brunette,' and so on."

:So there's a good chance this can too. Got it,: Samantha said. *:So...what now?:*

"Now we patch in every computer we've got on this ship that's not navigating us through jump and see what we can come up with," Madison said. And she did, even breaking out Chauncey II and patching its onboard computer into the processing cluster.

For the next three weeks, they crunched numbers, trying different methods of interpreting the code. Madison took to wearing a data-interface cable at all times, with a long enough reach on it she could get to most areas of the ship without hanging it up on anything if she was careful. Sometimes it felt like they were getting close, and the interface data almost started to make sense, before they lost it again. Madison made note of those times and directed the decode process down the paths they suggested. She tried different combinations of factors and number sequences as it got closer.

While they waited, Madison reacquainted herself with the ship's controls,

running piloting sims when she felt like sparing the processing power from their search. She discovered that, even if she couldn't access the computer directly anymore, she still had reflexes that were even faster than the computer's running the sim. She could type two hundred words per minute without even trying, and if she did try she got up to about four hundred before the computer stopped being able to keep up with her inputs. *:Nice,:* Samantha said. *:If the scouting thing doesn't pan out, we could always get a job as a secretary.:*

The breakthrough, when it came, was almost anticlimactic. Madison was dozing in the pilot couch on the flight deck, charging through one cable and analyzing through the other, when she became aware that the gentle white noise sursurrus of the computers poking the interface port with data had ceased. She opened her eyes and glanced over at the display screen set to echo the cluster's progress, and found a prompt: ANALYSIS COMPLETE.

Samantha blinked. *:Is that what I think it is?:*

Madison grinned. "Let's go and find out."

The decryption wasn't the final step. Once they had the right decryption key, they still had to analyze the jack's responses, and write an application software framework to translate those responses into useful communication. Neither of them was exactly the best coder, but the *Daydream Believer's* database had plenty of already-written program modules that could be kitbashed together into serviceable comm software. *:It'll be good enough 'til we can get home,:* Samantha said. *:I'm sure that the Intie community has experts who can whip these out in seconds flat.:*

Madison chuckled. The forced indifference in Samantha's mental voice didn't fool either of them. She was itching for Madison to *hurry up and finish, darn it* and let her back into the ship's computers. "All right, miss impatient kitty. I'll admit, I'm eager to find out what we can do ourselves." She downloaded her latest alpha comm code into a chip, and slotted it into a comm module she'd fabbed, emerald green to match their eyes, then attached it to the plug for the port. "Here goes nothing." She slid it into the port at the base of her neck, and it clicked home.

:Yes!: Samantha cheered as the interface to the ship came on-line. *:We get signal! Main screen turn on!:*

Madison chuckled, slipping into cyberspace and touching the *Daydream Believer's* computers directly for the first time. "This is new."

Samantha sent across an emoticon of her in her Fuser form hugging a plushie of the starship. *:Oh, baby how I've missed you!:*

Then the connection flickered and went out. *:Ow!:* Samantha yelped. *:What just happened?:*

Madison peered down at a wisp of smoke rising from her neck socket. She popped out the communication module and found the plug had charred. "Hmm. Okay, it looks like there's a throughput limit. We'll have to work on that. Hang on, I'll fab another one. Better keep the bandwidth usage low for now until we can refine it a little."

:Aww,: Samantha said. *:Oh well. Low bandwidth is a lot better than none at all.:*

Now that they had a working direct link to the computers, the work was able to go a little faster. Madison and Samantha worked together on refining the prototype for more durability. They knew, realistically speaking, they probably couldn't get it *too* much better, but every little bit of improvement meant a little better connection to the

computer without risking burnout. All the same, they kept half a dozen of the comm units on hand at all times, as quickly as they tended to go.

Fiddling with the communication unit kept them so busy that they barely noticed the passage of time, and the 30-hour jump end warning caught them both by surprise.

“We’re here? Already?” Madison said, sliding into the shock couch to check the instruments. She could have done it over their net link, but just as Samantha preferred using net connections, she preferred seeing things with their own two eyes.

:*Well, a day out still, but yeah,*: Samantha said. :I’m a little surprised, too. It didn’t feel like it was that long.:

“I guess time flies when you’re having fun,” Madison said. “Damn. We were so busy, I forgot to worry about what we might find when we get there. You think we’ll find we just missed everyone and they went gallivanting off to Totalia without us?”

:*I think they’d have waited,*: Samantha said. :*We’re the ones who know the most about the place, and if there’s a chance we could get back on our own, they’d wanna know what we know before they go. Anyway, it would take months to get a good invasion fleet together.*:

“Mmm,” Madison grunted noncommittally. She leaned back in the couch and dropped into their shared VR, where she could still be a human and Samantha a leopard. “You know, I’ve spent a month marooned in the desert alone. I’ve explored alien planets nobody else has ever seen. I’ve been locked up in and escaped from a wildcat colony nobody outside it even knew existed. And yet I don’t remember *ever* having been this nervous.”

Samantha purred and butted her head against Madison’s hand. “I know what you mean. Escaping the auction lot was a little scary for me, but this...well, it’s a lot scary.” She chuckled. “At least we know that whatever they do, they can’t separate us now.”

“You’ve got a point there,” Madison admitted, grinning despite herself. “I’m most worried about what Zane and Aggie are gonna say. Will they think we’re some kind of monster?”

“We don’t have to show them, at least not at first,” Samantha pointed out. “We’ve been working some with our new hardlight projectors already. I think we could pull off a human disguise. Anyway, we’ve got another day to practice the kinks out of it.”

“Hmm. Good idea. Yeah, it might be best to try to space the shocks out a little,” Madison mused. “Well then, kitty o’ mine, let’s get started.” She stepped back out into the real world, arose from the couch, and left the flight deck. The chronometer on the main display placidly continued to tick away. 29 hours, 45 minutes, and counting...

Epilogue: Home Again

December 3, 157 AL

The scout ship descended slowly, a glittering needle in the sky growing into a graceful light starship, circling the field to shed momentum before landing. Zane Brubeck grinned, standing in front of a small crowd of friends and watching her come down. “That’s my sister up there!” he said proudly, if somewhat unnecessarily and for the fourth time. His feline ears swiveled to follow its flight.

Rhianna nudged him. “Hey, she’s getting close. Don’t you think you should...?”

Zane blinked, then nodded. “Oh, right.” His body shimmered and his tigrish aspect was replaced by a hardlight disguise of his old human self. He’d decided that it would be best to break his new status to his sister gently, so she wasn’t too shocked after just getting home from her ordeal. He wasn’t looking forward to the argument they were going to have when she found out. Like their Dad, and himself before he met Terry, Madison had been firmly against the idea of cohabiting with RIDEs. She hadn’t had the chance to spend time with one and change her opinions yet, though Terry was hoping he and Agatha could change that.

At last the *Daydream Believer* made its final pass, and came in for a rolling landing. Zane was already running forward before it had even pulled all the way to a stop. Agatha Brubeck was just a few steps behind, though her RIDE Annette was waiting back with the rest of the crowd. Aggie had had her RIDE tags docked for the occasion, so as to startle Madison a little less.

Rochelle chuckled. “Eager, isn’t he?” She stood between Rhianna and Kaylee and Rufia and Yvonne, with Uncia’s minima shell seated on her haunches next to her.

“Well, in his position you would be too,” Uncia said, grooming a paw.

“Certainly a tidy little ship,” Rochelle said. “It’s like a Starmaster with a jump drive.”

“If you can call a Starmaster ‘little,’” Rhianna said dryly.

“I wonder if we could get a jump drive for the Dreamchaser?” Rochelle said.

“That would be a great way to go places!”

“I think that would be a *little* out of even our budget,” Rhianna said.

“What if you made googly eyes at Zane?” Rochelle asked.

“I am not going to dignify that with a response,” Rhianna said, grinning.

“News flash, Rhi, you just did,” Rochelle replied.

“Oh, *snap*,” Rhianna said.

Out on the airfield, the *Daydream Believer*’s main lock swung open and the boarding ramp slid out. Then a blonde-haired, tired-looking girl in a scout outfit similar to Zane’s stepped slowly down the ramp, stopping at the foot of it. “Uh...hi,” she said.

Zane grinned at her, and held out his arms. “Sis! C’mere.”

Madison hesitated a moment, then stepped forward into Zane’s arms and they embraced. Agatha stepped forward and put her arms around both of them. “Missed you, bro, sis,” Madison said.

“Missed *you*, sis,” Zane said, giving her a good long squeeze.

:*Uh, Rhi?: Kaylee said. :Seein’ something weird here. Is it just me, or is she... flickering a little? And my sensors say she almost isn’t there.:*

Rhianna blinked, then reached out to Fuse with Kaylee. “Hey, Shelley, c’mon, let’s go say hi.”

Madison stepped down the ramp, pausing to take in the scene before her. Zane and Aggie were there, and a bunch of other people she didn’t recognize. New friends, she guessed. She’d meet them later. Right now, she was just content to enjoy the familiar sunlight in the proper light balance slanting down through the dome, and the smells. *God, how did I ever forget how Uplift smells?* She moved down the ramp and into her siblings’ embrace as her vision blurred with happy tears.

:*So that’s your brother, huh?:* Samantha said. :*There’s something...weird about him, but I can’t put my finger on it.:*

:*Well of course there is,:* Madison said. :*Brothers are supposed to be weird. That’s what they’re for.:*

:*No, it’s not that...never mind.:* Samantha subsided, enjoying Madison’s happiness.

But then Zane *said* something weird. “So, sis...I was just wondering. How do you feel about RIDEs?”

Madison blinked. Why would he ask about RIDEs at a time like this? She stiffened, her mind leaping to the most obvious conclusion. They knew Samantha had left with her somehow. But how? What was this about? “Er...well, you know what Dad always said,” Madison said cautiously. “They’re nice for people who like them, but we don’t need to be sharing *our* bodies with them...”

:*Hey now,:* Samantha protested.

:*Hush,:* Madison said. :*I’m not sure what’s going on here, and I don’t like it.:*

Behind his disguise, Zane’s ears drooped. She was going to be like that about it? He’d hoped that all that time alone might have softened her outlook. “Er...well, yeah,” Zane said. “Just wanted to be sure you...still felt that way.”

Madison cocked her head. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Um...no reason, I guess.” Zane sighed inwardly, and resigned himself to keeping his disguise in place for a while. Except...it wasn’t like it was going to help in the long run. Zane Brubeck the tiger Integrate was all over the news. *This is going to be harder than I thought.* Agatha bit her lip and glanced worriedly back and forth between them.

Rhianna and Kaylee drifted up behind them. :*Rhi, look! You see what else Madison’s got?* Integrate dandruff! *And her disguise is just as shaky as Zane’s was back when he first changed.:*

:*I see the family resemblance, all right,:* Rhianna said, stopping a respectful distance away. “Um, Zane?”

“Oh, hey.” Zane glanced at her. “Maddie, this is my fi—ah, my *friend* Rhianna, and Kaylee. Rhi, Kay, Maddie.”

“Hi, Maddie,” Rhianna said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Er, hi,” Madison said, even more confused. Her brother had taken up with a RIDE user?

Rhianna looked back and forth from Zane to Madison, and couldn’t help chuckling. :*Gosh, they both look pretty uncomfortable right now, don’t they? Wonder why that is?:*

Kaylee sent an emoticon of an amused snort. :*They’re both trying to figure out how to break it to each other that they’ve Integrated. You know, this could go on for a*

while.:

:As amusing as it would be to watch, I think we'd better nip this thing in the bud before it turns into a full-fledged sitcom episode.: Rhiana replied. She retracted Kaylee's helmet-head to look both siblings in the eye. "Zane? Madison? I've got just one thing to say to *both* of you," she said, savoring the similar confused expressions on the similar human faces. "Drop the disguise, it's *not* helping."

Both Zane and Madison stared at her, even more confused, then they stared back at each other. Then Zane's human aspect flickered out, replaced by his tiger form. "Um, hi," Zane said.

Then Madison's human appearance flickered out, replaced by a fetching blonde-haired leopardess Integrate. She and Zane stood there staring at each other for a long moment, mouths open in mutual surprise. Their expressions still looked similar, Rhianna was amused to note, even though their Integrate species were different. Finally, Zane broke the silence. "Maddie, is that really you?"

"If *that's* really *you*, Zane, then I think yes, this can be me too," Madison said. "How on Zharus did *you* get Integrated?"

"I'd like to know how *you* got Integrated *off* of Zharus," Zane said, ears twitching in amusement.

"Something tells me it's a mutual pair of long stories," Rochelle said, coming up behind Rhianna. "What say we all head to Diane's before the paparazzi show up?"

"Whoever your friend is, I like what she's selling and want to subscribe to her newsletter," Madison said in a different voice, flicking her own ears. "Let's scat, cats."

Madison sealed up the *Daydream Believer* and climbed into the sporty hoverskimmer Zane was driving—a far cry from the big ol' truck he'd used to haul Chauncey around in. But then, that skimmer would hardly even have fit on the roads here. She wondered what Zane had done with Chauncey. He seemed a lot more comfortable in himself now, and she didn't think that was entirely because of his tiger side. *Going to have to ask him about that. I don't even know his other half's name yet,* she mused. But that could come later. Right now she was happy to enjoy the sights, sounds, and smells of Uplift as they drove back into the city.

The others were cruising alongside or behind them, on or inside RIDEs that had converted to skimmer form. Even Agatha had one, and now she was sporting lynx ears and tail similar to Rhianna's. *:Well what's happened here?:* Samantha purred amusedly. *:Seems like your whole family's gone RIDE-crazy.:*

:You're telling me,: Madison replied. *:I can't wait to hear the story behind this.:* She blinked as they passed by Founders Park. All the vegetation was a lot more sparse than she remembered, and her scout's eye picked out some traces of past damage. "What happened here?" she asked Zane.

"There was a little...incident a while back," Zane said. "The domes went down for a while. I'll fill you in on everything when we get to Cheers."

Then Madison blinked again as she realized a significant number of the people *in* the park were anthropomorphic animals who were far too small to be Fusers. *:Integrates out in the open?:* she sent to Samantha. *:Sheesh. You go away for a couple years and the whole world changes.:*

:This is interesting,: Samantha agreed. *:I'm hitting the local news and events archives now to catch up. Wow, your brother and his friends have been busy.:*

:Well, don't tell me yet,: Madison said. :The least I owe Zane is being able to be surprised when he tells me.:

:That's fair,: Samantha agreed. :It's going to take me a while to digest all this myself anyway.:

They pulled into the lot outside of Cheers, and Zane climbed out of the convertible then came around to get the door for his sister and offer her his hand. "And here we are."

"Thanks, bro," Madison said, taking it and pulling herself up. "But if I can explore uncharted planets, I should at least be able to get out of a car unaided, you know."

"Humor me, Maddie," Zane said, grinning with his tiger teeth. "It's been so long. And damn, I'm still so surprised! You look *great* as an Integrate."

"You're not so bad yourself," Madison said. "I *thought* a tiger would suit you." Around them the others were pulling up and hopping off their RIDEs, who were returning to Walker form. Except for the one fennec and an elk, they were all cats, Madison noted with some amusement. "Well, let's go inside. We've got some long stories to swap."

As they paraded into the bar, Madison got another surprise. Diane was behind the counter, a familiar fixture in the bar—except she was smaller and slimmer than expected, too. "Diane? *You* Integrated, too? And Serena?" she added, seeing the clouded leopard co-bartender was similarly shrunken.

Serena blinked. "Madison? Is that you? Wow, this is unexpected."

The deer chuckled. "We've been Integrated for as long as we've known you. Or your father, for that matter."

Madison snapped her fingers, "So that's why he would have been an 'ingrate' not to come here?"

Diane chuckled. "That would be it. Remind me to tell you about how your Dad and I met sometime. But right now I think you've got some catching up to do among yourselves." She shook her head bemusedly. "Maybe Integration *is* contagious. Though how you could have caught it light years out in deep space is a story I'd like to hear sometime."

"Join us at the table," Zane invited. "That way she'll only have to tell it once."

"I expect I'll be telling it a lot more often than that," Madison said, chuckling. "I'm going to have a lot of explaining to do to the scouts, for one thing. But yes, do join us! I think Dad would have wanted that."

They sat in the same spot where they'd held their farewell party, giving Madison a little bit of *deja vu*, but the table was longer this time. Madison sat at the head, in the place of honor, with Agatha to her left and Zane to her right. To Zane's right was Rhianna Stonegate, then her friend Rochelle, then Serena. To Agatha's left were Zane's chief bodyguard Myla Wilson, a lion-eared woman Zane introduced as Anny Hewer, his chief of security, and Rhianna's friend Rufia. Diane was at the other end of the table. The RIDEs of those who had them sat behind their partners, plugged into power sockets in the walls.

Madison chuckled and glanced at Zane. "So...who goes first? Do we flip a coin?"

"I hope you won't find me ungracious if I asked you to go first?" Zane said. "Ever since those message torps came in a couple months ago, we've been so worried...not to mention curious." He grinned. "Consider it your punishment for giving us such a scare."

Madison grinned back. "Okay, fair enough. It all started right after I went into

jump, at which point I learned I had a stowaway..."

Madison related the story, with a little prompting from Samantha, leaving out only the recorded message from Clint Brubeck they'd found in the cabin's server. That could wait for later, when she was alone with just family. "...and then I, or we, woke up all furry." Madison chuckled. "Luckily, we had a long journey home to get used to it."

"But where did you get your DIN?" Rhianna asked.

"My what?" Madison asked.

"Data Interface Normalizer." Rhianna pointed to her neck. "That comm unit."

"Oh." Madison blinked. "Data Interface Normalizer? Really? What a stupid name. Who ever came up with that? We just called it a comm." She shook her head. "Anyway, where else would we have gotten it? We made it ourselves. Took about two months to figure it out, but after all, we had nothing but time."

Rhianna whistled. "You really are your father's daughter. Can I see it?"

Unsure, Madison glanced at Zane. "She's got a professional interest," Zane said. "She makes DINs herself. Including mine." He held up his wrist to display it. "Really good at it, too."

Madison fished in the pocket of her scout jacket. "Here's one of my spares." She tossed it over.

Rhianna plucked it out of the air and pulled out a loupe to examine it, then took a device off her belt and plugged it in, looking distant for a moment as her implant read it. "Wow. This is a really impressive bit of MacGyvering. If you'll see me and Shelley later at our garage, I think we can learn a lot from each other." She handed the DIN back.

"Thanks, I'll do that," Madison said, pocketing it. "I suspect you could probably make one a lot better than we did."

"Maybe, but this is very amazing for a first effort," Rhianna said.

"What *I* find amazing is that there could be a whole space colony out there, in this day and age, that nobody even knew about," Diane said. "How do you even hide something like that?"

"It's not as hard as you might think. Or at least, it wasn't back when they launched it," Madison said. "The colonies weren't talking to each other very much. It was easy to buy something that was supposedly going to be shipped to one of the other colonies, and then not have it show up. By the time the records were everywhere, it was years later and nobody cared about going back through to make sure every shipment from twenty-odd years ago had a matching receipt somewhere."

She paused for a sip of beer. "Heck, it may just be that some of those records *never* ended up getting copied to the colonies, and the key to locating some other wildcat colony is mouldering in some forgotten data dump back on Earth. Where there's one, who knows? There could be...well, maybe not dozens, but at least a few more, I'm sure. For all I know, there could be some slowship, or even one of the just-faster-than-light ships, still trundling along out there that hasn't gotten to where its crew thinks is far enough away to look for a planet to settle down yet."

"Do I foresee a whole new secondary mission for the scouts?" Zane said, grinning.

"You might just at that," Madison said. "If I can convince them of it. Regardless, I suspect there's going to be a whole lot of forensic accounting going on over the next few months."

“An’ you found two new metamaterials,” Annette Hewer said. “Those’re gonna find some pretty important applications in a few years, I got no doubt. What if you filled a warhead with that nullifite stuff? You could knock out every energy system in a city. Maybe a continent.”

Madison wrinkled her leopard nose. “Does *everything* have to come down to weapons?”

“Regardless, I’m just impressed that you found them,” Zane said. “Those are some real feathers in your cap.”

Madison shrugged. “It was just luck of the draw. I only found one of them because the world was assigned to me, and the other was discovered decades ago by the Totalian colonists. I can’t really take credit for either one.”

“Even the colony by itself is a pretty big deal,” Myla said. “Especially now, with Earth starting to breathe down everyone’s necks. Once the word gets back to them...”

“We’ve been trying to keep news about Totalia on the down-low, since those message torps came in a couple months ago,” Zane said. “It’s not been easy, but we’ve managed to keep it from leaking out while we waited to see if you made it back.”

“Did any of the others get here?” Madison asked. “Guess not, or they’d have been waiting for me.”

Zane shook his head. “No, but on the other hand you did have the most recent, fastest ship. So they could still be days or even weeks out.”

Madison sighed. “We’re going to have to do something about Totalia, you know.”

Zane nodded. “I know.” He grinned toothsomely. “Which leads me to my next question. How would you feel about going back to Totalia?”

“How soon?” Madison snorted. “If I thought it would do any good, I’d head right back out to the ship right now.”

Zane chuckled. “Unfortunately, it won’t be *that* fast. We’ve been busy since those torps came in, but we’ve still got a ways to go. I’m putting together a fleet out near the edge of the system. The official story is we’re getting ready to go big into asteroid mining, but given the word leaking out here and there of the various military units from the different polities we’re taking aboard, there are all sorts of rumors going around. Some people even think we’re getting ready for a preemptive strike on Earth.”

Madison’s eyes widened. “Oooh! Great! I feel really bad about leaving Kendlen in the lurch like that—not to mention Barbaretta and all the other scouts. So, when? Tomorrow? Next week?” She also felt bad that she hadn’t worried about them very much on the trip back—but then, she did have just having Integrated to occupy her mind.

Zane shook his head. “Nowhere *near* that fast, I’m afraid. These things take time. It’ll be two or three months at best, probably closer to four or five.”

Madison grimaced. “Ugh. I tell you what, just fuel the *Daydream Believer* back up and I’ll go back there right now and rescue them myself. If Mantha was able to hack their systems to a fare-thee-well as just a RIDE, imagine what an Integrate can do!”

Zane held up a hand. “Hold up there, cowgirl. We need you here to talk to the Scouts—not to mention the various polity leaders who’ve been helping put this thing together on the QT. It’s one thing for me to talk about the place, but you’re the one who’s actually *been* there. If you want the planet saved good and proper, you’re going to have to get behind the fleet and help me push.”

Madison sighed. “I guess you’re right. Samantha *tells* me you’re right. Dammit.

Ugh, I hate politicking. That's why I went into the Scout Corps, so I wouldn't have to deal with people."

"We've all got to make sacrifices," Zane said. He chuckled. "Just look at Aggie. I've been after her for months to run Brubeck Mining for me. Now she's finally agreed to sign on as Brubeck CEO *pro tem* while I'll be off with you. Who knows, maybe she'll decide she likes it enough that she takes over for good even after we get back."

Agatha rolled her eyes. "Not likely. We've got our own lives, you know."

"Ah, but I *know* you, sis." Zane grinned wider. "By the time we get back, you'll have everything arranged *just* how you want it, and you won't be able to stand the idea I might take over and mess it all up again."

Agatha facepalmed. "If this whole Totalia thing hadn't come out of nowhere, I'd halfway suspect you of having set it up as some kind of elaborate trap."

"Well, you know how it is," Zane said. "Sometimes, when you've got two problems, you discover they solve each other."

Everyone sitting around the table shared in the laugh that followed, then Zane turned his attention back to his other sister. "So now that we have *that* settled, right now, I've got a more pressing question." He grinned. "So what should we call you? MaddieMantha? SaMadditha?"

Madison chuckled. "Mantha says she's fine with us just going by Madison still, like you're still Zane. We'll think it over. So what about you? I don't even know your other half's name yet."

"Oh, that's Terry," Zane said. "I met him in the desert a couple of months after you left, when the Board of Directors tried to dry-gulch me."

Madison blinked. "They what?"

"Oh, don't worry, they didn't get away with it," Zane said.

"Well, obviously," Madison replied.

"But then I met Terry, and we were able to come to an arrangement of mutual satisfaction." Zane grinned. "We saved each other's life, as it happens. And then..."

THE END (for now)