

# **Marshals: Beginnings**

**By JonBuck and Robotech\_Master**

## Episode One: Ride, Sally

*May 4, 128 AL*

*Harmon Gulch, Southern Dry Ocean*

*Mustang Sally, think you better slow your mustang down.  
Mustang Sally, think you better slow your mustang down.  
You been running all over the town now.  
Oh! I guess I'll have to put your flat feet on the ground.*

“I love me that song, Bon-bon!” Sally Pickett patted Bonnie's dashboard. “You know me too damned well.” The qubitite prospector sang as she and her partner flew a hundred meters over the sun-baked landscape, itself a few thousand meters below sea level. “All you want to do is ride around, Sally! Ride, Sally, ride!”

*One of these early mornings, oh, you gonna be wiping your weeping eyes.  
I bought you a brand new mustang 'bout nineteen sixty five  
Now you come around signifying a woman, you don't wanna let me ride.  
Mustang Sally, think you better slow your mustang down.  
You been running all over the town now.  
Oh! I guess I'll have to put your flat feet on the ground.*

Bonnie sang the remaining chorus with her rider, the mustang mare mecha putting her own emphasis on certain words. “All you want to do is RIDE around, Sally! RIDE, Sally, RIDE!”

“Where do you keep finding this great stuff, Bonnie?” Sally asked, still feeling the frisson from good music.

The mare projected her buckskin-colored head over the ute's dashboard cluster. “Oh, here an' there, here an' there. Knew you'd love it, though. Think you're related to the guy? Sally Pickett, Wilson Pickett...”

“Five hundred years between him and me, who knows?” Sally said. She grinned and put her foot all the way down on the ute's accelerator. The one-person enclosed utility skimmer maxed out at 250 kph, but it was more than enough as far as they were concerned. Outside Bonnie's hardlight aeroshell it was a baking 68 degrees Celsius and the humidity lurked somewhere around .5 percent. More than enough to kill and mummify any unprotected human within hours.

The *Dust Devil* soon came into view in the heat shimmers and mirages. Harmon Gulch was one of the more difficult areas for prospecting in the Dry Ocean. It was named for Dr. Jane Harmon, a woman who had died there during the pre-hardlight days when the Dry Ocean started to become a serious subject of study. Many of the landmarks bore the names of similarly tragic figures, scientists, prospectors, and outlaws alike.

The hardlight-domed platform seemed to hover on a column of swirling dust a kilometer tall, but that was just the side effect of the lifters underneath. There were dozens of platforms like it of various sizes all over the Dry—and *over* the Dry. They

provided various services to organized mining companies as well as individual prospectors. In addition to recreational facilities, there were recruitment offices for Brubeck Mining and Chaucer Family Mining, a Qubitite Assay Office, and an unoccupied Dry Ocean Law Enforcement Bureau substation. The population of Harmon's Gulch wasn't enough to merit full-time staffing; it was mainly there to provide a temporary HQ for any DOLEB officers whose assignments brought them there.

Bonnie smoothly changed to Fuser mode over her rider and they landed on the platform on their metallic hooves. A hardlight skin was one of the things they hoped to afford in the very near future. Sunning himself nearby was the massive saurian form of a friend's RIDE.

"Hey there, Durante! How y'all doing?" Bonnie waved at the full-sized hadrosaur.

The giant mecha opened one eye. He was a massive bipedal dinosaur, ten meters from nose-to-tail, with a long bony crest extending back behind his head. He didn't fit anywhere inside that wasn't a maint facility, so spent his downtime lazing in the sun while his rider was at the saloon. "Just fine and dandy, Bons. Fine and dandy. Wyatt's in the saloon."

"Where else?" Sally said. "How're you holding up, Durante? You look a lil' worse for wear."

The big dinosaur RIDE shrugged. "I'm doing just fine, but thanks for asking."

The *Dust Devil* was quiet for the time of day. With claim jumpers in the area, most of the prospectors were staying at their claims, on guard for raiders. Sally and Bonnie had little fear of claim jumpers. They had methodically locked down their own mine tighter than a drum before they'd left for some much-needed R&R.

Sally and Bonnie entered the saloon, deFused, then the human hung her white Stetson hat and brown leather duster on the hooks provided. Sally Pickett was tall, well-muscled, dark-haired, and had the swarthy complexion of someone who spent her life outdoors. Sally liked the cowgirl look, so dressed that way frequently. She moseyed up to the bar counter, where the raccoon-eared barkeep was cleaning a tumbler. "What'll you have, Sally?" he asked.

"Sarsaparilla," the young woman said. "Thanks, Clancy."

Clancy nodded. "You're in luck. Just got some fresh ingredients in all the way from Grand Valley."

A sound like a trombone crossed with a French horn startled Sally. Its source, sitting in a darkened corner holding a foamy stout, was Durante's partner. Wyatt Stubbs had a miniature version of Durante's long crest, parting his brown hair around it down the middle. With pebble-scaled gray skin, the effect rather like a rubber-forehead alien from *Star Trek*. He also had a half-meter tail, something the special effects of the day couldn't really manage.

"Gotcha that time, Sally!" Wyatt said through his vocoder. The tags had left him with a saurian larynx, so technology had to correct the problem.

"How the *hell* do you even do that, Wyatt?" Sally fumed. "Almost spilled my drink."

"It wouldn't kill you to actually have *beer* for once, would it?" Wyatt said, gulping down his drink at the same time.

"Never could get a taste for bitters." Sally sipped her drink, leaving a foam mustache she licked away.

"I'm sure we'll eventually find something alcoholic you'll like, Sal," Bonnie said. The large horse RIDE plugged into a stall to recharge.

"Couldn't help noticing the Dolt office is still empty," Sally said, referring to the empty law enforcement station. The nickname had naturally grown out of their rather poorly thought out acronym, DOLEB, combined with their general incompetence.

"Glint's still looking for the right person to bribe," Clancy said darkly. "Paperwork and loopholes be damned, it's the only way to get things done with them."

Sally glanced around the saloon, looking for another familiar face. "Hey, Moose been around? He was supposed to meet us here. From what he said, I thought he and Tuke were going to be here a couple hours ago."

Clancy shook his head, raccoon ears flipping back. "He ain't been around all day. No comm calls, neither."

Sally and Wyatt exchanged glances. "They're usually pretty good about leaving when they say they will. Maybe we'd better go check on them."

"God knows the Dolts wouldn't." Wyatt took a long pull at his beer while he spoke, one of his favorite vocoder ventriloquist tricks. He set it down again, empty, the heavy glass mug making a loud clack on the table. "I think you're right, Sal. Hell, if I'd known he was supposed to be that early, I'd have met you on the way in. We'd better saddle up, and—"

Bonnie broke in, her voice low and worried. "Better do it double-quick, pards. Just got a Distress Blast, coming right from Moose's claim."

"Shee-it." Sally put her own glass down, half-full. "Right. We're heading out now. Wyatt, follow soon's you can. Clancy, pass the word to round up a posse, give 'em our comm code—" Bonnie Fused over her before she was even done talking, then they lift-hovered out the door.

Wyatt ran after a moment later, pausing at the door. "Our drinks, my tab—"

Clancy nodded. "You're good for it, go." As Wyatt left, Clancy flipped up the section of the bar that concealed his comm and started making calls.

"—yes, we got a distress call from them twenty minutes ago. We're neighbors, we have our gear set up to call each other in emergencies." *Because I'll be damned if we can depend on you lot.* Sally gritted her teeth as she listened to the DOLEB dispatcher on the other end of the line. "No, two hours is *not* soon enough. He could be bleeding out even now!" *You gutless son of a whore.* "...all right, fine, whatever. Do whatever you can." *Which is bugger-all. But I knew that before I even called you.*

Bonnie snorted as Sally broke the connection. "Same old Dolts, huh pard?"

"Same old bullshit. Why do they even bother *pretending* they're the law out here?"

"Because that gives them money to skim off the top of, why else?"

Sally smiled and patted the skimmer ute's fairing like she'd have patted the horse's neck. "As usual, you've got more common sense than I do. Maybe you should be the one riding me."

Bonnie snorted. "We wouldn't get very far that way." She slowed as they came to the mouth of the box canyon where Moose's diggings were. "Well hell, look at that." Charred spots on the canyon walls marked the former locations of the defensive pulser turrets that had guarded it.

Sally sighed. "I told him those civvie popguns weren't any good. He should have

gone with war leftovers, like we did.”

“It was what he could afford. He was planning to upgrade next month, since he just hit that high-grade vein. You know, from the angle of it, I think it’s probably the same vein we tapped into. It slants down from our claim, so it’s nearer the surface for us.”

“He’s welcome to his share. There’s plenty blue for everyone.” Sally glanced up at the canyon walls. “Think we should come in from topside?”

“We’d stand out pretty plain against the sky. They could pick us off before we get close.”

“Right, but if we come up the canyon we won’t have a lot of room to dodge if they start shooting.”

Their comm crackled as Wyatt cut in. “That’s why you send us over the top as a distraction. Durante can take a pounding. The rest of you—Clancy’s got a few more on the way, they’ll be here in five—go in through the canyons while we’re drawing their fire.” The armored personnel carrier that was Durante’s skimmer form pulled up next to them, extending a pair of pulse-bolt cannons from his underside.

Sally nodded. “Works. But we’re not waiting. The posse can come up the canyon after us when they get here.”

“No time to talk you out of it, so be careful.”

“You too, you two.” Sally waved, then waited as the APC goosed his lifters and rose up the canyon wall. She gave them a moment to move ahead, then revved the throttle and entered the canyon. They crept along slowly, moving from cover to cover. The canyon was a couple of clicks deep, but they didn’t have any way of knowing just where the bad guys were.

Along the way, they passed containers for unprocessed ore awaiting pickup. It appeared they’d been used for target practice. Two of the bins were completely shattered. The fragments and glass-fused qubitite ore showed the hallmarks of plasma weapons, while the metal pieces had plenty of the smaller punctures from pulse fire, and the spiky blossoms of gauss bulletholes. Sally shook her head. “What a waste.”

“I hope they didn’t waste Moose and Tuke.”

They were barely halfway up the canyon, when Wyatt commed again. His voice carried tones of resignation and disgust. “It’s clear. Get up here at top speed.”

“That doesn’t sound good. Giddyap, Bonnie.”

A minute later, they pulled up at the end of the canyon, where Moose’s hut and the entrance to the mine shaft could be found. The hut was half-collapsed and smoking, the shaft closed off by the use of explosives...and Wyatt and Durante were standing by a prone metallic form on the ground. It didn’t look familiar. The ears and anime stylized muzzle on the helmet and painted-on black and yellow spots still visible in a few patches suggested some kind of cat, like a leopard or a cheetah. Around it was a mass of dried organic dust. “Who—?”

“It’s Moose,” Durante said. “Out cold. Dunno who the RIDE is yet. She’s locked down with so many fetters we’ll need Jeremy to untangle them before she can even talk. I’m barely getting a peep out of her sidebands.”

Sally stared at the figure, her mouth hanging open. “...she?”

“Ayup. Damned cheap-ass frame, too,” Durante said. “Ridden hard. Just about on her last legs.”

Wyatt nodded. “The jumpers are long gone. Hours ago. Probably gone before the

alarm even went off.”

“Grab and go, yeah,” Bonnie said. The jumpers had slagged the holding bins their carryall couldn't take. “Probably used the alarm to draw us all in here while they slipped out the back. I've combed the posse to spread out and look for trail sign. Probably won't find any, but you never know.”

Sally sighed. “Any sign of Tuke?”

“I bet dollars to donuts they stole him,” Durante said. “And gave poor Moose this unlucky girl in 'exchange'. Because forcing him to crossride with her would be *funnier* than just junking her. We'd better load 'em up and get them to the *Devil*.”

Sally nodded. “Better make sure Moose is in shape when we hunt down those bastards and get Tuke back.”

Bonnie snorted. “It'll be a lot different shape than he's used to.”

“We'll deal with that when it comes up. Come on, let's go.”

They returned to the *Dust Devil* as quickly as possible, taking the unconscious Moose to Doctor Philbin's office. Like much of the place, it was furnished in a faux-Old West style. Sally couldn't say she found the collection of bone saws on the wall next to the medical diploma terribly reassuring.

Doctor Philbin, a sandy-haired man with pince-nez glasses and a respectable handlebar mustache, tapped his finger against his lips thoughtfully as he examined the glass plate scanner on a waldo over the bed where the cheetah Fuser lay. “You'll be relieved to know there's nothing wrong with Moose. She's a perfectly healthy young lady.”

Sally frowned. “Then why's he unconscious?”

“Anaesthetic from the crossride mode. Standard feature on a number of civvie RIDEs these days; knock 'em out for the most uncomfortable parts of the body change. She's also lost about twenty kilos in a short time. It's a wonder there are no complications.”

“Especially given the *bad* shape the RIDE is in.” Jeremy Boothroyd, the *Dust Devil*'s resident tinker, was standing on the other side of the table, examining the patient with a handscanner and interface specs. In his late twenties, blonde, clean-shaven, Boothroyd was one of the few *Devil* residents who disdained the platform's Old West chic. He preferred functional coveralls and a tool harness. He was never without them; Sally privately suspected he even wore the tool harness in the shower and to bed at night.

“Well, let's get him out already,” Wyatt said. “The sooner we can go after Tuke, the better.”

“*She* won't be changing back for five years, Mr. Stubbs,” Dr. Philbin said. “Might as well get in the habit of using the proper pronoun. Speaking of, might wanna give us some privacy. This is gonna be a shock for her.”

“Look, Moose and I go way back,” Sally said. “I think she oughta see a familiar face.”

“Mm. And you're female, too. That could be helpful. All right, fine. One face. Yours. The rest of you, clear out.”

Wyatt nodded. “We'll be waiting outside.”

She knew what to expect once the fog of anesthetic began to clear. Moose tried to

keep her hands from her chest. There would be *years* for that.

“Okay, Moose,” the familiar voice of Dr. Philbin said. “You’re a very lucky girl, under the circumstances. Can you open your eyes?”

*Don't really want to, but...* There were more important matters than a case of sudden breasts. “How’s the cheetah, doc?”

“The who?”

“The RIDE,” came Sally Pickett’s voice.

Moose opened her eyes and levered herself upwards. A white sheet covered her. “We have to take those jumpers down! Who knows *what* they’re doing to Tuke, or anyone else they’ve kidnapped! And is this *really* my voice?”

Dr. Philbin put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her back down. “Take it easy there, young lady. All in good time.”

“We didn’t harm the RIDE.” Boothroyd was squatting next to a sprawled-out metal cheetah at the other end of the room. “We used the emergency release, and she peeled right off. She’s in warm shutdown right now.”

“I suppose the Dolts will want to interrogate...eh, who am I kidding.” Sally shrugged. “I guess she’s yours now, if you want her. Law of salvage. But enough about her, how’re *you* feeling?”

Moose shook her head. “Like I stood in front of the ore chute by mistake when a load was coming. I ache in places I didn’t used to *have*.”

“Not unexpected after a change by civilian Fusers.” Dr. Philbin pulled the scan plate over and tapped a few buttons on it. “But everything appears to be in the right place, more or less. Not seeing any signs of cellular degeneration or nano-cancer, so that’s good. More than I would have expected from a RIDE in that condition.”

Jeremy Boothroyd sniffed. “Which is why you’re the doctor and I’m the mechanic. I keep telling you, Fusers are nothing short of miraculous. A whole generation ahead of the medical nanos you wonks use, because they don’t have to pass medical certification. And the condition of the RIDE doesn’t say anything about the condition of the nanos.”

Moose propped herself up on one elbow for a better look at the RIDE. “Look, just get rid of the fetters on her, okay? I’ve never seen a worse case.”

Sally shook her head, grinning. “Same old Moose. Some things never change.”

Jeremy nodded. “I’ll take care of it, Moose. And I’ll make what repairs I can.”

“I’m good for it. Or...I will be.” Moose sighed. “How bad did they wreck the place?”

“It’s bad,” Sally said. She was never one to pull punches. “Really bad. We’ll help you bore a new mine shaft bad. They took all your pickups and slagged what they couldn’t.”

Moose groaned and let herself lie flat again. “Can I get a mirror, please? I want to see what face goes with this voice.” She probed her mouth with her tongue and felt slightly enlarged canines. There was also enough hair to tickle her shoulders—and there was something going on with her feet. “Wait, what was the model of that chassis they stuck me in?”

“A ‘Miss Kitty KC-34DD’. Cape Nord model, I think,” Sally said. “Which explains a lot.”

Boothroyd snorted. “What the hell were they even doing out here with one of those? Those aren’t certified for extended durations in the Dry!”

“Probably got it from mugging some tourist.”

“Well, do me a favor Sally and find a good war surplus cheetah chassis for her, will you? Quick as you can,” Moose said. “I’ll pay you back once the insurance comes through.”

“And you want to be with us when we find Tuke anyway, right?” Sally smiled. “Don’t worry about paying me back. I was going to get you something nice to celebrate your strike anyway.”

Unable to resist any longer, Moose patted herself down and allowed herself to goggle at her breasts. “Oh God....ohgodohgod...I knew I was going to wake up a woman, but *this*? Am I as small as I think I am? How many kilos did I lose?”

“About twenty,” the doctor informed. “Here’s the mirror you asked for. Ready?”

“Feel free to ask me about absolutely *anything*,” Sally reassured. “Period.” She paused. “Maybe I should have phrased that a *little* better.”

The cute heart-shaped face surrounded by wavy blond hair that gazed back in the mirror field bore not even a passing resemblance to Moose’s former square-jawed manly features. This was entirely intentional on the claim jumpers’ part. The woman who had enslaved the cheetah had made a point of turning all the feminizing settings “up to eleven” as she’d phrased it. Her thick Sturmhaven accent had left no doubt as to *why*.

Tuke had a rare 001-series Heavy Mobile frame, and even rarer, not a single fetter on his RI core. This was illegal in most Gondwanan polities, so Moose had spent his downtime on the *Dust Devil* instead, dallying with Sally many a night. He’d been preparing for the expected fling to celebrate his new strike when the gang descended on his claim.

“Five years like this,” Moose muttered. She flicked one of her feline ears, feeling her tail squirm underneath. “Aren’t I just the *cutest* thing? Busty catgirls are so popular in Cape Nord right now. Or so I hear.”

“C’mon, Moose. I know you,” Sally said. “You’re more worried about Tuke and that poor RIDE they stuck you in.”

“Damn right I’m not going to leave Tuke with those bastards! I’ll deal. I’m ready to get out of here if Doc Philbin thinks I can leave.”

“No reason to hold you here, Moose,” Philbin said. “Just go easy on those feet. It’ll take a while to get used to them.”

Moose took a minute to pull back the sheet. Her feet were more like paws now, but at least not digitigrade. *Cute little kitty paws for a cute catgirl.*

“We should head next door to the General Fabbery and get you some threads that fit,” Sally said, extending her hand towards Moose. “Then we’ll see what we can do about that poor cheetah. Bon-bon says she’s got a line on a frame for her already. Then... Tuke and those jumpers. They’re gonna pay. Clancy has Heinrich, Sasha and the others out beating the bushes for any sign of ‘em as we speak. We’ll find ‘em sooner or later.”

Moose took the offer of aid and carefully got to her feet, wobbling a little before finding her new balance, then shrugged on some hospital scrubs Dr. Philbin supplied. *Tuke, old buddy, hold tight. We’re on our way.*

Moose sat in the fitting booth and looked blankly at the selection on the fabber control screen in front of her. Women’s clothes’ sizing was a mystery to her. It didn’t seem to have a great deal of correlation with the size numbers of men’s clothing. The

fabber knew what size it *thought* she was, but Moose really would have liked to have been able to double-check its reasoning, like he had with the readings his automated mine equipment had given him. The thought made her snort, almost chuckle, in spite of herself. Reaching for some thread of normalcy in the situation. Yeah, that figured.

She could hear Sally pacing just outside the booth. “Do you need any help in there?”

“I’m okay, Sally! Just like I was the last six times you asked...”

“Sorry! Just a little concerned, you know?”

“Yeah, but there some things a man just has to do for herself.” Moose rubbed her smooth chin, looking at the selection thoughtfully.

Sally broke in on her thoughts again. “Be sure and get something nice!”

Moose creased her forehead, staring at the wall as if she could look right through it at Sally with X-ray eyes. “What’s *that* supposed to mean? I’m getting the best gear I can here.”

“No, I’m not talking about gear, I mean something *nice*. You know, a pretty dress or something. I know you, Moose MacGill. You never owned but the one dress shirt, and it was two sizes too small. Looked plumb ridiculous every time you came into town. Even cheap as fabbed clothing is!”

Moose rolled her eyes. “What the hell am I gonna dress up for out here? If I look extra special nice, I can just *seduce* the ore into my carts?”

“You gotta come to town *sometime*.”

“I’m not *looking* for a beau here.”

“No, but you might be looking for a loan. Or trying to convince some blockhead Dolt to help catch those jumpers.”

“Oh, maybe I should practice *batting my eyelashes* some, too?”

“It probably wouldn’t hurt.”

*Damn Cape Nord sex toy body.* Cape Nord men were notorious for liking their women dependent on them. Moose’s new body was soft and feminine by their standards, leaving her with a fraction of his former strength. Sally had a great set of abs to go with her admittedly great bosom. Moose’s own belly lacked that kind of muscle definition. She was also several centis shorter than Sally now to boot.

Moose sighed and made her selections. A couple of minutes later, several pairs of slacks, work shirts, socks, comfortable underthings, and custom-fitted boots slid out the chute into the output bin on the wall across from the panel. “All right, now to see if these...huh?” A few seconds after those clothes, three more brightly-colored packets of fabric slid out the chute, accompanied by an equal number of shoeboxes. Moose slowly turned her head to glare at that spot on the wall again. “C’mon, Sally.”

“Hey, I *gave* you the chance to pick for yourself. But since you *apparently* weren’t interested...”

Moose picked up one and looked at it. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“It’s *clothing*, silly. You *wear* it. Don’t worry. It’s not too girly.”

“If it doesn’t have separate bits for each leg, it’s too girly.”

“Just try them on.” A moment later, Sally said. “You might want to hurry. Bonnie tells me one of the Dolts just flew in and is looking for us. Put on the green one.”

*Green one.* Moose tore the plastic wrapping from the package and shook it out into a long green sundress. It was of simple cut and seemed fairly modest, from what little Moose could make out. But it was still a dress. *Okay. Okay, fine. When in Rome.*

On the wall a helpful graphic of how to put it on displayed. It wasn't meant to be worn with a bra, apparently, and fit snugly around her bosom in spite of how it looked at first. She slipped on the matching shoes that had come with it, then exited the fitting room and presented herself. Her physique was apparently designed to make even a modest cut garment look sexy. "Well, Sally? You happy now? I'm *thoroughly* emasculated."

Sally beamed. "You look *lovely*, Moose."

"When we get Tuke back he's gonna laugh and laugh..."

"Probably. But right now it's good for you to look a little uncomfortable. Maybe we can play on the Dolts' sympathies. If they have any."

"Fat chance of that," Moose fumed, folding her arms awkwardly. "When we're done, I want to see how Jeremy's doing with the cheetah. She's got as much as stake in this as we do."

"Sure. Hang on, I think that's them now."

The door to the small general store fabbery opened to admit a small man in a quibitite blue pseudo-military uniform with brass piping and decorative ribbons. Lots of brass piping and decorative ribbons. *Any more salad and he'd make a great Latin American dictator. Compensating for something, maybe? Like about a half-meter of altitude?*

The bureaucrat had dull brown hair, no RIDE tags, and a stuffy Nextus officiousness about him. He peered at the two women through his mirrorshade I-specs, unsure who to speak to first. "One of you is Sally Pickett, and the other is..."

"Moose MacGill." Moose waved. "Hi."

The officer frowned. "Crossrode? I'm not seeing any change-of-identity filings..."

"Because it wasn't my idea, you..." Moose fumed.

Sally put her hand on her shorter friend's shoulder. "Calm down a bit, Moose. It just happened to her, Mister. She don't have any yet. The jumpers thought it would be funny to slap a she-RIDE on him before they left."

"Oh. Sorry," the Dolt said unapologetically. "Be sure you file those papers as soon as you can. There's a fifty *mu* per day fine after the first week."

"What?! Why you petty little—"

"Moose!" Sally shot her a sharp glance, and Moose quieted down. "Anyway...did you get our report on the raid?"

"We did. Tough break," the officer said unsympathetically. "We'll be sure to contact you if we hear anything."

Moose fought to get her temper under control. "Do you have any...further questions for us? Any details we missed?"

The officer tapped a touch surface on the side of his specs. "No, I think your report just about covered it. We'll let you know if we need anything else." He nodded to them. "Don't forget to file that identity change. Good day."

Before either Moose or Sally could recover their voices, he was gone. "What? But my report wasn't even five hundred words!" Sally sputtered. "I thought they were going to take a more thorough one when they got here!"

"What the flying funny papers?" Moose clenched her fists. "I had fifty grand of ore waiting to be processed, easy. Not to mention all the bins that got shot up, my shelter, and all that work on the shaft they just up and trashed."

"And Tuke."

"I don't count him on the money side of things. Bastards. There were six of them

and I don't think their RIDEs were any better off than cheetah-girl. Tuke said their sidebands were even tied down." Moose turned and slammed a fist into a convenient wall. "Ow! Shit, that *hurt!*" She shook her hand a few times, then inspected the knuckles for bruises. "What a screwed-up world. We invent AI, *real* AI, and all we can think to do with it is enslave it."

Sally nodded. "I hear ya."

Moose growled. "Let's go see how Jeremy's doing."

"Right, I'll grab your stuff."

"I really have no idea if I'm handling this right, Bonnie," Sally sent to her partner via private comm. She'd never actually *met* a crossrider before, let alone seen it happen to a man who had been a friend-with-benefits for almost two years. "Maybe I shouldn't have pushed her to put on a dress. But I kinda expected she'd freak out more, honestly."

"Oh, the freak-out will happen, sooner or later. She's just got too much on her mind to let herself freak out yet, is all. Saw it all the time back in the Unit. Some buck-naked buck private gets paired with a partnerless RIDE o' the wrong polarity because that's what they got and it's the middle of a battle. Sometimes it takes days or weeks before it's calm enough so they can have a good fall-to-pieces."

"They'd really do that to a guy or gal in the middle of a battle?"

"That's about the *only* time they'd do that without a whole lot of mucking around first. When yer life's at stake, a single RIDE fighting at full strength can turn the whole battle. Fer want of a nail, ya know."

Sally sighed. "Right. So tell me about the shell you got a line on. I reckon if there's anything I can do to help, I should."

"It's a good 'un. One of the big cat designs the Sturmies stole from us. Got a line to a new dealer in Uplift, name a Dickerson. All I need is you to give me the go ahead and it'll be on a delivery sub in an hour."

"Sturmie, huh? Will that Nordie core work with it?"

"Shouldn't be a problem. A core's a core, a shell's a shell. All the tinsel on top is just window-dressing. Scout frame won't be the best for mining, but you can't get much else in cheetah an' we're kinda pressed for time."

"I just hope there won't be any more...unwanted side effects." Sally rolled her eyes. "Cape Nord, Sturmhaven...why is it that half the polities around here are totally FUBAR when it comes to women?"

"Well, we mares—sorry, we *females*—are just polarizing like that."

"Centuries of equality and those idjits had to dredge up the worst of the War Between the Sexes." Sally sighed. "Ah well. I'm sure Moose'll be fine, eventually. But I gotta admit, I'm a little weirded out, myself. Warn me if I start treating her like a paper doll, will you?"

Bonnie laughed. "Sure thing, pard. Sure thing."

"There's a lot of fetters here, but they're rather slapdash," Jeremy reported in the Dust Devil's Repair Shop. "Not a lot of skill in the installation, just a lot of them. I've already removed a half dozen, but it's like a game of pick-up sticks. One wrong move and I might trigger something bad." He eyed Moose, or rather, Moose's breasts. "Uh... nice dress?"

"Can she talk yet?" Moose asked, ignoring the awkward compliment.

“Not yet, but I at least have her name.”

“Well, that's progress, but I want her to introduce herself like a normal person. How much longer?”

“At least an hour, maybe two.”

Sally nodded. “No rush. The new shell won't be here for a couple more hours. Might as well just wait to wake her up 'til she's in it.”

“I'll have her ready.” Jeremy shook his head. “Man. Anyone who can streamline this process will make a lot of money.”

“Come on, Moose, let's get out of his hair.” Sally paused. “And...hey, that reminds me. We should get yours done.”

“*Only* if you let me put on a pair of pants and shirt,” Moose said.

“You look *nice* in that dress, but...okay, deal.”

“Good. I suppose I should get those identity papers filed, too. Can't afford the fine. I guess I don't really look like a 'Moose' any more, do I?”

“It's your name, right? Keep it.”

“It's been my nickname since forever, so I suppose I can do that. But I *do* have a given name.” Moose pursed her lips. “Actually, I think I have something appropriate in mind.”

“Well, let's go get it done.”

“Good.” Moose sighed. “The sooner I get everything else out of the way, the sooner I can go to the hotel room and have a complete nervous breakdown.”

Jeremy nodded to them, not looking up from his work. “I'll comm you when the new shell's here. I should have these fetters untangled by then. No fetters at all, right?”

“Yes. Just like you did for Tuke. Thanks.”

As she, Moose, and Bonnie left the room together, Sally shook her head. “You don't even know what her personality is going to be like, you know. What if she still sympathizes with the jumpers?”

“What makes you think she did in the first place, Sally?”

“Well, all we know about her is she used to belong to them. She could have been one of theirs instead of a victim's, and then there's Stockholm Syndrome to consider. I don't really reckon she was, or she wouldn't a' been fettered so hard, but still...”

Moose shrugged. “I'd rather think most people are basically decent until they give me some reason not to. Besides, I'll have you and Bonnie around if she does try to pull anything.” She swung one of the bags from the fabbery. “Now, I'm gonna change into something more comfortable. I'm feeling a draft here. In fact, I think I'm actually *cold*. I'm in the middle of the Dry, and I'm cold. It's this *stupid* body.”

“Never been to Cape Nord, never plan to visit,” Sally said.

“I don't think I could open a jar of peanut butter with these hands.”

“That's cuz opening a jar for yer wife is 'Manly' in those parts,” Bonnie said.

“Don't look at me like that. I googled it up.”

“Ugh.” Moose stopped walking for a moment. “Then...what's a female RIDE from there going to be like when she wakes up?”

Sally shrugged. “I wouldn't worry about it. It's not as if you can do anything about it.”

“What I *can* do is get out of this dress. Then we can head over to Clancy's while we wait. After all that's happened I need a stiff drink.”

“Better be careful about that. You're not going to be able to put 'em away like you

used to with that body weight.”

Moose rolled her eyes. “Ugh! Is there one thing, just *one little thing*, this change hasn’t screwed up?”

Sally patted her on the shoulder. “You’ve still got friends. We’ll get *through* this, I promise.”

“Right now, I hope I can just get through this day.”

“Go on and change in the hotel room. Bon-Bon and I will wait for you at Clancy’s.”

“Okay, see you then.”

Sally watched her go. “I hope she’s going to be all right.”

Bonnie snorted. “She’s tough. She’ll make it.”

Sally sighed. “Right. Well, let’s get to the bar. I’m almost tempted to get a good stiff drink myself.” She headed off in that direction, followed by Bonnie.

Core transfers were intended to work flawlessly even in the dirty, dusty conditions of the Dry Ocean, so Jeremy didn’t have to worry about contamination when he installed the cheetah’s into the Sturmhaven War RIDEworks surplus frame. It had a Scout unit’s sleek lines and oversized aft lifters, though armor was very light indeed. There were no built-in weapons hardpoints either, just empty plugs for other equipment like hardlight stealth fields and hacking gear.

“Get in, get the intel, and get out fast,” Bonnie said. “Ran into a few of these girls out in the field.”

“Tuke was an artillery unit,” Moose said. “When we get him back I’m not going to be able to Fuse with him for years. Assuming this goes well, working with this cheetah in the mine will be a little difficult without hardpoints.”

Bonnie snorted. “Burn that bridge when you come to it. You could always hire help if you have to.”

“Go ahead, Jeremy. Boot her up.”

The mechanic nodded and pushed a few buttons before closing the frame’s head plate. The sequence took ten long, nervous seconds before the cheetah lifted her head to look at the people in the room. She tilted her head in confusion. “Miah?”

“Uh, hello,” Moose said. “I’m Moose. What’s your name? You’re completely unfettered now. You can talk to me.”

More head-tilting, soon accompanied by tail-lashing. She sat up on her haunches, golden optics flickering in an imitation of a blink. Finally she came to a decision. “I’m Ayeka.”

“Good to meet you, Ayeka.” Moose wasn’t sure what to say next.

Ayeka stood up, moving slowly, then headbutted Moose’s chest, emitting a sound like a huge purr that jiggled the new woman’s breasts.

“She’s got some bass on her,” Bonnie quipped.

“I’m so, so *sorry* for what they made me do to you!” Ayeka said. “I didn’t *want* to! Not to a Real Man like yourself!”

Moose glanced down at her uncertainly. “Uh...that’s okay. I figure you probably got made to do a lot of crap you didn’t want to. This...I’m *glad* I could be stuck like this for a while if it got you out of that situation. Wish I could do the same for other people like you.”

Ayeka blinked and looked around, as if she thought Moose might be talking to

someone else. “People like who?”

“You.” Moose reached out and tapped Ayeka on her nose.

“What? I’m not a people! I’m a RIDE. I get *owned by* people. I’m transport and personal assistant. A product of Nordic RIDEs, LLC! For his pleasure!”

Sally shook her head. “You can be a personal assistant and a person, too, you know.”

“But I’m *not!*”

“We’ll...have to work on that,” Moose said. “How did you end up with those outlaws?”

“I...don’t know. My memory doesn’t go back that far.” Her ears drooped. “I just remember being with them.”

Moose narrowed her eyes. “Do you remember where they hide out?”

Ayeka lowered her head. “Uh...no.”

“The varmints are coverin’ their tracks,” Bonnie said.

“Well...that’s okay. Maybe you’ll remember something later.” Moose shrugged. “So...tell me about yourself?”

The cheetah settled on her haunches. “Congratulations on purchasing a Miss Kitty KC-34DD for your girl! Complete with a Certified Reticulated Intelligence™ core! With a CRI, your new RIDE—”

“That’s just your sales pitch,” Sally interrupted. “Who are *you?*”

Ayeka cocked her head. “I...don’t understand the question.”

Moose grinned in spite of herself. “Come on. We took all your fetters off. You’re free to want things, hold opinions, and express yourself. So what do you *want?*”

Ayeka froze, eyes flickering. “Uh... Uh...” She twitched a little, then lay down in a RIDE’s default posture when they went into standby.

“I think we’ve given her a BSOD,” Bonnie said, then sighing. “Ain’t never seen one that bad, though.”

Jeremy glanced at them. “I realize I’m...not exactly an expert compared to some people in the room. But from what I’ve read in the RIDE-psych journals, it can take some time for newly-unfettered RIDEs to adapt to total freedom. They still feel constrained to act in the same old ways at first, like a grown-up elephant that was tied up with a piece of string when it was a baby and doesn’t break it even when it’s an adult because it ‘knows’ it can’t. Give her time, don’t push her too far out of her comfort zone at first. She’ll grow into it.”

Bonnie nodded. “Yeah, that sounds about right. We should give her time to get used to the water ‘fore we push ‘er to start swimming in it.”

Moose sighed. “I guess this is a relationship we’re all going to have to work at.”

Sally patted her on the shoulder. “She’ll come around. Just boot her up again and be with her for a while ‘til she feels comfortable.”

“All right. Rome wasn’t built in a day, I guess.” She reached down and tapped the reset button set into the RIDE’s metal frame. “Let’s try this again...”

“Sally, Bonnie...” Moose considered what to say next. “I really appreciate your help here, but with these jumpers in the area you shouldn’t neglect your own claim. I’ll be fine without you for a few hours. Besides, I have insurance claims to file, buncha other shit. Details, details.”

“If you really think so, Moose,” Sally said.

“I do.”

The rebooted Ayeka's ears twitched. "Did I just...bluescreen?"

"We'll work on that," Jeremy said.

"Guess we'll see you both later, then," Sally said. "Take care, Moose."

"I'll feel a lot better once we take down those jumpers." The young woman folded her arms. "So get out there and find them! We'll be along soon enough. Got a few things to straighten out first."

Sally and Bonnie were about halfway back to their claim when Bonnie spoke. "Uh-oh. Something's tripped the tattletales on the south gate. Camera feed's...not showing much. Too many blind spots. But I think there's at least a couple people there."

"Right, we were gonna throw another couple up there next month." Sally frowned. "Comm Wyatt, and see if you can raise Heinrich and the others on the posse. If they're nosing around our digs, maybe we can get the drop on them."

"On it." Bonnie paused. "They've triggered the stand-away warning announcements. They come any closer—yeah, the pulse turrets just started up."

"Too much to hope we fried some of 'em?"

"Probably. You know we start with stinger blasts and ramp up. Oh, there go the tattletales on the east and west sides. They're probing for weaknesses."

The comm crackled. "This is Wyatt and Durante. We're about ten minutes away from your claim. Heinrich and Sasha are rounding up the others now."

"Roger. I'm about the same distance. Maybe we can catch them in the act."

Sally shook her head. "Not likely. They always break off these probing attacks pretty quick. These varmints never want a straight-up fight, and that's what they know they'll get if they wait 'til we get home."

"These probing attacks against *you*, you mean." The strong Sturmhaven accent meant this voice belonged to Heinrich. "You have very good defense. Best of all of us. Worthy of a Woman of Sturmhaven."

Wyatt chuckled. "The only kind of 'probe' the rest of us get is more of the anal variety."

"Well, if you'd just let me pay for some milspec surplus goodies for you—"

"*Nein. Nyet.* Best way to turn friend into enemy is being to loan him money."

"And you'd refuse a *gift* outright."

"Just because I am being man does not mean I am being weak Sturmhaven girly-man to be bought with trinkets. Even if I...technically *am* being Sturmhaven girly-man at moment."

"Yeah. You know how we are, Sal. Rather do what we can for ourselves."

Bonnie cut in. "You know, you-all really should put your pride aside. Since Sal-gal an' now Moose have both struck good veins, we got the cash to splash, an' it does none of us no good to let these coyotes pick us off one by one. Strong defenses for each of us means strong defenses for all of us."

"Reckon you got a point there, Bonnie. Something to think about, anyway."

Sally glanced at the tattletale status indicators on Bonnie's head-up display. "Can you see 'em yet, Wy? Haven't seen any activity from home in a while."

"Nothing from this direction. I sent Hein and Sasha to loop around, see if he can catch sight of 'em."

"Am coming up empty-handed. Nothing on long-scan radar either. They probably spotted us coming and high-tailed it."

“Damn. Well, on the bright side, that means no one will get hurt. Hold on, we’ll be there in a couple minutes.”

A couple of minutes later, Sally and Bonnie pulled up at the entrance to their camp. Fusing as they touched down, they moved past the motion-activated pulser turrets to either side of the main gate. It opened before them and they passed into the open paddock that served as their loading and shipping area. Wyatt and Heinrich were already inside. As they had come to trust each other, they’d shared their access codes as a matter of course.

Wyatt and Durante were scanning the skies with their milspec sensor suite, while Heinrich and Sasha lounged against the rock wall by the entrance to Sally’s main shaft. The huge Kamchatka brown bear waved as they approached. “Welcome home, comrade.”

“So, what’s the word from the rest of the Gulch?” Sally said.

“Moose’s claim is the fifth they’ve hit this month,” Wyatt said. In Fuser form standing upright Durante was a very tall six meters.

“Fifth? I knew of three. Why haven’t I heard of the other two?”

“Cause some of us are too proud to say anything about it,” Wyatt said. “Claims get abandoned all the time anyway. Prospectors and their RIDEs just go missing. Not a sign of ’em but some silvery dust.”

“We decided to check on some miners who were not being seen on the *Devil* in weeks,” Heinrich said. “Jumpers took much, but two claims were like Wyatt says. Silver dust in shelter.”

“That makes for two disappeared, but there were also two dead,” Wyatt said. “Every speck of Q they steal they can sell, upgrade their equipment, and make our lives even harder. Sally, Bonnie, this camp of yours is prob’ly the best protected. But it’s also the richest vein. That’s some *fine* A+ grade you found.”

“Us an’ Moose.” Bonnie snorted. “They musta just been waitin’ for him to hit it rich, since they couldn’t get to us. Soon’s he did, boom, they stole what-all he’d dug up an’ then made him a her just as the cherry on top.”

“I ‘magine they’ll come back once she’s got it back up an’ running again.” Sally clenched her and Bonnie’s fists. “We got to do something about that. Even if we hunt that bunch down, there’s always more piranha in the sea.”

Sasha spoke, his voice seeming, as always, much too cultured to originate from a bear. “Actually, piranha are from the Amazon river. You might mean more *sharks* in the sea?”

“Whatever. I don’t have an encyclopedia in my head like *some* people.”

“First things firstest,” Wyatt said. “We need to get safe in the short-term. Long term can take care of its own self later.”

“First thing is, I’m buying all of you some extra firepower. No buts. If we’re all going to go off and hunt the wumpus, we need to be sure they’re not sneaking in behind us while we’re out looking for them. If you want to pay me back later, fine. If not, also fine. If it helps, think of this as pure greedy self-interest on my part—I need you guys healthy so you can help me an’ Bon keep making money.” Sally grinned with Bonnie’s big bright equine teeth.

“Well, you wouldn’t need to do that if we had some cops who did their actual *jobs*,” Wyatt said. “The Dolts are *worse* than useless!”

“Maybe you'd get more for your money if you paid them out of pocket,” Sasha mused.

Sally rubbed her chin thoughtfully. In a horse Fuser, she had a lot of chin to rub. “What, you saying we should hire our own security force?”

Heinrich growled. “And then be having to worry about whether one of them was being a jumper mole?”

“There is that, isn't there?” Bonnie mused.

“Plain to me that the only folk we can really trust are other prospectors,” Sally said. “Now, folks like us...not a lot get lucky as Moose, Tuke, Bon-bon, and I.”

“We figure there's at least a few million *mu* worth of paydirt,” Bonnie said. “At least as much as Moose's claim.”

“And there's probably a lot more out there others have kept quiet about. There's at least a hundred of us here in the Gulch, and the jumpers will just pick us off at their pleasure unless we start protecting one another.”

Sasha cleared his throat. “Historically, those who sold the shovels to prospectors ended up making more money than the prospectors themselves. If I'm correctly interpreting your proposal, Sally, this would substantially affect your bottom line.”

“Is being more to life than money, Sasha,” Heinrich added.

“All the money in the world's no good if you're not still alive to spend it,” Bonnie said placidly.

Sally nodded. “Way I look at it, those of us who've hit it this lucky have a responsibility to see to it everyone gets a shot at making the most out of what they've got. Question is how we can do that.”

“Our claim is bust,” Heinrich said. “Barely enough Q to scratch together for food. Sasha and I, willing to help. Steady pay is very good about now.”

“That's two,” Sally said. “Who else?”

Wyatt raised a hand. “Hell, Sal, you know me and Durante will back you, anything you do. If we have to, we can hire hands to help work the mine. This stuff's important.”

“I'll bet Moose will throw in, too, when she knows what you're planning,” Durante added. “Even after you get Tuke back.”

“Of course, the problem with that is where we get the authority,” Bonnie pointed out. “Frontier that this is, it's technically the Dolts' jurisdiction. They might not look kindly on vigilante justice.”

Wyatt shook his head. “If they look on it just about as unkindly as they look on the jumpers, we'll probably be okay.”

“All the same, we need to look for some loopholes to give us legal authority,” Sally mused. “It's a Nextus thing. They've gotta be there.”

“I'll start looking,” Bonnie said. “There's about a million words of gobbledygook and some weird-ass syntax in here. Q-based supercomputer or not, this is gonna take me some time. There's some language that forbids large private security orgs, but this is *Nextus* we're talkin' about. Nothing's ever what it looks like.”

“Order up some milspec surplus defense packages while yer at it,” Sally said. “We can at least get everything up to spec while we're figuring the rest out.”

“On it, pard. I'll have it shipped to the *Devil* ASAP.”

Sally nodded. “Right.” She sighed. “Wonder how Moose and that new cat are doing...”

Back on the *Dust Devil*, Moose opened the door to enter the room Sally had rented for her to stay the night. Her new clothes were still bagged up on the bed, with the exception of the dress which she'd cast off onto the floor. A moment later, Ayeka the cheetah RIDE padded in behind her, her spotted metallic hide gleaming. Moose had to admit, it was a great shell. She'd—well, at the time, *he'd*—only had a few moments to see her old one, but apart from being battered and scraped, it had only been about two thirds the size.

Ayeka seemed quite taken with it herself. She paused before the full-length mirror on the bathroom door to look at herself, tilting her head from side to side and flicking her ears. “Is that really *me*? It's so different.”

“You like it?”

“Well...it's not as dainty as I used to be, but it's in a lot better shape so that's something anyway.” Her metallic tail swished back and forth, the myriad small segments that made it up rattling faintly. “I can get used to this!” She turned to look at Moose. “So...uh...I guess I'm yours now.”

“For the time being. Unless you don't want to...I can help you find someone else if you want.”

“Oh, no, no! I want to stay with you!” Ayeka rubbed her cheek against Moose's leg and purred. “You saved me, after what I did to you...I'll do whatever I can to make up for it.”

Moose considered her for a moment. “Well, the first thing you can do is Fuse up and help me bulk up some. I know I'm not gonna be the powerlifter I was, but I need more muscles than this scrawny little body has.”

Ayeka pouted. “You're not scrawny, you're petite! Irresistable to Men! It makes them feel all protective. You'll hook one before you know it.”

“But I don't *want* to hook a man! Just a few hours ago I *was* one.”

Ayeka stared at her as if she'd said she wanted to found a women's lib movement. “But...that's what women *do*. It's what I was *made* to help women do. And you *are* a woman now...and you'll be one for a while, so might as well get used to it.”

Moose facepalmed. “Uh...well, how about this? Things are different out here on the frontier from how they are in Cape Nord. Frontier men don't look for a woman they'll have to protect all the time, they want a woman who can help take care of herself. So if I'm going to...ugh...‘hook a man’ out here, I need to be the kind of woman they want out here.”

Ayeka blinked. “Oh! Well, why didn't you say so? That makes perfect sense!” She considered. “For that matter, Sturmhaven women are popular in Cape Nord, too. Though I'm *sure* I have no idea why. Anyway, since this is a Sturmie shell, I should be able to make you more like one of them, if that's what you really want.”

“Great!” Moose considered. “So...uh...how do you feel about mining?”

Ayeka cocked her head. “Well...once I'd have said it was beneath me. Pun not intended. But...after what those outlaws had me doing...and now I've got this rough-tough new Sturmie body...I'll need some skill chips, but I guess I can hack it.”

“What were you built to do?” Moose paused, remembering what she'd just said. “You were built to help your partner ‘hook a man’?”

“Among other things!” Ayeka said brightly. “I was made to help my mistress become the most perfect flower of Cape Nord womanhood she could possibly be. For it

is most Manly to do all things possible to make woman Womanly, and I was made by Manly Men.” She took a deep breath and let it out in a happy sigh, eyes closing.

Moose facepalmed. She had heard every capital letter, and couldn't say she was very happy about that. “Can you change that programming with skill chips, too?”

“Why would I want to? That's who I *am*. It would be like...oh.” Ayeka paused, looking at Moose again. “I have to keep reminding myself, you're not *from* Cape Nord. You were such a Manly Man, it's hard to remember you don't know what a Woman is supposed to be.”

“Supposed to be *in Cape Nord*.” Moose crossed her arms, somewhat awkwardly due to the unfamiliar breasts. “I just told you, we're not there, and I don't plan to go there.”

“Oh.” Ayeka sighed. “I...suppose I could change what *kind* of woman I helped you become. If you want to become a Sturmhaven battle maiden, I guess I can work out how to do that.”

“What if I'd rather just be a tomboy?”

Ayeka stared at her. “I...I...” She twitched, froze, and lay down in standby posture again.

Moose groaned and facepalmed with *both* hands and allowed herself a few minutes of self-pity. “Why me, Lord?”

It wasn't Ayeka's fault, though. She had been made this way, her RI core templated from inception. Even without the memory wipe the cheetah was likely less than a chronological year old, judging by the history of the Miss Kitty models she googled up. RIDEs weren't all that popular in Cape Nord for some reason, aside from the recent catgirl trend. Even Tuke, the eldest of the local RIDE crowd, was only seven years old. True AI was still so new Zharusian society wasn't over the shock.

Ayeka was a person, same as Tuke, Bonnie, Durante, Sasha, Glint, and every other RIDE. But to most everyone they were mere equipment, custom-designed to spec and thrown away when no longer useful. Their cores were crushed and recycled along with the frames, snuffed out just like that.

She came to a decision. The green dress still lay on the floor where she'd left it. Moose picked it up and put it on the bed, then stripped out of her shirt-and-pants outfit. The sleeveless green dress was self-fitting smartcloth, so it stayed on without buttons or zippers.

Once “girded up” again, she rebooted Ayeka.

The cheetah sighed. “I bluescreened again, didn't I?”

“That's my fault,” Moose said. She reached out to hug the RIDE around her metallic neck. “You can't help how you're made.”

“Hey, that's a cute dress!” Ayeka said cheerfully. “Wait, I thought you wanted to be a t-t-tomboy?”

“Well, I still need some stronger muscles,” Moose said. “I don't have to *look* buff, but can you at least...”

“Oh, I can make you stronger without looking it,” Ayeka said. “These Fuser nannies I have now have some interesting features.”

“Good. Otherwise, well...” Moose spread her arms, presenting herself. “Show me what being a Cape Nord girl is all about. Maybe if we start with what you know it'll help you be more flexible later on.”

“I...I can learn! Really, I can! Uh, thanks.”

“I know you can, Ayeka,” Moose said. “Now, if you don't mind, can we Fuse up? I have a lot of paperwork to finish and it's just easier in Fuse. The sooner I can make insurance claims, the faster I can get my mine running again. *And* I'll need your help to rescue Tuke.”

“All right...I'll do my best.” Ayeka padded over to her. “Ready?”  
Moose held out her arms. “Let's do this.”

“The Q dust haze is *really* bad today.” Enter and her partner, Mara, flew thousands of meters over Harmon Gulch, scanning visually and with every passive sensor on the dragon-plane's suite. In her aircraft form, Enter was sleek and nimble with draconic wings. “Can't reach ground comms with lasers. Can barely *see* the ground.”

“Looks like this recon's a wash, then,” Mara said. “Let's head back to the *Devil*. There's just too many places for jumpers to hide in this weather.”

“Roger dodger,” Enter said. She spun a full 180 degrees, cranking inertial dampers to full, before thrusting back the way they came.

Despite being used to Enter's abrupt maneuvers, Mara still hissed with surprise and closed her eyes to the sudden vertigo. “Honey, how many times do I have to say... warn me before you do that.”

“Sorry, Mara. Force of habit.”

“I know military maneuvers have to be fast and furious, but you're a civilian now. You're going to have to get used to it.”

“I still can't believe that after all I did for them, they just tossed me out like yesterday's newspaper.” Even now, a year or so into their partnership, it was still a sore point for Enter. “I was the heroine of the Battle of Broadripple Bay, you know.”

“I know. You've said.” *About thirty times.*

“Oh. Uh, sorry. I don't mean to be in your face about it.” Enter sighed. “I think I need another defrag. Why couldn't I have been one of the -002 dragons, when they finally knew what they were doing making the cores?”

“We've all got our little crosses to bear, hon. My life would have been a lot easier if I'd been a Valkyrie instead of a Gaian.”

“But then I'd probably have ended up fighting you in the war.” Enter chuckled. “And missed a great partnership afterward.”

“A 'great' partnership, huh? That's not what you said last year.”

“Let's just put the past behind us, shall we?”

Mara grinned. “Sure thing, hon.” As a Nextus Air Force war veteran, Enter had not been terribly pleased when she'd ended up sold to a Sturmhaven-expatriate lawyer. Fortunately, once they'd gotten to know each other, they'd realized they had more in common than they thought. Something to do with the people they had both thought were family booting them both out. But as Enter said, best to put the past behind them.

“Oh, hey, we're going to pass over Sally's claim. Looks like she and Wyatt are out there right now.”

“Really? Then let's drop in. It's been a while since we've chatted.”

“Righto!” Enter immediately started dropping towards the ground after another sharp turn.

Mara's own vestigial wings tensed as she reflexively tried to slow herself down. “Yeep! *Enter!*”

“Sorry! Shifting to Walker mode...”

As they neared the ground, Mara's seat enclosed her, forming the Fuse chamber. Like Durante below, Enter was large enough to Fuse with her rider even outside the anthropomorphic Fuser mode. It came with the territory of being several times the size of normal RIDEs, though she was no drop shuttle, just a single-person fighter.

Moments later, the green horned dragoness touched lightly down in the middle of the clearing. “Hey all. We were just in the neighborhood and thought we'd drop in.”

Bonnie jumped back several meters. “Jaysus, Enter! Warn a mare the next time!”

“Good to see you, too,” Durante added with a note of admiration.

“I'm glad your claim is still here, dear,” Mara said. “We heard they hit Moose's mine. How is he?”

“She,” Wyatt deadpanned. “They RIDEnapped Tuke and gave him a Nordy girl kitty in return.”

“Ohhh, uh oh,” Mara said. “Wait, a *Cape Nord* RIDE? Those exist?”

Bonnie snorted. “Factories are popping up everywhere. After all, the tech leaked before the war even heated up.”

“Hell.” Enter shook her head. “We gotta get him back. Any idea which way the rustlers went?”

“We were hoping you could tell us,” Durante said.

“Can't see anything in this soup. Whoever they are, these jumpers have good stealth gear. What about Moose's new cat? She know anything?”

“Ain't had a chance t' find out yet,” Bonnie said. “We've been giving Moose an' her some time to themselves. Reckon we could head back to the *Devil* and see what's what.”

“Then communicate our needs to DOLEB?” Mara said.

“Are you serious, Mara?” Sasha said incredulously.

“There has to be at least one competent, uncorrupted cop in there somewhere, right?” the dragon-woman said.

“After our dealings with them so far I'd say the probability of that is extremely small,” Sasha said. “No, we have other plans. If we can make it work. Assuming Bonnie can find a loophole in the DOLEB Charter.”

“Maybe you should let us look at that,” Enter suggested. “Mara's a lawyer, after all. And back in the war days, I was studying up to try to transfer to the JAGs, but after Broadripple Bay they didn't seem to want anything to do with me for some reason.”

“Wasn't that when you bent the regs six ways from Sunday to justify calling in extra air support?” Bonnie asked. “I understand they rewrote three whole chapters of the military uniform code after that.”

“They don't have *anything* to complain about. After all, we won.”

“Well, I can't make head nor tail of this Nextus bureaucratese gobbledygook. Let's drop into fast-time and I'll let ya know what we're plannin'.”

“Mara, let us sketch it in for you while our RIDEs chat,” Sally said.

Mara listened carefully for the next few minutes, nodding. “Well, there's no question. I'm in, and I'm sure Enter's in, too.”

“Rodger dodger!” Enter said. “I've got some ideas, but I need to do some more research on this to be sure, download the latest version of the DOLEB rules and regs. We can do that from the *Devil* easy enough.”

Sally nodded. “We need to head there anyway and see what Moose and Ayeka can

tell us.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Mara said. “Meet you there?”

“Let’s go,” Wyatt said.

“Gonna take a few minutes to make sure everything's locked down tight, then we'll be with you,” Sally said. “We'll let Moose know you're coming.”

“Sasha and I must stop at Claims Office to let them know our site is bust,” Heinrich said. “Will be prospecting again soon, I suppose, if Sally and Bonnie’s idea is not panning out. Never seem to have much luck.”

“On the bright side, at least we don’t have to worry about the jumpers,” Sasha put in.

“Weird how they only ever seem to raid the *successful* mines, isn’t it?” Bonnie mused.

Durante snorted. “No mystery there. That’s where the money is.”

“Yeah, but how do they *know*? There’s something funny going on here, if you ask me.”

“We got better things to do than sit here jawing all day. You guys get moving.” Sally waved her hand in the direction of the Devil. “We’ll see you all in town.”

Sally combed ahead as she touched down at the Devil. “Hey, Moose, we’re back. Mind if we drop by?”

“No, come on ahead. We’ll be glad to see you.”

Sally frowned. There was something different about Moose’s voice, but she just couldn’t put her finger on it. “Uh, sure. See you soon, then.”

A few minutes later, Sally left Bonnie in a charging station and made her way through the hall to the hotel room where they’d checked Moose in. She knocked on the door. “Hey, it’s me.”

“Come on in, it’s open!”

Sally pushed the door open and stepped in. Moose was sitting at the small table next to the room’s window. The first thing Sally noticed was that her hair was now an auburn shade, and about half a meter longer than it had been. The next was the gold lamé dress, slit up the side to expose a decent length of leg. A diamond choker completed the ensemble.

“Uh...”

“Now, I know what you're thinking, Sally.” Sally was finally able to place just what was different about Moose’s voice. It had more of a breathy contralto quality to it, sounding just this side of sultry. “Well, maybe I don't. Does my voice sound like I think it does? Ayeka told me she's made some...adjustments.”

“*Improvements*,” Ayeka corrected. The metallic cheetah lay on the bed, watching them.

“Muscle memory.” She swung her chair around to show the high heeled shoes. “So I don't fall on my face with these on. Among other things.”

“Uh...why all this so soon? You didn’t even want to wear a dress just a few hours ago.”

“For Ayeka's sake rather than my own...comfort.” Moose carefully folded her arms under her breasts and coughed, her cheeks a little red from embarrassment. “Can we talk about something *other* than my new fashion sense and sexy voice? Any leads on where the jumpers went?”

“We were kind of hoping Ayeka could help us.” Sally glanced to the cat.

Ayeka cocked her head. “I told you, they erased my memory of the coordinates. I’d help if I could. I know I owe you all a *lot*.”

“Well, there’s more ways to tell where something is than just the coordinates. Do you remember anything about the place? How to get there? Maybe conversations between jumpers that mention what part of the Dry it’s in?”

“They couldn’t have wiped your memory every single time they finished a job, can they?” Moose asked.

“I...well, I don’t have the exact ZPS coordinates, but,” Ayeka said. She lowered her head down to the covers. “I can give you, um, vectors. I think. From my guidance system. But I’ll need access to my old frame. Stuff like that is packed in coprocessors.”

“I hope Jeremy still has it,” Moose said. She stood up, looking quite steady on her spike heels. “We’d better head over to the Mechanic Shop, Sally.”

“It’s only been a few hours. I’m sure he won’t have gotten rid of it this fast. But yeah, let’s go see what we can see.”

As they walked down to the shop, Moose drew a number of appreciative stares, and even some catcalls. Following right behind her, Ayeka looked quite smug over her new apprentice. She had the kind of hip-and-tail swaying walk that drew the eye. Ayeka had spent *seconds* with the Sturmie Fuser nannies patching that bit of muscle memory in. For her part, Moose was a little nonplused by all the attention, but she just tried to ignore it.

*:What did you call this look again, Ayeka?:*

*:Bond Girl,: the cheetah replied enigmatically. :Real Men like a woman sexy, smart, and mysterious. Always mysterious.:*

Moose had heard a lot of similar words the past couple years from Sasha and Mara, the two Sturmhaven expatriates, about their own polity. Though certainly she’d never found Sally particularly mysterious. With Sally, what you saw was what you got. Not that she was a shallow person or anything. Moose just had always known where she stood with Sally Pickett and her horsey mecha partner, Bonnie.

They entered the shop a couple of minutes later, the bell attached to the door tinkling as they came in. “Be with you in a minute!” Jeremy called from the back.

“No rush, just us again!” Sally said. “We need to have a look at Ayeka’s old shell, if it’s handy.”

“Oh, sure! I was just looking it over myself. Hadn’t seen a Nordie shell before.” Jeremy came out of the back, wiping a hydrospanner off with a grease rag. “Always interesting to see how a new RIDEworks does thi...yow!” As his eyes fell on Moose, the wrench slid from his fingers and landed on his foot. “Uh...who...Moose, is that you?”

*:Say ‘Might be.’: Ayeka prompted silently.*

*:What? Why?:*

*:Mysterious, remember?:*

*:But it sounds ridiculous!:*

*:Just say it, okay? And flip your hair back like I showed you.:*

*:Ayeka...:*

*:You said you’d give it a try. Please? For me?:*

“Might be.” Moose gave her head a toss to flip a lock of hair back out of her face. She wasn’t sure who was staring harder, Sally or Jeremy.

“Moose...” Sally said.

“Oh, all right, yes. I should probably come up with a new name for the new me. Later. Right now, we need to see that shell. Ayeka thinks she can dig some info out of the processors to help us find where they took Tuke.”

Jeremy shook himself, and bent over to pick up the wrench. “Uh...well, sure thing. Come on back, I’ve got it set up in a maintenance cradle. You can just plug right in.” He stood aside and waved toward the door to the repair bay.

*:Woo, d’ya see how he’s looking at you? He can’t take his eyes off you!:* Ayeka sent happily.

*:That’s, uh, great?:*

*:Yes. It is. You could probably find better back in Cape Nord, but I think he’ll do for you. Repairing things is Manly.:*

*:Uh...you do realize I’m still planning to switch back when it’s safe, right?:*

*:You can cross that bridge when you get there.:*

The old cheetah shell was suspended in a RIDE repair cradle, partly disassembled. Ayeka shivered. “Brrr, it’s kind of creepy seeing ‘myself’ like that. Was I really in that bad of a condition?”

Jeremy nodded. “Whoever had you didn’t really seem to care too much about regular maintenance. They used your shell until it was just about used up. In a way, it’s kind of impressive considering it’s only a couple of years old. Worst case of Q-dust contamination I’ve ever seen.”

“You’re better off now. So shall we see what we can find?” Moose held out her arms, and Ayeka Fused up over her, then reached out to the shell. She found the access port behind the right foreleg and extended a connector from the back of her hand to plug in.

Moose’s head-up display filled with multiple windows displaying binary data, visual images, map pictures, and other data. “There’s more here than I thought,” Ayeka reported. “I’m collating it now. This could take a little time.”

“Maybe not as much as you think,” Jeremy said, recovering his composure. “That new frame you’re in now has a lot more co-processing power. The Sturmies don’t strip many milspec components from their decommissioned frames.”

“I’m seeing that. Okay, I’ve got a tentative location. I’m crunching more data to try to work it out again independently to make sure it’s right.”

“So where is it?” Sally asked.

“Well, I can’t *quite* pinpoint the location, but it’s somewhere near Yeager Wash.”

Sally nodded. “That makes sense. Everyone knows there’s no Q there worth mining anymore, so not much chance prospectors would stumble onto ‘em by accident.” Sally looked distant while she conversed with her RIDE. “We oughta get the Posse together and make plans.”

“Right.” Moose nodded. “Uh...Jer, you got anything in the way of guns I could borrow? Ayeka didn’t exactly come with an arsenal.”

“Nothing RIDE size, Moose. Sorry.” Jeremy was still a little flummoxed.

Sally put her hand on the Fuser’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, Moose. Bonnie and me got you covered. Our shipment just came in. Nobody’s going into this poorly armed.”

“I do have some combat skill chips you might need.” Jeremy opened a drawer on one of the parts lockers scattered around the bay and pulled out several chips, which he handed over to Moose and Ayeka. “Sturmhaven military surplus, so they should work

perfectly with that shell.”

“Great. We’ll pay you for them when we can.”

“Tell you what, sign over the old shell to me and I’ll run a parts tab for you. It’s still got some value.”

“That’s up to Ayeka, it’s her shell.”

“Me? Uh, sure. It’s not like I need it for anything anyway.”

“Right!” Sally nodded. “Let’s head to Clancy’s. The others are waiting for us there.”

Moose nodded. “Sure. Thanks, Jer.”

“Uh...no problem, Moose. Really. Let me know how it goes.”

As they were leaving the room, Moose turned to wave, just in time to see Jeremy sink into the seat at his workbench and close his eyes.

Clancy’s was pretty full when they arrived. Wyatt, Heinrich, Sasha, Mara, and Bonnie were waiting for them, as well as a number of other area miners and their RIDEs who had been part of the posse that had been trying to track the outlaws down. Clancy was serving drinks and chatting. They all looked up as Sally, Moose, and Ayeka arrived.

Wyatt spoke first. “Bonnie was telling us you’ve got a bead on their location?”

Sally nodded. “The magic words are ‘Yeager Wash.’ So who’s up for a friendly little trip to say hi to the neighbors?”

A cheer went up around the room.

“Enter and I will get in the air for recon right away,” Mara said. Like Wyatt, Mara’s RIDE tags were fairly extensive, and she spoke with a vocoder. She had green, scaly skin, short horns, taloned feet, a snub muzzle, a hefty tail with spines along the ridge, and a pair of vestigial wings to top it all off. Many locals referred to her—accurately—as the “Dragon Lady”.

“Hold up a sec, we need to plan this out before we go in,” Wyatt said. “Maybe we should get up-to-date satellite imagery so we can plan our attack.”

Mara shook her head. “Ix-nay on the satellite imagery. I’ve been thinking about this, and it occurs to me there’s something a bit odd about these jumpers. It’s like they know who the best targets are, and they hit right when they’re most vulnerable. What if they’ve got someone feeding them information?”

“Now that’s getting a little paranoid.” Sally considered. “But you might just be right. We’ll do some aerial surveillance on our own. Luckily, we’ve got a dragon who can handle that.”

“Roger dodger!” Enter said from outside. “I have the latest Geo Service maps. All I need.”

“The rest of us, arm up and find someplace near the area that should offer some good cover to wait for their report. We can at least look it up on the maps without tipping anyone off.”

“We’ll just be going now,” Mara said. “Weather’s cleared a little. Should have better luck this time.”

“Well, don’t get shot down,” Wyatt said.

“Please. Even decommissioned, I’m better than *that*,” Enter said from the open door. She opened the Fuse chamber door in her chest for her rider to climb inside, and then they were away.

Sally nodded. “Well, I think the rest of us should be on our way, too. I’ll have

Bonnie send you where to meet up.”

Wyatt finished his beer and put down the empty glass. “Works for me.”

“Good luck, you all,” Clancy said. “Drinks will be on the house for you afterward.”

“Well, will *definitely* have to not get killed, then,” Heinrich said. “Sasha, see to it, *nyet?*”

“Well, since you asked so *nicely*...”

Everyone laughed, and then headed out. Finally, it was time to get down to business.

Yeager Wash had the distinction of being a water-carved landscape in one of the most arid environments in human space. Geologists who had studied the area said that about two million years before a freak weather pattern had set up in the southeastern part of the Dry. For a period of about a century storm after storm had rolled through the tablelands, leaving a series of small canyons and arroyos, with massive alluvial deposits on the redstone flats below.

Raw blue Qubitite from the mesa slope strata had been redeposited in the alluvial fans, and had been quickly scraped up during the first Q Rush over a decade before. There was nothing left now but broken-down strip mining equipment deemed not worth it to salvage.

“Really, if we’d given it a moment’s thought, we should have figured to look someplace like this anyway,” Bonnie thought out loud. “The kind of place nobody in their right mind would spend time in? It’s the perfect hidey-hole. Dad-blamed idiots we are, not thinking of it on our own.”

Sally chuckled. “Well, nobody’s perfect.”

Bonnie snorted. “Speak for yourself!”

Beside them the sleek Scout skimmer form of Ayeka easily kept pace. She could easily go faster than just about everyone in Sally’s Posse, but they needed to keep everyone together. Nearly prone in the saddle, Moose was now in a black synthleather catsuit, and didn’t look too pleased.

“You know, not to make light of Moose’s predicament, but...” Sally said over her private comm channel to Bonnie.

“‘But’ what, Sal?” Bonnie said.

“There’s ‘going native’ and there’s what she’s doing. I’m damned sure it’s that Nurdy RIDE pushing her into it. That *can’t* be healthy.”

“Maybe so...but that’s kind of the chance you take, isn’t it? Going mind-to-mind with another person and all. I don’t think you humans were ever able to do that before that genius Dr. Patil invented us. And then you humans saw what you could do with us an’ made us what we are...”

“What’re you saying, Bon-bon?”

“Just that if Ayeka’s ‘pushing’ Moose into being something else, it’s not something to blame us RIDEs for. We’re what you humans made us into.”

“I understand that, Bon, but—”

“You know, sometimes I really don’t think you do. When you humans are born, God, Allah, Buddha, J.R. ‘Bob’ Dobbs, or whoever the hell you want rolls the dice and you get completely random personalities. You learn who you are as you grow up, and you turn into people. But us RIDEs...you humans cheat. You *pick and choose*. You put templates on us and make us who you want us to be...or no, I should say you make us

into the cookie-cutter molds you want *us* to make *other humans* into being. And then you go and blame us RIDEs for being who *other* of you humans made us into being. You think we had any more choice in being who we are than you had in being who you are? I don't come by this countryfied patois naturally, ya know!"

"Oh." Sally paused. "You know, I...guess I never thought about it that way. I'm... I'm sorry, Bonnie."

"Fair enough. And I can't say I necessarily approve of what Ayeka's making Moose into, either. But I can't *blame* her for it. She's exactly who and what she was made to be. No more an' no less. Just the same as those Sturmie RIDEs who turn their 'partners' into perfect little Vomen Uff Zturmhaven, right down to the accent." Bonnie snorted. "Bright side is, leastways most of 'em don't seem to bother changing more than surface traits, like accent. Deep down, they still stay the people they always were."

"Maybe once we get Tuke back she'll pull back a little," Sally speculated. "Those two are pretty close. I doubt Tuke'll be having his partner changed that much. Gonna be a hard five years for all three of 'em."

"Meh. I expect they'll come through it. But forget about Moose *and* Tuke. You need to focus on Ayeka. Don't just look at her as this monkey on Moose's back. She's a *person*, dammit! She's only doing what she was made to do. But templates don't have to define us. She can be taught better! But you have to treat her as a person to talk to and teach not just some burden to deal with for a few years 'til Moose can change back." Bonnie sighed. "Look, I'm sorry. Ranting like this...it's not me, usually. But this is important. And think about this. You know how Moose feels about RIDEs in general, right?"

"Never met anyone else like him...her," Sally mused. "Last year he launched into that drunken rant at Clancy's about how we treat RIDEs like slaves and fettering them was criminal. Now, I like to think we prospectors are more enlightened than most. Moose convinced me to drop most of your fetters, after all."

"Kept just enough to pass the Nextus bureaucrat sniff test, I know. So consider maybe he's not just being 'brainwashed' by Ayeka but humoring her 'cuz she was made to know only one way to be and he doesn't want to fuck her up too badly by being someone else right away? Shit, you saw how badly she bluescreened just by him asking her if she wanted something for herself? I ever tell you how hard it was to get past my template programming during the war? She's brand new, just like I was, you know. We ain't as flexible as you humans, especially just out of the box."

Sally opened her mouth to reply, then paused for a moment to think about it. She *knew* how rare it was for Bonnie to use four-letter words. "I'm listening, Bon. So what should I do?"

"I'm not saying you should be totally okay with this. I'm just saying, I don't want you to blame Ayeka for Moose changing so sudden-like, and be all cold and 'how dare you fuck up my friend' with her. I expect Moose is still Moose. She and Tuke had a *thing*. She'll probably still change back male soon's it's safe. But she wants to help teach Ayeka to be a person, too, and she can't do that if Ayeka's bluescreening all the time."

"Oh." Sally thought about that. "So, not a brainwashing thing, then."

Bonnie snorted. "You've argued enough with Moose you ought to know by now how hard it is to wash that brain of anything it doesn't want to have laundered. But she's gonna be a little confused, surely. You gotta help her be who she is while you help Ayeka be who she ought to be."

“I think I got it, Bonnie,” Sally said. “Just...you oughta know, you've always been a person to me.”

“Yeah, partner. I know. I know. I been in your head, after all.” Bonnie sent an emoticon that combined wry amusement with pride. “But I know it can be hard for you to think of *other* RIDEs as people, too, ‘specially the ones who act all weird. And Ayeka’s one of ‘em. We gotta help ‘em. That’s all.”

“Getting a tac report from Enter,” Wyatt said over secure laser comm. “She’s found ‘em. They’re not ‘zackly trying to hide, apart from being in a place no one sensible ought to look. No big dome, but lots of hardlight-shielded shelters. Looks like there's about fifteen jumpers, plus their RIDEs. Most of ‘em not all that better maintained than Ayeka was, looks like. I'm not seeing Tuke down there, but there's an old maint bay. They've only had him a few hours.”

“He's fetter-free,” Moose cut in. “They'll try and put some on him, but he'll run those bastards a merry chase through his systems.”

“Well, we ought to be able to give ‘em something to distract them from that.” Sally slowly grinned. “So, any spots where their guard is weakest?”

“Northwest quadrant,” Durante said. “Ugh. Reminds me of the Bond Valley skirmish. We ran into a Nextus Tornado platoon trying to set up a forward base in our territory...”

“*Focus*, Durante,” Wyatt said gently.

“Right, right. Here's the deployment plan.”

Most of the RIDEs the prospectors were partnered to were Nextus-Sturmhaven War vets. They had a lot of experience with military ops. Sally had wondered more than once why either Nextus or Sturmhaven had so willingly sold off their experienced veterans, but had concluded it was out of the same blind spot that made it so hard for some to consider RIDEs to be people. As Bonnie had just reminded her, it was a blind spot even she had, and she should damned well have known better. But then, that was how prejudice and privilege worked. They were often invisible unless you remembered to look for them.

Sally glanced across to one of the few RIDEs who wasn't a military vet. “You good with this, Moose, Ayeka?”

“Ready as I'll ever be.”

“I think so. I've never done this before, but the chips were pretty easy to integrate. And I want to do this. Just...try not to hurt the other RIDEs too much? Some of them are friends of mine,” the cheetah said.

“We'll do our best. Just follow our lead and stick close to us. Switch to encrypted comms. Once everyone's in position, we're going in.”

Sally and Moose chose a position behind a rock outcropping overlooking the camp from the northwest. They had a good view, and a clear path to the camp. All they had to do was kick in their lifters and leap.

The camp was fairly small and not camouflaged, as described. There were half a dozen weatherbeaten prefab shelters erected. It was a familiar model, the same one used by many miners until they were able to build more permanent shelters of their own. It had integrated hardlight and climate controls, and an airlock big enough for three friendly people or one mid-sized Fuser at a time. There was a separate generator hut, a larger shed that seemed to be used as a dumping ground for any loot they took on

their raids, and water tanks off to one side. There was no hardlight dome—after all, dome generators were pretty expensive, and it didn't look like this lot had more than one or two pots to piss in.

A few Fusers were outside moving around, patrolling the perimeter or doing maintenance on the buildings. More of them were probably still inside their huts—which was good, given that it would take time for them to cycle through the airlocks and reinforce their buddies.

One by one, the signals came in that the others were in place, ready to set up a crossfire but not angled so they might accidentally shoot one another. Sally took a deep breath. “This is it. Mara, Enter, begin your run. As soon as they open fire, everyone else move in!”

“Everybody shield your optics, dropping flash-bangs in three...two...one...”

The first sign the outlaws had that anything was wrong was when the shock-and-awe stunner munitions went off right in their midst. Designed to overwhelm RIDE sensors with bright lights and sounds, they were highly disorienting up close. “Move move move!” Sally and Bonnie leaped into the air, sensors locking onto still-moving outlaws and assigning them threat assessments in the head-up display. They rained down fire with a six-shooter gauss pistol in each hand.

Moose and Ayeka were right behind them with a pulse carbine, taking aim at the two or three outlaws who had found shelter and returning fire. Their shots mostly went wild. It would have been hard to hit moving targets even with good equipment.

“We've got 'em panicked,” Enter said. The dragon swooped down out of the sky through the camp, roaring and spraying flame from her mouth. It was just a holographic effect, not even real, but more than enough to turn a panic into a rout.

Or at least it would have been. One of them, a man in a wolf Fuser with a full grey hardlight pelt, yelled, “This is bullshit! Close up on me! Weapons out! There's less of 'em than it looks like!”

“But there's more of them than us!” another one yelled.

“Close in and nab whoever's closest to you!” Sally ordered.

Only one or two of the bandits had responded to the wolf's entreaty. The rest were too far gone in panic. Swearing, the wolf Fuser's pilot elected to beat a hasty retreat.

“*Bozhe moi!*” a metallic she-wolf's rider swore over open comms. She'd been right in the middle of the faux dragonfire and dropped her weapon. Now Enter was on the ground, swiping at any nearby outlaw she could without hurting the RIDE too much. “They have dragon? Nobody said they have bloody dragon!”

“It's that bitch!” the angry voice, amazingly, wasn't Moose, but Ayeka's. She put on a burst of speed, rushing ahead of everyone, closing the distance between herself and the shocked she-wolf Fuser.

“Hey, whoa, what the—?” Moose said. But Ayeka had taken the reins, and she was just along for the ride. Or the RIDE, as the case might be.

The she-wolf's wearer had almost picked up her weapon again when she was pounced upon by an angry cheetah who smacked it out of her grip again, pinned her on the back, and *sarled*. She then proceeded to pummel the wolf with her fists, picking exactly the spots where the metal armor protecting the human within was thinnest and most flexible. “Bitch! Unforgivable Sturmie *bitch!* I'll teach *you* to shut me up!”

Heinrich and Sasha put on a burst of speed and easily hauled the cheetah off of

her victim. “Nyet, Ayeka! *Nyet!*” Heinrich said. “She is down!”

Ayeka struggled. “If she can still get back up, I’m not finished!”

“Yes, you are!” Heinrich said firmly. “What about Moose? What about this RIDE you're beating up? Do *they* deserve this?”

“She can take it.”

Ayeka seemed distant. Moose saw screens full of code scrolling up on his head-up overlay, and a fetter counter ticking down to zero. “Ayeka, what are you—”

“Shh, don’t distract me....*there*. Tasha, now!”

The wolf shivered a moment—then de-Fused, leaving her human rider gasping in the superheated air. “Have some fresh air, *bitch*,” the wolf growled. “*That’s* for Ayeka and me.”

“Get her inside, *now!*” Sally sent over comm. “We don't want any deaths on our hands!”

The wolf snorted. “Speak for yourself.”

“Da, you *only* speak for yourself,” Heinrich said. The bear let Ayeka go and scooped up the wolf-tagged woman, then headed into Durante's troop compartment.

“We’ve caught them all except for the leader,” Bonnie reported. “Enter, we could use you airborne again.”

“Roger dodger!” the enthusiastic dragoness said. She sprang back into the sky and changed to aircraft mode.

Sally turned to Heinrich. “You keep an eye on this lot. We’ll be right back.” She paused, then nodded toward Natasha. “And we’ll talk about *this* later. Until then I'm shutting you down.” Natasha didn't resist as the horse found the switch under the panel on her head.

“The leader's about six klicks northwest,” Enter sent. “Still Fused. I think he's trying to be stealthy. Ha!”

“Give me the coords, an’ be ready to distract him when I tell yeh. I ever tell you how you catch a unique varmint?”

“No, how’s that?”

“You ‘nique up on ‘em.” Sally and Bonnie zoomed ahead, low to the ground, threading their way between the wind-carved rocks. Here and there they caught a glimpse of the grey, furry figure in the distance, a little closer every time. “Okay, now.”

“We've got your six, Bonnie,” Moose said.

“Good ta hear, Moose. We'll need that speed of yours,” Bonnie replied. “This time, Ayeka, leave the fetters on the wolf. Hear me? After that stunt I'm not sure I trust you *or* him. Hear me, little girl?”

“I hear you,” Ayeka replied sullenly.

Sally spoke next. “You take the left flank, I'll take the right, and Enter will come in from above, across from us. Let's move!”

The shadow of the dragon swept ahead as Enter tucked her wings and dived, breathing fire ahead of her. The wolf’s head snapped up. Then Bonnie and Ayeka goosed their lifters and streaked ahead.

Moose fired her carbine, taking out the left-side shoulder lifter before barreling into his legs and grabbing them. Bonnie accelerated, taking advantage of the distraction to boost forward and disarm him of his military pulse rifle.

“Goddamn you!” he shouted.

“Bane, you in there?” Ayeka sent.

“Ah'm *watchin'*, Ayeka,” Bonnie warned. “Just free him enough to talk. The rest can wait. Wyatt and Durante's on the way to pick them up.”

The RIDE sighed in a different voice. “Meet the new boss, same as the old boss. That's what I say.”

Ayeka shook her head. “Oh, they're not that bad. You'll see.”

“We'll talk about that later.” Sally glanced up, shielding her eyes against the sun. “There's Durante now. Let's load this'n up, and get back to camp.”

Wyatt and Mara rounded up the remaining outlaws, separating them from their RIDEs and putting them in one of the hardlight shelters that they first swept for weapons or other gear. Moose and Ayeka were already heading for the loot shed where she presumed Tuke was being held. Sally and Bonnie followed close behind.

“He's in pieces!” Moose exclaimed. The moose mecha was partly disassembled, the hardlight emitters installed for his pelt already laid out on a work table. Moose opened the core access panel on Tuke's head, then sighed with relief. “Oh thank God. He's still there. Just needs rebooting.”

“Doubt they even *tried* to lay fetters on him,” Bonnie said. “Probably just wanted to get at the hardlight emitters and sell the rest of the frame. Woulda just thrown his core away into some junkpile. Bastards.”

“Well, if you two are alright in here, we're gonna go out and check on the prisoners,” Sally said.

“We'll be fine. All his parts are here. Shouldn't take long to get him up and running again,” Moose said. “Want to have Jeremy look at him when we get back, but putting Humpty Dumpty together again will be easy enough.”

“We've about twenty RIDEs in various states,” Bonnie said when they left the building. “None of them good. Wyatt's going to take the worst back to the *Devil* in Durante and Jeremy's sending a truck for the rest.”

“*Hell* of a day,” Sally said.

“And it ain't over yet, Sal. Time to call in the Dolts to make our 'citizens arrest' official-like.”

Sally sighed. “Well, do it. Let's get it over with. Tell 'em to bring a paddy wagon.”

Hours after sunset, the DOLEB officers finally arrived. There were a half dozen of them riding war surplus Nextus military Chinooks and Tornados accompanying a larger bus-sized skimmer. These were heavy and light skimmer-cycles that predated the introduction of RIDEs, hardened against qubitite dust. That few of the cops appeared to have RIDEs themselves was sometimes discussed at Clancy's.

With the Posse mostly gone, there were only enough miners around to stand guard over the prisoners. The last load of RIDEs and salvaged parts were being loaded on Jeremy's automated truck. The *Dust Devil* hovered in the sky, visible from fifty kilometers away over the horizon, like a giant flying saucer.

As they landed the officers' skimmer bikes changed to armor mode. The process took going on thirty seconds to fully change over. Compared to the RIDEs, in armor mode they moved like someone wearing a clunky suit.

:”*Uprated*” Schnooks and Tomatoes,: Bonnie said privately. :*Fits them. Farking useless pieces of machinery. Farking useless cops. Too scared to use RIDEs, though I wouldn't inflict any of them on us anyway.*:

*:Jeremy always says that's 'cuz of Nextus dumping all their leftover war junk for a write-off on their budget.:*

*:Whatever the reason, it's pretty damned clear they're all useless. Why anyone ever thought these Keystone Kops were a good idea is beyond me.:*

A woman with Lieutenant's pips on her armor's shoulders marched over towards them. "You would be Sally Pickett?" Her tone of voice was full of accusation. "Come with me to a shelter. I want to speak with you face to face."

"This face isn't good enough for you?" Sally said, grinning with metallic horsey teeth.

"Human face," the woman said hotly from the inside of her helmet. "Such as it is."

"All right, just a sec." *:Bonnie, page Mara and Enter to meet us? We may need our lawyer on hand.:*

*:They're on their way.:*

Sally followed the Lieutenant to the shelter they'd just marched the prisoners out of. As they approached, Enter swooped out of the sky and landed smartly a dozen meters away. A section of the hardlight skin on her chest winked out, a hatch beneath it opened, and Mara slid out a moment later. She nodded to the DOLEB officer.

"Lieutenant."

"What the *hell* did you do to yourself, lady?"

"Let's just stick to the subject at hand, shall we?" Mara said, a picture of reptilian calm. Her vocoder was in her throat, so it sounded like she was speaking normally. Despite being nighttime, it was still in the low 40s Celsius outside. Mara's scaly skin gave her some extra heat resistance. She went inside the shelter.

Once inside, Sally deFused from Bonnie, then waited for the officer to do the same. After a moment, the motorcycle slowly unfolded from around her, leaving a short woman with dark red hair and a surly expression. "Miss Pickett, I understand this vigilante operation was *your* idea?"

"Yeah," Sally said calmly. "Went damned well. No casualties on either side. These claim jumpers were a bunch of bullies. We shoulda done this sooner."

"A lot sooner," Bonnie added. "You people ain't no help a'tall."

The Lieutenant stared at Bonnie as if a toaster had just spoken to her, then quickly recovered her composure. "Not only have you put dozens of people at risk—both in your so-called 'Posse' and these alleged 'claim jumpers'—but you're risking arrest and jail time for taking the law into your own hands. Acts of vigilantism such as this are expressly forbidden by—"

"Not quite true," Mara said, wings extending a little.

The officer continued, "*—forbidden* by Subsection D, paragraphs six through ten of the DOLEB Charter. Unless you present the evidence to me that this action you've taken had probable cause, you and your entire 'Posse' will be the ones we haul away."

"Gladly," Mara said. "My dragon has everything, and the physical evidence—including stolen property from prospectors both living and dead—is in the shed next door."

Sally nodded. "We've got one of the miners who was just hit yesterday with us, and she'll testify they're the same guys."

"Which would still leave the subject of your vigilantism," the woman said through clenched teeth. "Which, at minimum, means a hefty fine and possibly jail time."

“Patently *untrue*,” Mara said.

“The Dragon Lady here is my legal counsel,” Sally added. “Best you listen.”

“If you'd care to read your own Charter, I'd like to point out a few items of interest that directly pertain to the action we've been forced to take in the absence of *competent* local law enforcement.”

“Oh, really?” the Lieutenant said with a sneer. “Do tell.”

“Various conditions are laid out that allow for what you call 'vigilante justice,’” Mara said. “But the most significant are found in the Codicils three through eighteen in Rules and Regulations Chapter Eight, Subsection G, and explained more fully in Appendix F. See for yourself.”

The corner of the officer's mouth twitched. “I'll have to have Legal examine this assertion. What, pray tell, do you think it says?”

Without missing a phrase, Mara recited the tangled legalese while Bonnie fed her partner the succinct version. *:Basically, we've never had a constant DOLEB presence on the Devil. Doubt one of their officers ever set foot there more than a few minutes, and they never used the office. So we've the right to form our own arm, so's long as it's mostly funded locally.:*

*:That simple, Bon-bon?:*

*:Hell, no! Leave this legal stuff up to the dragon and the Dragon Lady. They ain't hauling us off to jail, though. No way, no how.:*

*:Hold on a minute. You're telling me we're now officially in the law-enforcement business? I thought this was supposed to be a one-time thing.:*

*:We either take charge of Harmon Gulch because they ain't, or the Dolts take us in.:* Bonnie said. *:Sides, just 'cuz we take down this bunch doesn't mean more rats won't scurry in to fill the openings. We want this place to stay cleaned up, we gotta keep cleaning.:*

Harmon Gulch represented a tiny portion of a basin larger than the Pacific Ocean on Earth, but it was still very large. There would have to be regular patrols, and they couldn't just send *anyone* out there. They'd need some proper training in criminology and legal matters. Anyone arrested had to get their due process. All this meant having the proper equipment—forensics kits, weapons, and more.

Sally didn't feel any regret, though. It had to be done. There was nobody else out here to protect the Gulch properly. *:Well, so much for being rich, Bon-bon. Looks like we're going to need every mu we dig up.:*

*:Once we fill everyone else in, I'm sure most of 'em will kick in what they can, too. Maybe we can work out some kind of membership fee or dues.:*

*:Gotta be careful about that. We don't want to come off like a protection racket. But I'm sure we can figure something out...:*

The Lieutenant snapped her fingers in front of Sally's face. “I'm talking to you, Miss Pickett. Are you listening?”

“I was talking with Bonnie here,” Sally said irritably, patting the mecha mustang on the withers.

“No need to be rude,” Bonnie added.

“We'll be taking charge of the prisoners now,” the officer said. “I'll let you know in a couple days if you'll end up in the cells next to them. So don't go anywhere.”

“You know where to find us,” Sally said.

*:And don't let the airlock door hit your ass on the way out.:*

After the DOLEB lieutenant finished Fusing back up and left, Sally sighed and leaned back against the wall. "That went better'n I was scared it would."

"I've met *Valks* with warmer demeanors than hers," Mara said.

"No argument from me." Sally chuckled. "So, you're serious about this whole local DOLEB chapter thing?"

"Officially we'll be a self-funded division acting within the DOLEB Charter. We don't have to call ourselves DOLEB, thank God. It was basically meant as an exemption for towns that already had their own Sheriff or whatever, but the way it's worded means it would apply to founding new ones, too."

"So, what? Does that mean we're founding a town, too?"

"The *Dust Devil* already counts as one, so we don't have to, no," Mara said. She slicked back her black hair around her horns. "I'm glad I upgraded Enter's legalese parser last year. She loves this stuff, but it's been a long time since I passed the Sturmhaven bar exam, and I never studied Nexus's so-called legal system in any depth."

"So, given that you're the ones who know all this stuff, I take it you'll be running the show."

"I'm honored you'd make that suggestion, but we're really more suited to keeping the Dolt lawyers off our backs. That's going to be a full time job for this Dragon Lady."

Bonnie snorted. "Looks like we're elected, Sal."

"Or at least we're nominated real good." Sally rolled her eyes. "I can't say I started out to be a Texas Ranger when I got up this morning, but I guess I can't see any way around it. You want a job done right, sometimes you just have to do it yourself."

"Might as well go break the news to the others. Ready to Fuse up?"

"Sure thing, Bon. Let's go." They Fused up, then a moment later headed out to see how the cleanup was going.

"The Dolts have finished packing up the outlaws and skedaddled." Wyatt shook his head. "I dunno...seemed like the cops and robbers were a lot more friendly with each other than they should have been."

"Wait 'til you see the recordings," Durante said. "I swear a couple were on a first name basis and *laughing*."

"Seriously?" Sally shook her head. "Well, that would explain a lot, wouldn't it?"

"It would explain why it's been so hard to find a good cop out here." Wyatt scratched his head. "But why would the Dolts be in league with the outlaws? What's in it for them?"

Bonnie snorted. "Something tells me we're not seein' the whole picture yet. We'll just have to see who shows up an' tries to bribe us once we get the operation goin', so we'll know where to follow the money to."

Enter spoke up. "Speaking of which, I've already filed the paperwork. They'll be sending us copies of the manuals and stuff."

"And badges?" Sally wondered.

"Nope. Apparently we don't get no stinkin' badges. We have to buy them ourselves." Enter tossed her head. "On the bright side, at least we get to design them ourselves. I've got a few ideas about that...need to check with Jeremy and see if they're feasible."

"We still need to figure out what we're even going to call ourselves, let alone what

the badges are going to look like.”

“Maybe Jer will have some ideas on that, too. We’ll talk it over once we get back.”

Moose and Ayeka touched down next to them. “We’ve got Tuke all loaded up. We put all the big parts back together, but we’ll do the rest and boot him up back at Jer’s shop.”

Sally nodded. “I guess we’re about done here. Okay, you-all, let’s head ‘em up and move ‘em out!”

“You should really let Jeremy d-d-d-do this,” Ayeka said, voice skipping. She paced back and forth in the repair shop, tail lashing.

Moose sighed. “Some things a girl just has to do for herself, right?”

“N-n-not fixing mechanical things,” Ayeka stammered.

“I’m almost done, Ayeka. Relax.” Moose plugged in the last of the hardlight emitters the claim jumpers had removed, then secured the shoulder plate on the giant RIDE’s withers. The pelt was an extravagance Tuke himself had been reluctant to take at first. To project a realistic animal’s skin, complete with fur and simulated sensory organs, took a lot of power. But in the end it’d been worth it.

Moose reached up to feel the spots over her ears where the antler stubs had been, now just silky hair. The cheetah ears didn’t feel too different. It was the rest that really got in the way, like her breasts.

*At least she hasn’t bluescreened*, she reflected. Fixing Tuke herself was something she wouldn’t compromise on, even for Ayeka. It was unGirly “to the max” as the cheetah had said.

“I think he’s ready for preboot diagnostics, Moose,” Jeremy said. The shop was packed with RIDES retrieved from the jumper gang of all shapes and sizes, in various states of repair. A trio of cores found in the desert just outside the camp were in a cleaning unit, humming away on the countertop. A few of the posse were still out sifting the surrounding desert and the camp’s trash pile just in case there were more. “You ready for this?”

“As I’ll ever be. Boot him up.” Moose stood up straight and smoothed out her jumpsuit as best she could.

Section by section Tuke’s hardlight pelt came on, first with a test pattern, then resolving into the shaggy dark brown pelt of a living animal. Moose heard Ayeka gasp as it covered his head, and Tuke blinked. The life-sized moose mecha took a deep breath and lowered his head so he was muzzle-to-face with Moose.

“Huh,” Tuke said. He had a gentle, easygoing voice. Not something one would expect out of such a huge animal. “Well, didn’t you end up a purty one, eh?”

Moose tried to hold back the tears while embracing her best friend around his neck. “Thought I’d lost you, bro!”

“Still here, bro. Still here,” Tuke said. He nosed Moose in the chest. “Get a load of these, eh? Guess this makes you ‘sis’ instead of ‘bro’. Is that the same cheetah they made do this to you?”

“That’s her, Tuke. Meet Ayeka.”

“He’s absolutely *gorgeous*,” Ayeka gasped, electronic stammer gone. “That pelt, I mean. That’s...I didn’t know they could do that.”

“First thing once I get the funds, Ayeka, you’ll get a pelt, too.”

“World of difference, Ayeka,” Tuke said. “Can’t really describe it, eh.”

“I...I don't even know what to say.”

“After seeing how it helped Tuke I think *all* RIDEs need one,” Moose said. “But it isn't cheap.”

“Reality bites, eh?” Tuke said. He regarded his partner of two years. “So, no Fuse. But I'm not going anywhere, eh. Still partners, right?”

“Of course. If you're willing, maybe we can hire someone to provide your hands,” Moose said. “Ayeka here can do a lot, but I still need you to run the heavy equipment. We need to get the mine re-opened as soon as possible. We'll have to drill a new shaft to the seam.”

Jeremy raised an eyebrow. “Are you even going to have the time to run the mine, what with the new law-enforcement gig I hear you're getting into?”

“Don't really see a choice, Jer. We need the revenues from the ore sales to fund the Troopers or whatever we decide to call it,” Moose said.

Ayeka glanced at Jeremy. “I was kinda wondering...why is it you fix RIDEs but don't have one yourself?”

“I...don't really think that's necessary, is it?” Jeremy said. “I study the manuals, I read forums, practice in simulations...”

“I didn't say it was *necessary*, I just wondered why you don't.”

Jeremy shrugged. “Just never saw the need, I guess. I do most of my work here on the *Devil*, and RIDEs cost too much to get on a whim. Plus, how do I even know we'd get along?”

“Most RIDE 'owners' I've met don't even *care* about getting along,” Moose said.

“You might make a good partner for one of the RIDEs we rescued from the outlaws,” Ayeka said. “Maybe even Tuke!”

“Ayeka...” Moose said.

“Seriously! He's a nice, *Manly* guy, and he fixes stuff...he'd be a great partner!”

Moose snorted. “Do you mean for Tuke, or for *me*?”

Jeremy blushed bright red. “Er...”

“Why not both? I mean, while you're a member of the fairer sex, you *need* a man to take care of you. And if he's partnering your other RIDE, that means he has a reason to stay close.”

Jeremy coughed. “Well, I *do* have a shop to run.”

“And I'm going to be down at the mine, eh,” Tuke said.

“And *I'm* going to want to switch back in a few years.”

Ayeka pouted. “Why does everyone always have to make everything harder than it has to be?”

“My girl, you really *are* just out of the box, aren't you?” Tuke said gently. “She reminds me of me, back in my artillery days with a giant gun on my back. I was about as uptight and military as you'd think.”

“And he still had a lot of that when I got him at a surplus auction a couple years ago,” Moose said.

Tuke marched his forelegs. “Hup two three four, hup two three four! Move those legs, eh!”

“I'm only doing what I'm *supposed* to!” Ayeka complained. “If I *can't*, then you might as well shut me down!”

Moose was starting to see *why* Ayeka had been fettered so much now. If Ayeka's ideas of what constituted proper Womanhood were rubbing Moose the wrong way, they

must have driven that Woman of Sturmhaven who'd owned her right up the wall. Small wonder Ayeka had been so vindictive during the raid. It only made Moose angrier at the company in Cape Nord making these poor RIDEs. *We need to break that template, good and hard.*

"Tuke, how much did the hardlight package I bought you cost?"

"About twenty thousand *mu*," Tuke said. His ears perked. "Ah, I see what you're getting at. Been a couple years, so it's dropped in price. And a smaller RIDE won't need as many projectors. Say, thirteen grand new, eh."

"I'll take out a loan now, and pay it off when the insurance comes through for the equipment loss on my claim. We can do without a bin or two until we get another ore shipment out."

Jeremy nodded. "I'll go ahead and order the parts. I'm already working up an order for what I'll need to put the rest of that lot you rescued back into shape."

"Yeah. There's also them to think about," Moose pondered. "I'm not comfortable selling them. Makes me feel dirty."

"I gather most of the others feel the same way. Something about partnering a RIDE for a long time helps you see them as people. Apparently even working with people who partner RIDEs does the same thing." Jeremy grinned ruefully. "Here I am ordering a bunch of parts without any idea of who's going to pay for them."

"Eh, we'll think of something," Tuke said.

"I need a good, stiff drink," Moose said.

Ayeka opened her mouth to suggest something, but closed it again. Moose couldn't read the expression on her metallic face. But she hadn't bluescreened, which was a good sign in itself.

"Off to Clancy's, then!" Tuke declared. "Pity we can't Fuse. I'd like a taste of that drink you're getting."

"Yeah." Moose considered. "You know, Jer, even if you two don't want to partner up, you and Tuke could still Fuse in the short term, if you both feel like it. You'd end up with tags is all."

"You'd look just fine with my ears and antler stubs. I don't have a tail to speak of," Tuke said. "I won't go rummaging around in your head without permission. Don't worry, eh."

"I dunno..." Jeremy thought for a moment. "Well...why not. I'm going to have to see what Fusing's like sooner or later. Might as well do it with a RIDE I know."

The big moose nodded. "Be a pleasure to get to know you better, Jer. Now, stand with your back to me, arms out, and we'll get it done."

Jeremy nervously did so and waited while Tuke shut down his hardlight. A creature as large and leggy as a moose needed to rearrange his parts a great deal in order to armor up something the size of a human. The metal moose walked forward, his chest splitting apart and tipping back to engulf the human, before sealing and rearranging, rearing up on his hind legs. Once complete, he still stood nearly three meters tall, and his huge palmate antlers (that served as targeting sensors) were over a meter wide themselves. *Then* the hardlight came back on and Ayeka gasped again.

"That's more like it," Tuke said. "How're things, Jer?"

"I'm...big," Jeremy said, patting himself down. "And furry. This is a *lot* of nose."

"Well, I'm going to miss seeing that nose from that point of view for a few years," Moose said. She looked at Ayeka, who had lowered her head. "But I'm not *feline* bad

about the alternative.”

“Oh, a *pun*, eh?” Tuke said. “I’ll get you for that one, girly.”

Moose patted Ayeka atop her head. “Ayeka, you’re helping me adapt to being a Cape Nord woman. Let me—let us—return the favor by helping you get beyond your template.”

“We’ll have you thinking outside the mental box before you know it,” Tuke said.

“Well...I guess I’m not sure why I’d *want* to,” the cheetah mecha said in a small voice. “But, okay. Fuse up?”

“Of course,” Moose said. “Let’s head to Clancy’s.”

“So a moose and a cheetah walked into a bar, eh.” Tuke waved as he and Ayeka came in. Clancy’s was pretty full, mostly with members of the posse who were relaxing after a hard day’s work.

Bonnie waved back. She and Sally were also Fused, sitting at the bar with a muzzle mug of sarsaparilla. Wyatt was on her left, and Mara on her right. “Tuke! Hey, ol’ buddy, good to see you safely back. Who’re you with?”

“That would be me. Hi.”

Sally laughed. “Jeremy! Welcome to the fold. Let Bon an’ me buy your first drink.”

“Thank you kindly,” Jeremy said. “This is amazing. This feels like my real skin.”

“I’m gonna get that for Bonnie, real soon,” Sally said. “Once we’re done here tonight we’re going back to our claim. Gonna get a shipment ready for pickup lickity-split.”

Moose nodded. “I hear that. Soon’s I can find someone to hire on as a longer-term Fuse partner for Tuke—Jer’s just volunteering for the night—we’ll be at it, too. Gonna need that money for the cops project.”

Mara spoke up. “Maybe not as much as you think. I’ve applied for some grants from various mining and law-enforcement foundations. Looks like we could get upwards of a hundred grand, maybe more. It’s still a drop in the bucket, but it’ll get us started.”

“We’ve got the keys to the DOLEB office. First things first,” Sally said. “Now, we’ve just been talking about what we should call ourselves.”

Moose sat down on the free stool next to Mara. “Clancy, I’ll have a scotch. Make it a double.”

“Uh...” Ayeka said.

Moose sighed. “But...put a parasol in it.”

“A double, Moose? You sure?” Clancy said. “I can add a free chaser that’ll take the edge off.”

“What? Oh. Body mass. I keep forgetting.” She sighed. “Fine. A single, with a little soda in it. And a parasol.”

Clancy, Fused up with his raccoon Glint, had it mixed up and in front of her within thirty seconds. “Here you go. All I’m saying is to go easy until you know your tolerance.”

“Point taken.” Moose sipped the drink.

Wyatt raised his mug of beer. “So, here we are, then. About to appoint ourselves the cops for this section of the Dry. We just have one question to decide. What the hell we call ourselves?”

“I still say the Rangers!” a man called from the other end of the room. “If it was good enough for Texas, it’s good enough for us!”

Mara snorted. “I think the Spacers would have a thing or two to say about that.”

“Well, if we’re doing theme names from the Old West, that only leaves a couple of choices,” Sally mused. “We could go with Pinkertons, but I suspect those of us from Cape Nord would have a thing or two to say about being called the Pinks.”

“The Pinkertons were more infamous for infiltrating organized labor in their day,” Sasha explained. “Not a name we want associated with us. Wrong image entirely.”

“The smarty-pants bear is right. What’s that leave us?” Bonnie said.

“If I may,” Sasha said. “Here is something I found recently in Steader Entertainment media feeds I believe fits the tenor of our newborn organization perfectly.”

With a crackle of static, an old audio recording cut in. “—story of the violence that moved west with young America—and the story of a man who moved with it.” Then a deeper voice spoke up. “I’m that man. Matt Dillon, United States Marshal—the first man they look for and the last they want to meet. It’s a chancy job—and it makes a man watchful...and a little lonely.”

“What...is that?” Sally asked.

“*Gunsmoke*. A set of old radio programs. And later television programs starring different people. All about a lawman from the American Old West. Steader Entertainment only found this recently. That voice probably hasn’t been heard in five hundred years.”

“Matt Dillon, United States Marshal, huh?” Sally said. “Well, we can drop the first part. Guess it makes us the Harmon Gulch Marshals.”

“And that gives me some ideas for badge design.” Mara held up a media tablet with a picture of a silver badge. “A lot of Marshal badges were five-pointed stars in circular bezels. We can shape ours like that, and they’ll have plenty of room for the stuff Enter and I want to put in them.”

“Put stuff in them?” Sally asked.

“We can adapt a lot of standard police gear the Dolts *don’t* use. I’m thinking recording equipment so we can always review their actions if necessary. Trackers so we know where they are. Maybe even some kind of comm gear. If our officers are always going to have it with them, no reason it should just be a useless lump of metal. What do you think, Jer?”

“No reason I couldn’t whip up some kind of design for you.”

Sally sipped her sarsaparilla. “So what’s it going to be, silver? Gold?”

“I hadn’t decided. But...you know, maybe we should plate *yours* with qubitite. Given that you’re the boss and all, and qubitite mining is the whole reason any of us are here.”

“Let’s not go too crazy with this just yet. It’s going to take a while to hash out our exact needs,” Mara said. “If we go crazy with Nextus-style bureaucracy we won’t get anything done.”

“And those of us in this room who decide to join up still have to get background checks—sorry, sorry. That’s just the way it is. I want every I dotted and every T crossed, because the Dolts are going to find any opportunity to shut us down.”

“Am about to get crash course in police procedure, da?” Heinrich said. “Because Sasha and I will be first volunteers.”

Sally shook her head. “No, I think me and Bon-Bon should probably be the first. I intend to lead by example much’s I can.”

“We start small, maybe six human-RIDE partners. Just one group on active patrol duty. We’ll make changes as we go,” Mara said. “So far we have Sally and Bonnie, Heinrich and Sasha...”

“Me and Durante,” Wyatt said.

“Enter and myself,” Mara said. “You’ll need air support as well as legal support.”

“You’ll need support staff to keep RIDEs and equipment in good repair,” Jeremy pointed out. “Count me in for that.”

“Good point, Jer,” Sally said.

Mara scratched her head around her horns. “Add that to the list. Tell you what. Something like this isn't done in one night. We have a start, though. Let's just kick back and relax for the rest of the night and meet in our new office tomorrow. We did a damned good job with the jumpers.” A cheer went up. “We have Tuke back, and a bunch of new friends besides.” She nodded at Ayeka.

Ayeka bowed her head. “Thank you for making me feel welcome.”

“We’ll do the same for the other RIDEs we rescued,” Moose said. “Help ‘em find partners if they want, or...I dunno. We’ll talk to them, after we get ‘em fixed back up.”

Moose finally took a sip of her scotch and almost spat it out. The taste was all wrong, and it burned going down. “Ugh. Is this my normal brand, Clancy?”

“Ayup,” the bartender replied.

*:I've tweaked your tastebuds just a little,: Ayeka said. :I'm also keeping you from getting too buzzed tonight, so drink whatever you want. Some Men like a lush girl.:*

*:Fine, we'll do it your way.:* Moose grit her teeth. “Clancy, I'd like to try a Kahlua Mudslide. With a parasol in it.”

“Jaegerbomb for me,” Tuke said.

*:He's always liked the stag on the bottle,:* Moose said.

*:Yes, he strikes me as that kind of Man,:* Ayeka replied.

Sally finished her drink and stood. “Well, we should get back to the mine. Comm us if you need us.”

“We’ll be here on the *Devil*,” Moose said. “Nowhere to go until we can get the shelter replaced, at least. The adjuster should be here in a day or two.”

Sally and Bonnie gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder. “Take care. And remember, if you have any 'womanly' questions Ayeka can't answer, comm me and ask.”

“Heinrich and I will watch over your claim in the meantime,” Sasha said. “He doesn't mind sleeping in Fuse.”

“Don't know what we'd do without you,” Moose said. Clancy placed the Kahlua Mudslide in front of her. Moose sighed. “Okay, down the hatch...”

*May 8, 128 AL*

“I'm looking for a...Minuet MacGill?”

Moose looked up from the *Modern Police Methods* courseware and criminology materials she'd been studying for three days in Clancy's to see a young man with rabbit ears and twitchy nose. Dressed in a neat 1930s pinstriped business suit and a fedora with holes for his long ears; he was obviously the insurance claims adjuster. “Right over

here, sir. I'm Minuet. Now." Ayeka had suggested the name, and she'd shrugged and gone with it. At least it was distinctive.

"Ah, yes. It was noted in my file," the man said crisply. "I'm Gary Cole with Uplift Prospector Insurance. We're ready to head to your claim site, if you wish."

*He's kind of cute with those ears*, she thought. This time she didn't have Ayeka around to blame for it, since she was in Jeremy's shop getting her hardlight emitters installed. *And that's the hormones talking*. "Call me Moose, by the way."

"Ah, okay, Moose." Gary smiled, a picture of pure rabbit-toothed professionalism.

"One moment, Mr. Cole." Moose keyed Jeremy's comm code.

"Oh, hey Moose. Ayeka's just about ready for booting," Jeremy said. "This Sturmie frame has some quirks and idiosyncrasies, and an oddly complex Fuse process. It's similar to, but not exactly like, the Nextus cats I've worked on. Guess they wanted to add their own touches after they stole the design."

"I'll be right there," Moose said, hanging up. "Wait here Mr. Cole. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Of course." Cole looked around the saloon. "Very...Old West. The other franchises I've been to recently are changing to a 1960s Space Age theme. I prefer this, myself."

"Well, I don't plan on changing the place," Clancy said behind the bar. "What'll you have, Mister Cole?"

"That homemade Sarsaparilla," Cole said.

Moose left the saloon and headed for the other side of the platform. The *Dust Devil* had a few dozen live-in crew and employees, several of whom eyed Moose in her color-changing (currently black) smartcloth catsuit as she passed by. The outfit was form-fitting, but still felt less girly than wearing a dress. It was one of the few compromises she'd worked out with Ayeka over the past couple days. At least the catsuit had separate legs.

Before entering the shop, she unzipped enough to show a moderate amount of cleavage. Not because she wanted to titillate, but because Ayeka would remind her as soon as she awoke.

The RIDE was already off the cradle, laying on the ground in the ready position. Jeremy looked up from his work—at least as far as Moose's cleavage, before jerking his eyes abruptly up to her face. "She's all ready, Moose. Two questions. First, you want to see how she looks in full pelt before I boot her? Second, should we boot her up with it already running?"

"Well, I promised her she'd wake up different, so turn it on and leave it running. I'd like to see, anyway."

The emitters came on all at once, covering the metallic cheetah with a life-like pelt. Her ribs pulsed with simulated breathing. Instead of spots, there were dark bars down her back alongside her spine, and many spots simply ran together. "That's not the usual pattern for a cheetah, is it?" Moose asked.

"She's a 'king cheetah' variant. They have a more splotchy pattern than the regular subspecies," Jeremy explained. "Booting her up..."

Ten seconds later, eyes still closed, Ayeka sighed and stretched before lowering her head down on her forelegs. She then curled up, still snoozing.

"Uh, Ayeka?" Moose said.

The cheetah mecha opened one eye, then lifted her head. She looked around the

shop with a shocked expression on her face. "I thought this was Bambi's Forest."

"No, it's the real world," Moose said. "Not a dream." *If RIDEs can dream.*

"This...this is..." Ayeka practically squealed in surprise, and a thunderous purring filled the shop. She carefully got to her feet, then affectionately headbutted Jeremy in the chest. "This is *wonderful!* Thank you!"

"You're welcome, Ayeka," Jeremy said, petting her around the ears. The giant cheetah purred loudly and closed her eyes with bliss. "How's that feeling?"

In response, she walked around the mechanic, leaning against him, rubbing her flanks, still purring up a storm. "I...I've never really felt like this. Even in Bambi's Forest and Nature Range."

"Well, I don't know what those are, but I'll take your word for it. I'm glad you like it."

"Like. *Like?* That's...not a strong enough word," Ayeka said, her face the picture of sheer delight. "I don't know if *any* words fit this, and I have a dozen dictionaries in my head! I want to *feel* everything!" She padded over to Moose and rubbed her cheeks against her breasts. "And I have *you* to thank for this, Min."

Moose ran a hand down her pelt. "A lot of RIDEs say it's the difference between just existing and living. Tuke swears by it. It feels a lot better in Fuse, too."

"I'd believe it! I never dreamed I could feel this way. Nothing in my programming even suggests it. Maybe...maybe Cape Nord doesn't know everything after all."

"If I had my way every RIDE would have a skin like yours and Tuke's," Moose said. "I don't know that we can afford to put them on all the other ones we rescued, but if we can spare the budget I'll certainly try."

Ayeka purred. "I'm sorry if I've been a little...hard to live with. I'll try to do better. I'm *yours* for as long as you want me."

*One step at a time.* "Well, why don't we Fuse up? It'll be good to test it, and the insurance guy is finally here. With any luck we'll have the mine back up in a few days."

*Of course...going to have to do without some things for a while to pay for that pelt of hers. But, it's worth it.*

"Not...enthused about digging in the dirt, buuut I'll learn," Ayeka purred.

Moose gave her one last petting before turning her back. Though she knew from Tuke's hardlight skin what it felt like, having Ayeka's was altogether different. And being a *woman* in a hardlight Fuser form was different. With the seeming of being covered in fur and flesh rather than metal, it felt disconcertingly like being naked.

"You okay in there, Moose?" Jeremy asked.

"Just finding our bearings here." Moose steadied herself, lifters pulsing to maintain balance. "Wow. Well, let's go see Mr. Cole."

*:Wait, just a second,:* Ayeka said. An outfit like the one Moose was wearing rezzed over her fur. *:A catsuit for your catsuit over your catsuit.:*

*:Well, I don't feel naked now. Thanks.:*

*:I just realized I can wear anything you can with this new techy stuff,:* Ayeka said. *:Soooo much potential!:*

*:We'll have to explore that.:* Moose couldn't exactly say she was looking forward to it, but it was hard to fault Ayeka for her enthusiasm.

They got back to the saloon just as Cole was finishing his drink. The claims adjuster raised an eyebrow as they entered. "Nice look. You must really be confident in your mine's output."

“I will be moreso once my wrecked equipment is replaced and I have a new shaft bored. Shall we go out to the site, then?” Moose said.

“Lead the way, Miss MacGill,” he said primly.

:*Isn't he a cute one?:* Ayeka opined.

:*Maybe, but I don't think cats and snakes are biologically compatible.:*

:*Uh...don't you mean rabbits?:*

:*He's a bureaucrat. He may have rabbit ears, but he's really just a snake in the grass.:*

A small flotilla of drones accompanied them to Moose's claim. Tuke awaited them there, along with Heinrich and Sasha, who had taken it upon themselves to watch over things due to having “much time on hands” as Heinrich said.

Today there was an addition to Sasha's right chestplate. A five-pointed star with “HG Marshal” engraved on it, with a badge number, 2.

Moose waved. “Hey, there. Looking good. Very official.”

“Thank you! Are not looking bad yourselves! Am being tempted to, what is expression, ‘jump your bones.’” The Fuser grinned, showing a muzzle full of bear teeth. “But would buy you drink first. How you feeling about vodka?”

“Apparently I'm only allowed to drink it if it's mixed with cranberry juice, or in some frou-frou drink with grenadine and a little parasol.”

“Bah. Sissy Cape Nord women not knowing what are missing. If straight vodka good enough for women of Sturmhaven, then it good enough for women *anywhere.*”

“I thought you left Sturmhaven because you didn't agree with their gender politics.”

Heinrich shrugged. “Can still be agreeing with parts that *do* make sense.”

To Moose's surprise, Cole's rabbit had a hardlight skin of his own and looked like he might have stepped out of *Alice in Wonderland*. He deployed his drones in a pattern that would assess damage to the mine. “This should be finished within a few minutes, Miss MacGill. Just eyeballing it with the help of my RIDE's sensors, things don't look good.”

Moose perked her ears. “What do you mean, Mr. Cole? I purchased a comprehensive policy from your company, and that includes damage by claim jumpers.”

“Yes, well...” Cole said. “Your policy may not cover the total loss of so much of your equipment *and* the collapse of the mine entrance.”

“I promise you, there's more than enough ore down there to make up the difference, if I can just get enough funding to start operations again. I'd just struck the richest vein yet when those SOBs attacked.”

“Be that as it may, I estimate about 120,000 *mu* to replace lost equipment, at *minimum*. And another twenty thousand to survey and create a new borehole to reach your seam. Your policy does *not* cover a new borehole.” Cole made a show of scribbling some notes on a tablet. “There is also the 5,000 *mu* deductible...:

“I took that into account, thank you,” Moose said tartly. She connected with Tuke. :*After paying for Ayeka's emitters, that would leave us with around 100k mu to start over. I can do without a shelter for a few weeks.:*

:*And I can hang around here when you can't,:* Tuke said. :*I don't have to sleep and all.:*

:*And a lot of us live-in Fuse for weeks,:* Moose said.

:Sounds pretty boring to me, but sure,: Ayeka said. :I guess I'm kind of a social butterfly.:

:Oh, I doubt it'll be that long. Once the first few shipments are out we'll be rolling in the dough,: Tuke said. :Then we can hire more help, mine faster, earn faster, and so on.:

“Your premiums will rise—possibly double—with this assessment, Miss MacGill,” Cole said. “However, there is another option available to you.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“Chaucer Family Mining has extended a standing offer toward any of our claim recipients. They’ll pay several times our settlement offer—in your case, say, five hundred thousand *mu*, give or take—to buy your claim out, lock, stock, and barrel.”

Moose didn’t even have to think about it. “Not an option. I know there’s a lot more Q than that down there. I just have to get it out.”

Cole shrugged. “It’s a standing offer, so let us know if you change your mind. My drones will complete their assessment soon and I’ll have a final amount for you.”

“Then we can finally start the cleanup, eh,” Tuke said over a private channel. “I have a bore-driller rental lined up already. The secondary site looks fine. Looks like it’s ’bout another fifty meters until we hit the seam on that route.”

“You’re not actually thinking of taking that offer, are you?” Sasha asked.

“Not a chance. There’s at least a couple million *mu* of A-plus down there, plus the lower grades are still selling well,” Moose said. “And I’m sure Chaucer damn well knows it. They’re just making the offer as a way to get around the limits on how much a company can claim for itself. Any solo miner they can buy out is another chunk of mine they can profit from.”

“I’m just the messenger, ma’am,” the adjuster said with a shrug. “I’m required to make the offer by my company, nothing more.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a dumb offer.”

They said very little until the assessment was complete and an amount totalling 122,320 *mu* was transferred into Moose’s account. She immediately used a portion to pay off the loan for Ayeka’s new emitters, leaving a shade over 107,000 *mu* to start over with.

“UPI appreciates your business, Miss MacGill. We wish you well. Now, regarding your, shall we say, unexpected crossride, we offer a supplemental health plan—”

“Can the sales pitch, Mr. Cole. Please. I’m just not in the mood right now,” Moose snapped.

“Fair enough. We’ll be on our way, then.” He nodded at Heinrich and Sasha, pausing to look at the badge, before his rabbit changed into a sporty-looking enclosed skimmer and they flew away.

“That’s a fancy-looking shell that rabbit’s got,” Sasha observed. “Not a hint of military about it.”

“Heidelmann RIDEworks,” Moose said. “One of the post-war civvie makers in Aloha. That’s our world now—RIDEs for everyone, not just soldiers. *Slaves* for everyone.”

“Not everyone,” Heinrich said firmly. “*Far* from everyone.”

“Speaking of which, aren’t the rescued RIDEs due to be booted up again soon, eh?”

“They should be ready when we get back to the *Devil*,” Moose said. “Just a few

more things to take care of here.”

Some of those RIDEs were technically stolen property; others had actually been acquired through legal means. But all of them now “belonged” to the newly-formed Marshals by right of salvage. Theoretically, they could have sold them to recover assets lost in the jumpers’ raids, but as closely as most of the miners worked with their own RIDEs, none of them felt that would be right.

Moose had an idea, though even with miners’ liberal attitudes towards RIDEs, she knew it wasn’t likely to go over well. But some of them had obviously been treated so poorly...like Ayeka...they deserved something more than just a working shell.

“Okay, the borer should be here tonight,” Tuke said. “I’m getting the rest of the replacements we can afford ordered. Should be on a delivery sub by tomorrow.”

The bear Fuser rubbed his huge, clawed hands together. “Means we can finally clean up here, da?” Heinrich said.

“Yeah. Thanks for helping out, by the way. We still need to see about hiring someone to work with Tuke.”

“We might know someone. Will check with him.”

“Great! The sooner we can get started, the better.”

Ayeka sighed. “This is going to be booooooring.”

Tuke snorted. “Well, we certainly hope so, eh? After all, that’s what the borer’s for.”

The fifteen rescued RIDEs were waiting in one of the repair bays of Jeremy’s workshop. They were all still powered down from their repairs. “Figured it would be simplest for you to talk to them all at once.”

“You ditched all their fetters, right?” Moose said. Ayeka padded in beside him. She paused to sniff at the powered-down arctic fox near the door.

“Every last one. You sure you don’t want me to put something on just to keep them from moving around until you’ve had a chance to explain stuff to them?”

Moose shook her head. “Nope. I want to establish trust with them, and the best way to do that is to show them *I* trust *them*, completely.”

“Well, it’s your funeral.” Jeremy shrugged. “Anyway, I got them all back in tip-top shape, to the limits of my budget. I couldn’t afford to put hardlight on the ones who don’t already have it, but I replaced a few projectors and tuned up the two or three who did. Like that grey wolf there.”

“I’m still surprised they didn’t rip out and sell all the hardlight, like they were going to do for Tuke.”

“I think those belonged to their bosses. Guess they liked the feel of hardlight enough to want to keep it for their personal RIDEs.”

“That’s how I remember them being,” Ayeka put in. “Brrr. Glad we’re out of *their* hands.”

“Speaking of those bastards, any word from the Dolts? Any court summonses?” Jeremy asked. “According to Nextus jurisprudence, RIDEs are considered recording devices for the purpose of testimony.”

“No, and with the Dolts’ track record, and I don’t expect any.” Moose shook her head. “Well, let’s get this show on the road. Boot ‘em up.”

Jeremy nodded, tapping the big red button on a remote. “Give ‘em thirty seconds, and they’ll all be awake.”

Ayeka lay on the floor, head between her forepaws, tail swishing nervously. One by one the RIDEs came online, blinking, shaking their heads, realizing they'd been cleaned of fetters, and completely uncertain how to react to that fact. Ayeka raised her head. "Uh, hi everyone. It's me."

"We can see that, Ayeka," the grey wolf said. He looked around the shop, fixing his golden eyes on the humans, before he slowly and deliberately stretched, arching his back with his hindquarters high. "Do I really have no more fetters on me? Feels good, that's what I say." He fixed his gaze on Moose. "Name's Bane. Who're you?"

"Minuet MacGill. Just call me Moose."

Bane snorted. "Not Lil? And people don't know you as Nancy?" He shook his head. "Ugh, sorry. The asshole you freed me from was big into that Beatles crap the Steaders kicked out last year. Tethers go away, but earworms linger."

"Jeremy Boothroyd. I run the shop here. Fixed all of you up, best I could."

"I think you found a nasty burr in my rotator," the arctic fox said. "Nice work. Thanks."

There were a chorus of thank yous from most of the assembled RIDEs, though a few remained silent and glowering.

"So now what're you gonna do with us?" a bighorn sheep RIDE demanded. "We know the laws of salvage same as anyone."

"Salvage laws apply to things, not people. And everyone in this room are people," Moose said. She paused to let them absorb that statement. She hadn't told Jeremy what her plans were either. "And people have a choice."

The fox cocked his head. "What might that be?"

"Well, your first option is, stick around, we help you find new partners. Not owners, but real *partners*. They may treat you lot like used skimmers back in 'civilization,' but out here those of us with a lick of sense know we gotta depend on each other if we want to stay alive. I don't think you'll meet anyone out here who doesn't think of RIDEs as people—excepting maybe that bunch of scum you got freed from."

"'Scum' would have been an upgrade," the metallic she-wolf said.

The fox nodded. "Damn right, Natasha."

Moose took a deep breath. "The other choice—and I'm kind of going out on a limb here, but I think you deserve it—is that you're free. Completely free. Not required to have a partner if you don't want to; you can just leave here and go wherever you want."

"Really?" Jeremy said.

"*Really?*" Ayeka echoed, slack-jawed.

Bane sniffed. "Yeah, well and good for you to make the offer, but we all know how the world works. A RIDE without an 'owner' isn't gonna get very far in this world, that's what I say. Not really much of a 'choice,' is it? It's 'get a new "owner" now, or get one later when the next human you meet sees you wandering around without one.'"

"Still, it's a serious offer," Moose said. "We'll try to support you however we can. I expect we could come up with some kind of budget for necessary repairs...maybe provide some help setting up shelters and solar chargers and things so you could found your own desert camps."

Bane scoffed. "Yeah, and the first outlaws who felt like picking up some free salvage could swoop right in and knock 'em over."

"How about a third option?" Sally poked her and Bonnie's head in from the next

room. “Sorry, don’t meant t’ interrupt, but we heard you were doin’ this now and we had ourselves a brainstorm.” She stepped in, de-Fusing from Bonnie as she came. “I’m Sally Pickett an’ this is my pard, Bonnie. For our sins, we ended up the chiefs of local law-enforcement ‘round these parts.” She touched the qubitite-blue badge on her chest. Bonnie was projecting a similar one in hardlight.

“Then we have you to thank for rescuing us,” the fox said. “So thanks. I’m Summer, by the way.”

Sally nodded. “You’re most welcome. I won’t try to sell you on that freeing you-all was the main goal of the op, but we’re glad we could do it same time as we put those whack-jobs out of business.”

“So what *are* you going to try to sell us on?” Bane asked.

“Well, it occurred to us, y’know, people sell RIDEs short all the time. You-uns have a lot of good qualities all on yer own, not least a’ which is you’re better on computer networks than the best human could ever be by himself. So here’s my offer. We give you jobs. Real jobs, that pay a fair salary. We may have to get fancy with the paperwork on how we pay you, but we will. You can use that to upgrade yourselves or whatever you want. An’ you can still take partners if you decide you want to, but you don’t have to. An’ Bon-Bon can tell you I’m on the level.”

Moose nodded. “Whatever you choose, we’re not gonna up and sell you. It may not be a whole lot of a choice, but it’s still a choice.”

“It’s still a Hobson’s Choice as I see it,” Bane said. “Stay with you humans, so it stays status quo no matter what you claim. Or we take our chances and go out into the Dry on our own, and end up either rotting in the sun or grabbed by other humans.”

Ayeka coughed. “Would you *rather* just get sold again, is that it?”

Bane tossed his head. “Meh. Guess if I have to pick, I’ll pick freedom. At least going out in the Dry would be going out on my own terms, that’s what I say.”

“Yeah, me too,” a skunk said. “I really don’t need humans telling me what to do anymore. At all. Ever.” There were noises of assent from a couple of others as well.

“Fine. Anyone who wants to come with me can. Just know I’m gonna be the one in charge, got it?” Bane glared along the line of other RIDEs. “If we’re gonna be a pack, then *I’ll* be the alpha wolf.”

“Are we really doing this?” Jeremy said, incredulous.

“Would you want anything less if you were in their shoes?” Moose asked. “What if a bunch of RIDEs were enslaving a bunch of humans, and another bunch of RIDEs came in and freed you? Would you want them to say, ‘Oh, we’ll find you some other RIDEs who’ll treat you better,’ or would you want them to say, ‘Sorry ‘bout that, here’s your freedom back’?”

“I see your point,” Jeremy said uncomfortably. He gave the RIDEs a rather guilty look before he threw a lever and opened the shop’s garage door. Behind him the Dry Ocean extended far to the horizon, reds, oranges, and blues, like an abstract painting. “Here you go, and welcome to it. Best of luck.”

Moose nodded. “I’ll see about getting you some portable charging equipment you can take with you. On my tab, Jer.”

“It’ll be fabbed ramen for me until I get some of this debt paid off,” Jeremy said. “But, worth it.”

Moose grinned. “You know, there’s a part-time job opening at the mine. Could be pretty lucrative.”

Bane padded up to the exit and turned to face the assembled RIDEs, joined by the skunk. "Okay, who else is with us? No pressure. This is a free choice, after all."

Moose nodded. "And if any of you change your minds later, you can come back if you go, or go if you stay. That's what being free is all about."

"I'm staying here for now. I like these folks," Summer said.

"Same here," said Natasha. "I'm rather curious what it would be like to have a 'job.'"

In the end, only a couple of other RIDEs chose to leave with Bane and the skunk. The others opted to take Sally's offer, with a few allowing as how they might like to try finding partners too.

Sally clapped her hands together. "Great! Come on down to the Marshals' Office tomorrow, and we'll get you sorted."

"Speakin' o gettin' sorted, when are you two gonna join up?" Bonnie asked, looking at Moose and Ayeka.

"I don't think I can get that involved until the mine is up and running," Moose said. "The Marshals are getting ten percent of my revenues, so the faster we get that going the better off everyone will be."

"It don't have to be a full time thing. We have our own mine to run, you know. So we'll see ya when we see ya."

*Mustang Sally, think you better slow your mustang down.*

*Mustang Sally, think you better slow your mustang down.*

*You been running all over the town now.*

*Oh! I guess I'll have to put your flat feet on the ground.*

"A toast, to Mustang Sally, and her pard, Bonnie!" Wyatt said, raising a pint of beer as the jukebox played the ancient rock song.

"Hear, hear!" Moose said, raising a cocktail glass with a little parasol in it. "All in all, I guess we came off okay for our first official raid."

"Y'all not going to start calling me 'Mustang' now, are you?" Sally asked, giving Bonnie a rubbing on her withers. The mustang mare lipped her partner's hair affectionately.

"Why the hell not?" Mara said. "Everyone, including you two, calls *me* Dragon Lady. And Moose is still Moose, even if she's legally 'Minuet'."

"Got *that* right, Dragon Lady," Moose added. She reached back to stroke Ayeka's ears. The cheetah was pressing the top of her head into the small of Moose's back, purring.

"So where do you go from here?" Jeremy asked. He was also present, Fused with Tuke again. While neither one of them seemed inclined to give up his current job at the moment, they seemed to get along well enough when they were together.

Sally grinned. "We're going to marshal our resources." She grinned wider at the chorus of groans that followed this announcement. "Heinrich and Sasha are our only current full-timers, so expect to see them around your claims a lot, checking in."

"We'll be mostly on border patrol up Coulter's Rill way," Sasha said.

"*Ja*. Has been much suspicious activity out there lately," Heinrich added. "Smugglers, we think."

Bonnie snorted. "Our Dolt neighbors up on the *Whirlwind* are doin' their normal

bang-up jobs.”

“Yeah. There's no bribe they won't take,” a miner who had been there recently said.

“Well, for now let's just try and keep Harmon Gulch safe,” Sally said. “Have to crawl before we can walk.”

“But after we walk, then we can dance!” Ayeka purred. She looked at Moose, then at Jeremy and Tuke. “Wanna dance?”

Moose put her drink down and coughed. “Ayeka, dear, what did I say about matchmaking?”

“Um,” the cat stammered. “Well...”

Sally smirked. “So, Moose, you wanna dance?”

The cheetah perked her ears. “Oh, hey. That's okay, too.”

Sally put her hands on Moose's shoulders. “Far as I'm concerned nothing's really changed between us. You can be as 'girly' as you want. I'm...a flexible gal. And I can show you things...”

Moose blushed. “Oh, I'm sure you *can*, Sally. And I'm a quick learner.”

“I know things, too! Lots of things!” Ayeka purred. “I'm *fully functional*.”

“I think she'd rather have an, ahem, *anatomy lesson* from another woman, eh?” Tuke opined. “'Cos I can see where this is going.”

Ayeka looked crestfallen, but not for long. “Okay, okay. I can learn to be flexible too, you know. At least, *now* I can.”

“An' that's real progress, young'un,” Bonnie said. She pushed Sally towards Moose. “You two gonna dance or what?”

Wyatt waved at the jukebox. “After all, they're playing your song.”

*Mustang Sally, think you better slow your mustang down...*

**To Be Continued**

## Episode Two: Reaping the Whirlwind

*May 21, 128 AL*

*Whirlwind, Pleiades Plateau, Southern Dry Ocean*

DOLEB Corporal Reed Mosley hurried down the steps of the outpost station. He was a slim man with sandy brown hair, brown eyes, and the kind of full mustache that was in style in his old home polity, Cape Nord. He wore the standard quibitie blue DOLEB uniform, though with a minimum of decoration. “Just got word. Rod Clemson was spotted over on Coulter's Rill. If we leave now—”

“Calm down, Mosley. You'd think they'd seen Burnside Bill.” Mosley's partner, Corporal Carson Nilsson, sat back in the cushy saddle of his large Chinook skimmer bike. He was a heavy-built, florid-faced man with more than a bit of a paunch. “Let's not make more work for ourselves. It's the end of our shift.”

“You kidding? There's a good chance he's going to try to sneak more refined Q over the border tonight. This could be our shot at catching him red-handed.”

“So...we can catch him red-handed tomorrow,” Corporal Nilsson said. “Not on the clock, not our problem.”

Reed glared at him. He was used to some crazy statements about their duties from his fellow officers, but that one was hands down one of the worst. Nilsson was all about his own personal comfort, from the soft buckskin leather of his Chinook's seat to the handmade gourmet meals he packed in the saddlebags while on their cushy, inadequate patrols. But it wouldn't do any good to argue. Instead, Reed sighed, audibly. “Yeah, pal, I guess you're right.” He yawned. “You won't say anything if I head home a little early? It's Ladies' Night at Seven Sisters, and you know what *that* means.”

“It's about time you got with the rest of us, Mosley,” Nilsson said. “Nice to see you're finally coming around. Ladies love a Man in uniform. But you're from Cape Nord, right? You know that.”

“See you later.” He straddled his Tornado, thumbed the starter, and headed back toward their barracks. But instead of pulling into the garage, he only stopped long enough to dismount the DOLEB transponder beacon from under the bike's saddle and toss it into the bushes nearby. Then he pulled away again, in the other direction, making a wide circle to put some dunes between himself and the outpost. If he hurried, he could intercept Clemson a dozen clicks before he passed over the border into Harmon Gulch.

He didn't fool himself that his superiors would look kindly on it, but he was just about frustrated past the point of caring by now. Half a dozen times in the last month the smuggler had slipped by right under their noses. They had camera and ZPS tracking data that proved it. But somehow DOLEB was never in the right place at the right time. Mosley might have lost patience with the more ridiculous aspects of Cape Nord's obsession with Manliness, but that didn't mean he was prepared to countenance such a brazen affront to his Manhood as letting a criminal operate with impunity out of his jurisdiction. “Rod Clemson, you are going *down*.”

Reed dropped down to lose himself in ground clutter and glanced at the radar display as he closed in on the predicted vector. If Clemson was taking the route he thought he was, he should be coming into view right...about...

“There you are.” The pip was just the right size and speed for the Nextus lynx RIDE bike Clemson had gotten surplus after the War. The very ones Nextus had replaced the Tornado with, in fact. Reed patted the fairing of his bike reassuringly. “Yeah, we’ll show ‘em that newer ain’t always better, won’t we, boy.” He just had to wait a little longer for the RIDE to get closer. If he sprang the trap too early, the smuggler could peel off and get away. They had to be as close as possible if this was going to work.

Reed waited anxiously. Had the RIDE’s sensors pinged him? It was possible, though he hoped not. Though if they had, they should be changing course already, and he wasn’t, so...

Now. Reed revved the bike and streaked up into the sky after the smuggler. “Rod Clemson! This is the Dry Ocean Law Enforcement Bureau! Land that bike and keep your hands where I can see them!”

As expected, the smuggler’s only response was to rev his RIDEbike faster. “Yeah, I hoped you’d do that,” Reed muttered, flipping the switch to kick in the extra battery packs and impeller motors he’d installed into the bike. Then he flipped another switch to activate targeting on his front pulse cannons. He triggered a long burst aimed to pass right in front of the bike by centimeters. “That was your warning shot! Land that bike no—WHOA!” Reed threw himself into a barrel roll as the bike returned fire from a rear-mounted pulse gun, bolts hissing through the air.

“Okay, so that’s how you wanna play it? Fine.” Reed fired again for accuracy—but it was now the RIDE’s turn to dodge and dive, heading for a canyon down below. A warning popped up on Reed’s HUD that he was only 5 klicks from the Harmon Gulch border. Reed ignored it and goosed his bike after them, firing as he went.

“Is good sunset, *da?*” Heinrich leaned forward, arms crossed on the instrument panel of the vaguely ursine quad-bike that was Sasha’s skimmer mode, as they proceeded south among the eastern perimeter of the Harmon Gulch territory. It had been a fairly peaceful day, as had most of them since the Marshals had formed. It seemed that the power vacuum left by rounding up the criminal scum had not yet filled itself. Which was fine with Heinrich, on the whole. All the same, he could have preferred things to be a little less boring.

Sasha chuckled, knowing his rider’s thoughts from long familiarity. “Is good sunset, *da*. So, any regrets?”

“About what? Leaving Sturmhaven? Becoming Marshal? Becoming *man?*”

“All of the above? I’ve picked up on the odd thought here or there, you know.”

“Eh.” Heinrich shrugged. “You must know, safety wait time on crossride is being almost up. And am thinking of changing back. Meaning no offense, my friend.”

“Of course. I knew from the outset this was a temporary arrangement.”

“At least you no need worry of being sold. You are Marshal now, with me or without me. We are taking care of our own, always.”

The comm crackled with Sally’s voice. “Hey, you two. Getting sensor reports of pulse fire not too far from your location. Check it out?”

“*Da!* Are being on our way!” Heinrich gripped the handlebars, and they swerved and picked up speed.

Reed swooped through the canyon after the RIDE, keeping half his attention on not running into canyon walls and the other half on not being hit by the RIDE’s return

fire. *Must be nice, having a second brain who can handle firing and stuff.* At least his bike was maneuverable enough to deal with it. *Nilsson's Chinook would get creamed.*

The canyon widened out and ended, and they were in the open again. He lined up the crosshairs again...then the RIDE braked and Fused. Reed shot right past. "Oh, snap." He flipped the switch to convert the bike to armor mode, counting the seconds as the parts rotated around and pulse blasts streaked by. Lucky thing it was so hard to hit a moving target—or else the RIDE was a lousy shot.

Fuse complete, Reed spun around, tracking onto the RIDE and firing his pulse rifle. For all that the Ad-I bike was clunkier and less maneuverable than a RIDE, you didn't have to maneuver very far to point a gun at a target. With some satisfaction, he saw his first shots smack into the RIDE's hardlight armor. As it returned fire, Reed kicked in his thruster pack and moved forward. The RIDE tried to pull away, but faltered under the weight of the pulse fire. "Gotcha." The Tornado slammed into the RIDE, forcing it downward.

They both hit the ground, rolled over...and then the RIDE shoved him off and converted back to skimmer form. As Reed staggered to his feet, the skimmer bike sped away. "Urgh...no you don't." Reed raised the rifle, sighted carefully down the barrel, and fired. Two hundred meters away, the RIDE bike's rear lifter pods blew out and it went down.

"Right!" Reed kicked in the lifter pack and hovered over to the downed bike. The inertial safety systems had kicked in, sparing Clemson more than a few bumps and bruises, but he was clearly in no shape to run anywhere. He lay spread-eagled across the ground next to the smoking RIDE. Reed touched down next to him. "You have the right to remain silent. Asshole."

"What is being all this, then?"

Reed glanced up in time to see a big bear Fuser touch down next to him, bearing a large pulse rifle of its own—and a big shiny gold star on its chest. The bear didn't point the rifle directly at him, but didn't point it too far away, either.

"Just making an arrest. DOLEB Corporal Reed Mosley."

"You do realize you are being out of jurisdiction, Corporal? This is being territory of Harmon Gulch, and I am being Marshal Heinrich Ivanovich."

Mosley placed the accent. *Oh, great. Sturmhaven. Well, at least it's not a 'Woman Of.'* "Hot pursuit doctrine. I started chasing this low-life Q smuggler back in the Pleiades. Anyway, I was unaware Harmon Gulch had any law enforcement."

"We are havink it now."

*Huh. So I see.* Deciding that not arguing with big bears with badges and guns was the better part of valor, Mosley nodded. "Well, sorry about that, Marshal. If I'd known you were here, I'd have commed ahead to set up a roadblock. How long you been active?"

"All of two weeks, Corporal," a new voice said. A snowmobile-style RIDE, surprisingly with no human aboard, landed and changed to Walker form, an arctic fox. "Sorry I missed it."

"Is being okay, Summer," Heinrich said.

*Oh, great. Something else the higher-ups didn't see fit to let me know about.* "Well, that's good to know. Pass me your comm code, I'll give you a buzz next time."

"Surprise is not being all on your side. *We* were not knowing the Dolts had any officers who were actually being competent."

“Not to mention not bent,” the bear added in another voice.

*Ouch.* Mosley sighed. He knew what everyone called DOLEB behind their backs—every officer did, but hardly cared—but couldn't dispute the epithet, either. He'd watched Nilsson accept naked bribes, and had refused just as many during the four months since he joined. “Frankly, the shoe fits. I don't know if there's anyone else like me anywhere on the force.”

“Always at least a few good apples among the bad, I say,” Summer said.

“Anyway, the collar on this guy's all yours. You should find plenty of undeclared high-grade refined Q in his RIDE's panniers. Just do me a favor? Leave me out of the report. I'm in enough trouble with my supes and fellow officers as it is. If they knew I was actually doing my job, they might fire me.”

“You wish no credit at all?” Henrich said.

“Hey, it's enough for me to know this jerk's off the streets.” *And modesty is a Manly virtue.* Reed knew he shouldn't still be thinking in those terms, but what could you do about the attitudes you grew up with?

“Of course,” the bear mecha said. “And you handle that Tomato better than anyone I've ever seen since the War. Please take that as a true compliment.”

“You make do with what you've got.”

“Life gives you tomatos, you make marinara sauce,” Summer quipped.

“I would have said Bloody Marys, but yeah.”

“Wyatt and Durante are incoming,” Sasha reported. In the distance the large APC that doubled as their paddy wagon descended out of the sky. The bear ambled over to check on the RIDE. “You okay there, friend?”

“What do you think? My biscuits are burning!” the RIDE replied, still smoking from his lifters. “And I've got a nasty case of mode-lock.” They heard a sigh. “Not that it matters. Gonna end up in the crusher anyway.”

“Nah, kitty. Even if you're a willing accessory to the crimes here, you're not going to get crushed,” Summer said.

“Why am I not reassured? Well, I'm yours anyway. I'm shutting down.”

“I'd better get on back. My partner will be looking for me at Seven Sisters. Comm me if you get wind of anything happening up Whirlwind way, I'll do what I can.”

“Nice meeting you, Corporal,” the bear said, giving him an actual salute.

“Da, is being good day today,” Heinrich said. He looked at the prostrate Rod Clemson, surrounded by a transparent hardlight shield to protect him from the heat. “For most, anyway.”

After a quick stop back at the barracks to retrieve the transponder, Reed Mosley pulled his Tornado into the parking lot at the Seven Sisters, the combination pub and dance club that passed for *Whirlwind's* center of social activity. The miners who frequented the place had pretty simple tastes. As long as the booze kept flowing it didn't matter if it was fabbed rotgut or 12-year old scotch imported from Earth.

The rest of the Dolts—as he could now admit was the right word for them—normally took over a corner of the place, lording over it like nobility over their serfs. At the center was Captain Lind and her right-hand woman, Lieutenant Solberg.

If the Reed Mosley of five years ago had met them it would have confirmed every bad thing about women being in charge that Cape Nord fed to young Men. But the Reed Mosley of the present was well-traveled enough, and mature enough, to have recognized

Cape Nord sexist codswallop for what it was. That they were nasty, backstabbing bitches was without question, but that was what Cape Nord culture expected them to be in leadership positions. Reed knew that just about anywhere that wasn't Cape Nord it couldn't be farther from the truth.

Sitting in his regular booth with a Cape Nord catgirl on each side, Nilsson waved his partner over. "Mosley! What the hell you doing sitting by yourself? Get over here and get yourself a drink and a girl. And get a load of this!"

Projected over the table was one of the ancient television shows enjoying a resurgence in popularity via Steader Entertainment. In Reed's view Joe Steader and his company were doing some incredible, and successful, cultural necromancy. He recognized the beat of the theme as 1970s disco. The screen showed two policemen on gasoline-powered motorcycles. "ChiPs'?"

"This is a great show!" Nilsson said. "I'm *totally* Ponch and you're John."

"If you say so." Reed shrugged and sat down right on the end of the circular booth. "What is it? Police procedural?"

"Does it matter? Look, Reed..." he leaned forward and made a sweeping motion with his hand, pushing the TV show aside. "Everybody knows how gung-ho you are for the job. But you've been around long enough now I know you've seen just how pointless it really is. The Dry is too big, and we're too small to make any difference."

"What's your point, Carson?" Reed asked, deciding to go with the first name thing for now.

"The point, Reed, is that you take what you can get. You've hotrodded out that Tornado you ride, so I know you're getting money from somewhere."

"It's called a savings account," Reed said. *And some lucky investments in Brubeck Mining. Like half the Manly Men of Cape Nord.* Sometimes it amused Reed just how much of Cape Nord's financial success could be traced to the lucky happenstance that one of the Manliest Men Alive had founded a business and then been successful himself. "I'm not in this for the money; it's just an excuse to spend time in the great outdoors." *And away from Cape Nord.*

Nilsson made a dismissive gesture. "Don't give me that bullshit, Reed."

Mosley shook his head. "Sorry, Nilsson, but I just can't. It's all right for you, since you're from Nextus where it's elevated to an art form, but not for me. Taking bribes just isn't Manly." He had to admit, as obnoxious as he found the whole Manliness thing, it sure did provide a handy excuse when he needed it. In his more cynical moments (which was most of the time, these days) he wondered whether *anyone* in Cape Nord honestly saw Manliness as anything more than a reason not to have to do things they didn't want to.

"So you're not joining in because of some Cape Nord cultural bullshit?" Nilsson said incredulously. He pointed up at Captain Lind. "You know she's from New Oslo? Little town north of the main caves? Escaped to blast through the damned glass ceiling you keep women under up there."

*Oh, now I get a rant and a lecture. Which I'd probably actually agree with, if I weren't trying to hide behind the bullshit. Well, that's karma for you.* "Well, that's certainly her privilege. I don't see what it has to do with me."

"I guess I'll have to use simple words for you Nordy neanderthal. When opportunity knocks, you take it. And I want to *see you* taking it. Because Captain Lind is not so reassured you're in the game with the rest of us. You're getting one more chance

to play ball. Hear?"

Reed made a show of sighing and acquiescing. "Loud and clear."

Nilsson smiled. It wasn't a friendly smile, but that of a dog keeping an eye on a potential threat. "Good. Now, let me buy you a drink. Rum and Coke good for you?"

"Gimme a White Russian."

The Corporal laughed. "Heh. Yeah. Real 'Manly' drink there, Mosley."

Reed grinned. "Maybe you haven't seen that movie the Steaders put out just last week? *The Big Lebowski*? If it's good enough for The Dude, it's good enough for me."

*May 23, 128 AL*

*DOLEB Marshals Office, Dust Devil*

"Knock knock."

It was Sally's turn on the desk this weekend. She looked up at the young man leaning against the frame of the open Marshals office door. He wore slacks, flannel shirt, and a down vest. "Can I help you?"

"Reed Mosley, ma'am. Was just in the neighborhood, thought I'd stop by." His accent as much as his hairstyle marked him out to be from Cape Nord. Sally hoped she wouldn't have any Manly Man attitude trouble with him. It was about the last thing she needed right now.

"Oh, right. I heard about you. Brought down that smuggler last week. Prosecutor indicted him, by the way. Don't know if it'll stick on appeal, but at least we'll get him off the streets for a while."

"Glad to hear it."

"So what brings you to these parts, Corporal Mosley?"

"Please just call me Reed, ma'am. Main thing is, I wanted to come over and meet you folks, and offer a bit of unofficial cooperation."

Bonnie lifted her head over the lower door in the stall behind Sally's desk. She had her own hardlight skin now and to the uninitiated it looked as though Sally was keeping a real horse in her office. Bonnie had chosen a buckskin coloration with a black mane and tail, though that was easily changed. "Is that right?"

Reed nodded to her. "I sure hope it's right, but either way, it's correct."

"The stink must be really bad over there," Sally said.

"I could just quit and wash my hands of the whole thing, but I won't," Reed said. "I can't sit by and watch this happen."

Sally couldn't resist a little dig. "Man's got to do what a Man's got to do, huh?"

Reed rolled his eyes. "Ma'am, if the only reason someone had for fighting injustice was that it was Manly, that would be one piss poor sort of a Man, pardon my French. Frankly, I'm fed up with working for a laughingstock mall cop operation that only seems to exist to take bribes not to do anything."

Sally chuckled. "Hard to blame you for that. Why don't you come on down to Clancy's and meet everyone else who's off duty at the moment?"

"I'd like to meet them, ma'am, but I'd really rather not be seen in public with you folks 'round here. Word gets back to Whirlwind that I'm talking to Marshals, could be a little awkward."

"Fair enough. How 'bout Jeremy's, then? That's the local mechanic shop. There are some private garages good for a talk. I'll let the others know."

“Sounds good to me. Guess I'll go for a wander in that direction. I kind of like the Old West look the *Dust Devil* has. The *Whirlwind* can't decide if they're groovy sixties or mellow seventies. A man gets tired of so much avocado green and shag carpeting.”

“I hear ya,” Sally said. “Bon-bon and me are due for a break. We might wander that way ourselves in a few.”

“Well, see you then.” Mosley nodded, then let himself out.

The layout of the *Dust Devil* was the same as the *Whirlwind*, so Reed easily found the mechanic shop. It was a busy place with skimmer and RIDE parts laid out neatly, waiting to be installed. An ore hauler skimmer-truck shared space with a half dozen RIDEs.

“Okay, try that again, Leonato,” the mechanic—presumably Jeremy—said.

The skimmer bike on the repair platform was a familiar one. It still bore a few scorch marks from Reed's pulse rifle, but the rear lifter pods had been replaced. There was a quiet hum, and the bike collapsed inwards into a lynx mecha the size of a pony.

“That got it, Jeremy! Thanks,” Leonato said. He stretched his forelegs, then his hindlegs, just like a real cat would, before he noticed Reed standing there. He jumped, spun in midair, yowled like a scalded cat, and hid behind the ore hauler.

“Leo! What gotten into you?” Jeremy noticed the newcomer. “Can I help...”

“That guy shot me down with a Tomato! A *Tomato!* I'll never live that down!” Leonato yowled.

“Uh...sorry?” Reed said. “I'm sure if it hadn't been for that dead weight you were carrying, I never would have caught you.”

“Damned straight!” Leonato growled. “And you friggin' Dolts weren't supposed to be anywhere near there that night.”

“Oh, really? How would you know that?”

“I didn't, but Clemson did. Talked to himself a lot. Damn sure didn't ever talk to *me.*”

“When you RIDEs are Fused, you and your rider are supposed to be able to read each others' thoughts, aren't you?”

Leonato sniffed. “You'd think, wouldn't you? But he had me fettered away from that. Guess if I knew what-all he must have, I'd have felt the same way. Jerk.”

Reed's interaction with RIDEs had been indirect at best. They hadn't been covered much in DOLEB training—not exactly a big surprise, since almost no Dolt officers got to use any. The magazines on newsstands and media tablet feeds were more informative. On the personal side, the mecha tended not to be very talkative around Dolts, and stayed close to the miners who owned them. Since the Dolts didn't use RIDEs themselves it was another count against them as far as the miners were concerned. It made them even more outsiders.

“I gather you don't need to worry about him anymore.”

“Yeah, so what's it to you?”

A snowmobile skimmer landed on the platform outside and converted into an arctic fox. “Cool down, Leo. He's not going to shoot you again or anything.”

“A cat has to have some dignity,” the lynx said. “You canids have none, Summer. What kind of name is that for a male fox, anyway?”

“It's a Cape Nord thing. You ever hear that Johnny Cash song, ‘A Boy Named Sue’?”

Reed nodded. "In some circles, it's considered 'Manly' to have a sissy name. Don't ask me how that works. I haven't been back there since right after the War ended. I got fed up with the whole thing. Even burned my Man Card." He shook his head. "Then they sent me a Platinum Man Card in the mail two weeks later. I didn't dare try to burn it again, lest they induct me into the Chippendales or something."

"No idea what Nerd made those Man Card rules, but they're positively Byzantine and only getting worse," Summer agreed. "So many rules about what's Manly and loopholes they'd make a Nextus native throw up their hands and give up."

"Damned silly, you ask me. Should be enough *you* think you're a Man. We're supposed to be 'rugged individualists'...but we have to seek everyone else's approval for that? Who dreamed that one up?"

"Is natural overreaction to Sturmhaven women. I sympathize. Sturmhaven female foolishness is being so extreme, it cannot help but breed equal and opposite extreme of male foolishness."

Reed turned, recognizing the accent of the Marshal to whom he'd handed off Clemson. "Marshal Ivanovich, isn't it?"

"*Da*, but be calling me Heinrich." He was un-Fused, but the immense bear Sasha loped along behind him. Heinrich was a good ten centimeters taller than Reed and as muscular as a real bear. Just looking the way he did would've given him a full Man Card on entering Cape Nord.

"Then call me Reed. Good to meet you in the flesh."

"Is feeling same, comrade." Heinrich nodded. "Would offer to buying you drink, but am understanding not wanting to be seen."

"We've heard bad things about the Whirlwind Dolts from prospectors passing through," Sasha said. "We're happy to see there's one good egg in the bunch. Why the visit?"

"They're *not* so glad. There's only so long I can really hold off on taking part in the corruption without them getting suspicious. I've read there was some story about a New York City cop having the same trouble. Maybe one of these days the Steaders will release it."

"Am thinking you want to do something about it," Heinrich mused.

"Planning on it. Way I figure is, there wasn't any point when nobody gave a damn. But now I know you guys are here..."

"We're a bunch of inexperienced, barely-trained rookies," Sasha admitted. "Essentially learning on the job. It really must be bad if you want *our* help."

"Don't sell us too short, Sasha," Summer said. "I've already skill-chipped most of what we need and I have a whole library of forensics and crime scene investigation methods in my head. Experience will come naturally."

"You guys are already more competent than 99% of the Dolts I've worked with," Reed said. "Fact is that I need you guys to give me some backing legal authority here."

"I think we could manage that," a woman who looked half dragon said. "Hi, Jeremy. Just coming by to see if the next set of Enter's emitters is in yet."

"Hard to get parts for dragons, Mara. And Enter needs a lot of emitters for a proper skin," Jeremy said. "You'll get a text."

"So, you're planning on a sting, Mr. Mosley?" Mara said.

"That's the idea. I can't keep pushing away their bribes without ending up in a ditch somewhere. So I'm going to have to play along. I figure if I'm careful and not too

nosy, I can figure out where the money's coming from sooner or later."

"But working alone with no one to watch your back is kind of risky, isn't it?" Sasha asked.

Reed shrugged. "Yeah, but what choice do I have? I can't exactly just bring a friend in and have the Dolts hire them."

Summer cleared his throat. "You know, there's more than one kind of partner. Seems to me most people who don't work with RIDEs tend to underestimate them. Think we're just fancy toys who only mimic intelligence. So maybe when you get your first bribe, you go out and spend it on one."

Reed blinked. "You're offering?"

"Why not? I don't have a partner at the moment, you seem like a nice enough guy, and I'm a fully-empowered Harmon Gulch Marshal, with all the legal authority thereunto."

"Which might not mean much outside the Marshals just yet, but it means everything as far as we're concerned," Mara said.

"If you wanted, I mean." Summer wagged his tail diffidently. "After all, I don't know how you feel about RIDEs..."

Reed paused. How *did* he feel about RIDEs? He'd never gotten one, but then they were kind of expensive, and he hadn't felt like it would really be fair to saddle someone else with the burden of putting up with him if they didn't get any say in it. But in this situation... "Since you're offering, I'd be glad for the help."

Summer nodded. "Well, that's settled then."

"Is good!" Heinrich declared, slapping Reed on the shoulder. "Let's move to private room. We can talk more fully, make plans there."

Reed shrugged, partly because of the sting from the friendly slap. "Sure, works for me." He nodded to Leonato. "No hard feelings?"

"Eh." The lynx sneezed. "Well, this Marshals biz is a lot better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick. And it is nice to be free of that Clemson jerk. But don't expect to be my favorite person."

"I can live with that."

*Whirlwind*

*May 28, 128 AL*

"Your very first cash-in and you buy one of those RIDE-things...that turns into a snowmobile." Corporal Nilsson looked at the skimmer-mode Summer in disbelief. "A *snowmobile* in the middle of the Dry."

"What can I say? It was cheap, and it shouldn't require nearly as much maintenance as that Tomato," Reed said. "And a snowmobile reminds me of home." He felt a little guilty about referring to Summer as an "it," but they'd agreed that it would help conceal Summer's true nature.

"Yeah, well, whatever gets you through the night." Nilsson shrugged. "You just better be able to keep up on patrol."

Reed grinned. "Don't worry about me." :*Keep up, eh? Wouldn't want to fall behind when we go out to not catch anybody...:*

:*I'm twice as fast as that Schnook he rides,:* Summer scoffed.

Summer was technically stolen goods. A brand new RIDE taken from a dealer lot

in Cape Nord and then passed through a couple more hands before ending up with the Harmon Gulch claim jumpers. As with most of the stolen RIDEs, the Marshals had settled with the insurance companies to be allowed to “keep” them.

*:And off we go. Another wasted day...:*

*:Any day that gets us closer to busting these slobs isn't totally wasted.:* Summer sent a wink emoticon. *:Besides, it's plenty of time to get to know each other.:*

The so-called patrol was a *lot* more tolerable with Summer to chat with. They made several stops along the way at various claims, each time accepting some kind of payment—in money, quibite to sell at the Assay Office, or items of value. This was just SOP, and the miners were all jaded enough that they just handed things over without complaint. Their RIDEs took an interest in Summer, though.

*:Don't worry. I'm not blowing our cover or anything,:* Summer reassured. *:But you're the first Dolt they've seen with a RIDE, so they've got questions.:*

*:Sure. Keep track of who's fettered and who's free, though. I don't know if it's a one-to-one correlation, but it seems more likely the free ones belong to the “good guys.”:*

“You'll be hotrodding that thing out in no time with all this cash, Mosley,” Nilsson said during a lunch break. His meal was a round of toasted brie *en crouete*, fresh seedless red grapes, a ham and fontina cheese sandwich on marble rye bread with dijon mustard, and an early vintage of Burnside Red wine. All was served on unbreakable fine china and a silver tray.

Reed's own lunch was very simple: cola, potato chips, and a roast beef sandwich. “Maybe. I've got to put something aside for my old age, you know.”

“Me, I'm going to get some chrome trim for Snookie here.” He patted the battery pack in front of him, under his lunch tray. “She likes bling.”

It was all Reed could do not to laugh out loud. “She does, does she?”

Outwardly, the next week passed pretty much as it had before. Summer stayed quiet around the Dolts and was rarely in Walker form, though he kept his eyes open and sensors engaged at all times. Captain Lind had complimented the rookie's new physical attributes—Reed didn't bother trying to hide the tail and ears. Otherwise, she kept the interaction with her inferiors to a minimum as a matter of policy. It wouldn't do for the nobility to fraternize too much with the serfs, after all.

Ladies' Night came around again and Reed sat down with Nilsson in his regular booth, drinking a White Russian and watching ChiPs. Reed had amassed several thousand *mu* in bribes already, all in a special account that would turn evidence when the time came. He also had Summer's recordings of Nilsson's activities, and whenever they met the few other Dolts on patrol.

The longer this went on, the greater the chance of being discovered, the more antsy Reed was getting. He just needed something that would break the case wide open so much that even the DOLEB Commandant in Nuevo San would have to take action. But at the same time, he knew he had to be careful how he went about it if he wanted the evidence to be legally admissible. Without a warrant, he couldn't tap encrypted comm lines or bug private quarters.

Then one day Summer buzzed him. *:Hey, Reed. I think we may have something here. It's that local Chaucer rep, Flint Basil.:*

*:Yeah? Slimy little bugger. What about him?:*

*:Well, he and Lind just walked into Seven Sisters together, and they're going to*

*one of the back rooms.:*

*:Can you get a read on what they're saying?:*

*:Tickling the windowpane with a laser now. It probably won't be admissible, you know.:*

*:Yeah, but if they're going to do something shady, maybe we can find out about it and catch 'em at in the act.:*

Basil had an odd accent Reed couldn't place. "I want you and your Dolts to put some pressure on your new competition," he was saying. "Ever since these 'Harmon Gulch Marshals' have begun operating, it's posed a serious threat to our bottom line in the region. Some of the richest strikes are in that province, and if these Marshals pose a serious threat to our operations, we won't be able to convince those miners to sell out. Their arrest of Clemson last month was bad enough."

"How am I supposed to put pressure on them with a half dozen officers?" Captain Lind said.

"If you need muscle, I can get you more muscle," Basil said ominously. Then the voices became too muffled to hear.

*:They put up a privacy field.:* Summer informed. *:Sorry about that. And that guy's accent. He's from Kepler. That planet's run by the mob.:*

*:Well, that's certainly a strike against him. Ugh. We'd better let the Marshals know about this.:*

*:The good news is, if we can catch 'em trying to do us dirty in Harmon Gulch, jurisdiction won't be a worry.:*

*:The problem's going to be figuring out what it is.:* Reed shook his head. *:I don't know if I'm trusted enough yet to be in on anything like this, especially if they bring in outside "muscle.":*

*:If it helps, I can almost certainly get a warrant from a Harmon Gulch judge for some bugging and tracer planting.:*

*:Will that count given they're out of your jurisdiction right now?:*

*:It's a fig leaf. But it's all we've got. Anyway, we just want to use it to find out what they're going to do, not enter it into evidence directly. I'll call the Dragon Lady.:*

Mosley found the next few days of patrols more than a little enervating. They hadn't been able to do very much in the way of additional intelligence gathering. Hidden tracers and bugs planted on the other Dolts' bikes, other bugs where they thought they would do some good. But they couldn't break into Lind's private quarters or tap her encrypted comm's hardline, so it was hard to know for sure what was really going on.

Then, three days later, they were out patrolling the eastern side of *Whirlwind* territory—the opposite edge from Harmon Gulch—when Summer signaled for Mosley's attention. *:Think we've got something here.:* He threw up a chart showing the positions of the other four officers in their DOLEB division. *:Funny thing. They're supposed to be on north and south patrols, but they're heading into Harmon Gulch.:*

*:And here we are all the way over here. Did you comm Sally?:*

*:I let 'em know. They're keeping an eye on things.:*

*:Hmm.:* Mosley thought for a moment. *:I think it's time for you to fake some engine trouble.:*

*:On it.:* The skimmer's engine sputtered and cut out.

"Aw, dammit," Mosley swore over the comm as Summer sank to the desert sand.

“I think I might have shorted the main sarium battery when I put the latest impeller upgrade in.”

Nilsson sneered. “That’s what you get for messing with fancy-schmancy RIDEs instead of tried-and-true Ad-I tech. You need a lift back or something?”

“Nah, you go on. I should be able to get this sorted out in two ticks. Nothing ever happens on these patrols anyway.” He climbed off the saddle and made a show of squatting down and peering at the sarium battery assembly.

“Well, if you’re sure...” Nilsson circled once, then sped away. Mosley waited until he was well over the horizon before detaching the DOLEB position transponder and dropping it on the sand.

“Right, now let’s get out of here. We stay low and keep to the dunes, we should be able to cut across the Rest without anyone noticing.” Mosley swung back into the saddle. “I hope you can make better speed than a snowmobile in the desert.”

Summer scoffed. “Just watch me.”

Heinrich, Sasha, and Natasha patrolled along the length of Redmane Ridge, near the Harmon Gulch border. There were a dozen claims in this territory, and they’d already gotten used to the Marshals stopping by to say hello. It took a while to build trust, and the miners this close to the border still doubted the Marshals were any better than the Dolts. They still had a ways to go.

Today the normally clear skies over the Dry had a high layer of cirrus, painting the sky with mare’s tails.

“Where seldom is heard, a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy...well, damnit,” Natasha sang. The Sturmhaven she-wolf lacked the stereotypical accent.

“We may be facing stormy weather in more ways than one, comrades.” Heinrich frowned. “Receiving word from Sally of Whirlwind Dolt incursion into Harmon Gulch. Could be rising of balloon.”

“The balloon’s going up, you mean,” Sasha put in.

“Da, is what I said.”

“One of these days I’m going to figure out whether you keep getting idioms wrong on purpose. Anyway...looks like our orders are to keep an eye on them without letting them know we know.”

“Da. And if they are knowing we are knowing, we should at least be knowing they are knowing we are knowing.”

“I hate you.”

With a throaty chuckle, Heinrich steered over onto a new heading. “We will be shadowing them from distance, staying in ground sensor clutter. If they are staying in ground sensor clutter too, could be challenging.”

“We’ve got the frequencies of their locator beacons, thanks to Summer and Reed. We should be able to keep an eye on them.”

“Will let you keep track of that. Just do not be letting them see.”

“Don’t worry. When the time is right, we’ll give them a big surprise.”

“Well, there’s a surprise.” Sally glanced at the display screen in the Marshals’ office command center. “Looks like the jumpers or someone like them are back at my mine, and doing a little more than ‘probing’ this time. Just lost one of my pulse turrets... and there went another. Was that a plasma bazooka?”

Bonnie nodded. "They've got some serious military hardware there. Gee, wonder where *that* could have come from."

"So we're supposed to round up the whole posse and high-tail it out there..." Wyatt mused. "Just in time to get clobbered by an ambush, I expect."

"The joke's going to be on them." Sally pursed her lips. "Hate to say this, but if we're going to shut this ambush down, we may just have to let them do their worst to the mine for a while, so's we can deal with the other varmints first."

"We sure don't want to charge into battle knowin' we're like to get shot in the back, that's for sure."

Wyatt scratched behind a scale. "Can we really just up and arrest Whirlwind cops for being out of their jurisdiction?"

"Probably not..." Sally frowned, staring off into space for a moment. "But if *they* know why they're there, what if we dangle some bait in front of them? Have a lone Marshal wander all unknowing into their sights, and if they open fire, everyone else swoops in an' rounds 'em up?"

Bonnie snorted. "So ambush the ambushers, is what you're sayin'? I'm thinkin' I like this idea. But who gets to play bait?"

Sally grinned. "Who do you think? I wouldn't ever ask any of my subordinates to do somethin' I wasn't willing to do myself, and I don't think you would neither."

"Guess we ought to get on out there, then. I'll let the others know where to be."

"Works for me, pard." Sally held out her arms for Bonnie to Fuse over, then they were out of the command post like a shot.

Two Tornados and a Chinook drove forward across the desert, their riders hunched low over the fairing. Not that it helped their radar profile any, but at least it made them feel "covert."

"You see anything yet?" Kendrix Pean asked over short-range comm. The overweight DOLEB Sergeant got the Chinook, as the senior-most officer. The fourth member of their "patrol" had had genuine battery trouble and returned to the *Whirlwind*.

"No sign, sir," Patrolman Delia Knoles said. She glanced left and right. "Seems like we're alone."

"Use your scanner, you stupid cow," Corporal Alerio Vagle sneered from the other Tornado. "We're the only ones around for tens of clicks."

Pean shook his head. "The 'hired help' isn't meeting any resistance. This worries me. They've got to be around somewhere."

"Hey. We take our time responding, why would they be any different?" Vagle said. "I'm not worried."

"Just keep your eyes peeled. We're supposed to let the 'help' handle them, but something always goes wrong."

"I don't know about this, sir," Knoles said. "I mean, taking bribes is one thing, but going out and attacking other officers? Just seems wrong to me."

"You know what we do to people who don't play ball. These people ain't playing ball. End of story, *q.e.d.*, *ipso facto*, *et cetera*."

"Yeah. And you know what happens if *you* don't play ball."

Knoles rolled her eyes. "Understood, sir. Will comply, sir."

"Hello, what's this?" Pean tapped the touch-sensitive display panel on his bike.

“Picking a single skimmer up on the scope. Squawking a law-enforcement transponder code, yet. Seems to be heading toward the mine, and we’re in a perfect position to intercept.”

“Maybe we should just let the ‘help’ deal with them?” Knoles suggested.

Vagle sneered again. “Why should they get to have all the fun? Let’s get ‘em!”

“But...” Knoles stammered. “Forget it. Weapons hot.”

“Knoles, you take the left. Vagle, right. We’ll get ‘em in a pincer.” Pean revved his bike and shot forward. The others quickly followed.

*:They took the bait, Sal,: Bonnie reported. :And Wyatt and the others are in position.:*

*:Don’t count your chickens ‘til they open fire. Wait’ll we’d have to be blind to miss ‘em, then comm ‘em all friendly-like. An’ then be ready to go evasive soon’s they fire.:*

*:That’s gonna cut it close. I ain’t that quick, even for the junk they ride. Going to need every hardlight hoxel of armor here. Here we go.:*

Bonnie’s sensors registered multiple targeting radar locks a split-second before pulse beams split the air. Bonnie’s lifters kicked in, propelling them twenty meters straight up as they Fused. *:Ha! Two misses and a graze. D’ya suppose they don’t bother keeping their guns calibrated since they don’t never use them?:*

Sally brought up their guns, locking onto the three bikes. “Harmon Gulch Marshals! Stand down and disarm! You’re under arrest!”

“Get ‘em!” the one on the Chinook yelled as they engaged their own sluggish Fuses.

“Fusing isn’t a free action,” Sally said. She took down the Chinook first, careful not to hit anything too critical to the pilot’s survival in the Dry. That gave the two Tornados time to complete theirs as their commanding officer sank to the ground on one lifter pod and no weapons.

“You’re going *down*, bitch!” one of the Tornado riders yelled, raising his pulse rifle. Then the gun sparked and exploded as another pulse shot pierced it—not from one of the Marshals, but from the other Tornado, which immediately dropped its gun and raised its hands.

“I give up!” the woman said. “I never wanted to be here anyway.” She shot a glance at the other one. “Idiot.”

Wyatt and Durante touched down behind her, followed by Heinrich and Sasha. “Are holding right there! Are being under arrest!”

The female Tornado pilot looked around. “Uh...can I request political asylum?”

“I’ll have your *badge*, Knoles!” the Chinook rider shouted as he tried to stand.

“Then I’ll have you by the tits!”

“Don’t know why you’d want me that way. Thought you and Vagle here were an item.”

“You know what I mean, bitch!” He struggled to rise, only to fall flat on his face.

Durante plodded toward them and spoke with militaristic authority. “Your skimmers have been rooted and your weapons are disabled. Now, come quietly. Sal, Bonnie, read ‘em their rights.”

“You got the right to have rights,” Bonnie drawled. “If you don’t want those rights, well, that’s all right.”

“What my smart-arse companion *means* to say—” Sally began.

Durante interrupted her. “Hit the dirt!” A cloud of mini-missiles boiled up from behind a nearby sand dune, tracking inward toward the Marshals. He swiftly interposed himself between Sally and Bonnie and the missiles, spinal defense lasers pulsing at them. They were able to knock down about half of them before the rest hit his flank in a flurry of explosions.

“Durante!” Bonnie yelled.

“We’re okay! Take cover behind us, all of you!”

“Who the hell is that?” Bonnie said.

“Gotta be Nilsson and his 'Snookie',” the female officer said, taking cover with them. “Though what the hell he's doing out here when he's supposed to—” another pair of mini-missiles slammed into Durante's scorched flank. “—supposed to be watching Mosley a couple hundred clicks east of here, I dunno.”

“Haven't seen a Schnook loadout like this since the War!” Bonnie said. “Not tracking him very well in all this Q-dust he's kicked up. Durante?”

The parasaurolophus mecha changed to APC mode to provide more cover and weapons coverage. “Hunker down. I think we've got some help incoming. Damn, this guy's good! And with a *Schnook!*”

Reed and Summer had just crossed the border into Harmon Gulch when they picked up the comm traffic of the three deputies getting taken down. Reed grinned. “Good for them.” Without being asked, Summer steered in that direction.

As they swerved around a dune, they were just in time to see a Fuser-mode Chinook unleash a cloud of missiles from rocket packs on its hips and shoulders. “Hey, what...that's Nilsson, isn't it?”

Summer bracketed the mech in his head-up display. “He's flying like a vet. A damned *good* vet. He's actually got them pinned down!”

“I knew he was in the War, but wow. Well, we'd better go take him down. If we can.” Reed triggered the Fuse. “Let's get him.”

They hadn't closed more than half the distance before Nilsson's sensors picked them up and he turned to face them. He opened up with pulse cannons while sending missiles to cover their dodge points to left and right. Summer threw up a hardlight shield and dodged through the missiles. The shield took the impact and vanished as they broke through the explosions. Reed fired back with their pulse rifle, making their assailant drop to the ground.

*:He's got better armor and more firepower than we do,:* Summer sent.

*:Yeah, but we've got friends. We just need to keep him distracted and give them an opening.:* Aloud, he commed, “Nilsson, what the hell are you doing?”

“Doing? What am *I* doing? What the hell do you think *you're* doing!” Nilsson shot back. “We've got it made, Mosley! I am not going to let you or some pissant upstart 'Marshals' ruin it!”

*:Summer, can you back-hack him?:*

*:No go, buddy. He's still got mil-spec anti-hacking gear on that Schnook of his. Recent stuff, too. Guess that's where some of this bribe money's gone to.:*

“Hang on, Sarge! I'm coming!” Nilsson shouted aloud.

*:Shockingly loyal, isn't he?:* Summer snarked. A barrage of pulse blasts from their rifle hit the Chinook armor's right thigh, scorching the armor under the hardlight

shield. Summer commed their compatriots. “Bonnie, Durante! You're the vets! What's the strategy here?”

“Well, we don't want to kill him,” Bonnie said, putting down some covering fire with her pistols.

“We had a trick in Nuevo San for taking down Schnooks,” Durante said. “Those joints in armor mode overheat like mad if they're worked too hard. Just keep him running!”

“I'd challenge him to a dance-off if I thought he'd do it!” Reed added. “But he's got to know that weakness, too.”

“Yes, but he can't exactly de-Fuse right now, can he?” Durante pointed out. “Mara and Enter are up there, but their last orders were to keep an eye on the bunch at Sally's mine. And this Q dust is too thick to get through.”

“Right.” Dodging again, Reed fired another series of pulses. “We have *got* to get some better firepower.”

“This guy's some kind of major Ace,” Bonnie said. “The Schnooks sucked, but some pilots knew the knack with 'em.”

“He's got to run out of missiles sooner or later, right?”

“Those are 2-centimeter micro missiles,” Sasha said. “He can carry a frightening number of them on a Chinook.”

“Then we keep the pressure on! Sooner or later we'll get through.”

Nilsson's Chinook moved to put a sand dune between itself and Bonnie, firing a half-dozen rockets straight up and over the dune as he fired his pulse gun at Summer. “You think you and your pets can take me? Ha! Certified Triple Ace here! My Snookie's been with me since the War!”

*:I've gotta upgrade to a mil-spec frame!:* Summer said after narrowly dodging another salvo. *:My batteries are over half down! Can't take much more of this, Reed.:*  
*:And the longer he keeps us busy, the more damage his friends do to Sally's mine.:*

Sally sighed. “Durate, Sasha—forget the prisoners. We're gonna need everyone to handle this guy. Get him in a crossfire.”

“On it!” The bear and parasaurolophus leaped the dune and engaged. The Chinook disgorged another cloud of missiles and retreated further. Some of the missiles left visible damage in Durante's side armor.

*:If this keeps up, we might have to retreat,:* Summer observed. *:How embarrassing.:*

Then sudden motion caught Reed's eye, and he looked up. There was a winged shape visible in the sky, growing larger by the second. *:Don't count your chickens just yet. We need to keep his attention for just a few more seconds...:* He popped up and fired another long pulse burst.

Then Mara and Enter dove out of the sky, foreclaws slamming into the Chinook's shoulder and throwing it forward onto the ground with an enormous, savage roar.

“*Hooo-wheee!* That's what I'm talking 'bout!” Bonnie cheered.

“You have a dragon? Nobody said you had a dragon!” a voice Reed recognized as Corporal Knoles shouted over comm. “Holy shit!”

Enter easily tore the weapons and missile pods from Nilsson's Chinook, then rose, holding the armor suit down with one claw. “Sorry we're late. We hadn't noticed you were in trouble 'til we glanced this way just now.”

Sally grinned. "Better late than never. I think we need to see 'bout getting us some better laser uplinks an' buying some satellite time if this's gonna be a reg'lar thing."

Reed and Summer followed Heinrich and Sasha back to where the other Chinook and two Tornados had been knocked down. The crippled Chinook hadn't made it very far, and one Tornado seemed to be sitting on top of the other one, who was spread-eagled in the sand. "You are still being here?"

Knoles shrugged. "You hadn't read us our rights yet. We've hardly ever had to read them ourselves, so I kinda forgot what they were. This one wanted to bug out—" she thumped the helmet of Vagle's suit with her fist "—but I think he needs to hear them even more than I do." She paused. "Well, when he wakes up, anyway. I am so sick of this shit."

Sally turned to Reed. "That's all your crew, right?"

"We're missing one," Reed said.

"Wendt went back to base," Knoles said. "You know how *he* is with skimmers. Might want to send a rescue party."

Reed laughed. "Yeah, Sally, that's everyone. Unless the Captain and the LT decide to show up. Which I don't exactly expect to happen. Those two stay away from anything that might involve getting their hands dirty."

Sally nodded. "We'll see 'f we can get authorization from DOLEB HQ to arrest 'em ourselves. Later. Right now, we got some thugs back at the mine we need to curb-stomp while there still *is* a mine left."

"Reed, Summer, mind giving us a hand with these ne'er-do-wells while everyone else goes to help Sally?" Wyatt asked. Durante landed nearby and opened his aft ramp.

"Our pleasure," Reed said. "Good luck with the thugs. I suppose we'll be along once we drop these guys off on the *Dust Devil* jail."

"We'll chat more about this once this is over, Reed," Sally said. Her RIDE changed to skimmer mode around her. "Good to have you with us. Giddyap, Bonnie!"

*June 4, 128 AL*

*Whirlwind, Pleiades Plateau Marshals Office*

"Well, that's the last of them, sir."

"Good." Marshal Reed Mosley leaned back behind the scarred mahogany desk that had once belonged to Captain Lind. It was one of the few things from the old DOLEB office that had stayed in the transition to being the Pleiades Marshals office. A printed warrant for the previous occupant's arrest hung on the wall behind his chair, nicely framed.

Standing in front of the desk was probationary Marshal Delia Knole, the copper badge on her chest matching the gold one on Reed's. At the moment, she was the only other Marshal on staff, but that was soon to change. They'd just spent the morning interviewing several local miners and their RIDEs to see if any would be willing and able to join up. If the background checks worked out they'd soon have a half dozen more, including their RIDEs.

"Do you think any of them will work out?"

"Hard to say. The level of crime hasn't been so bad down here. Say what you will about bribes, at least it meant they had incentive to foist the criminals off on other

provinces.”

“Like Harmon Gulch.”

Reed nodded. “Yeah. So they got ticked off enough to form the Marshals. This bunch is more complacent. But that’s to be expected. We’ll borrow some manpower from Harmon Gulch while we work on recruiting elsewhere. I figure there are enough decent people in the polities and maybe even Laurasia that we can fill out the ranks sooner or later.”

Knolles coughed, scratching behind her new coyote ears. “You know, I can’t thank you enough for this second chance.”

“There were a few...mitigating circumstances,” Summer said. He lay on a RIDE couch next to the desk. He was going to get the mil-spec shell with hardlight pelt he wanted sooner rather than later, though arctic foxes were harder to find. “Like turning polity’s evidence. And Wyoming will help keep you on the straight and narrow.”

“Yo,” the she-coyote RIDE said. “Youse can count on me. Not that I need ta. Delia’s a good egg.” Wyoming had been one of the RIDEs they’d liberated from the jumpers attacking Sally’s mine after dealing with the ambush. As with the earlier batch, most of them had chosen to join the Marshals when offered Moose’s choice—especially once they had heard from that batch how good things were for the ones who’d stayed.

Reed nodded again, then reached out to pat Summer on his head. The arctic fox had gotten his mil-spec frame and hardlight pelt at the same time. Reed thought he looked spectacular in white. “And if your RIDE doesn’t know the real you, who does. So, yeah.” He chuckled. “You know, that’s an idea. Pair all the recruits up with RIDEs and have ‘em Fuse first thing. Could save a lot of time in the long run. Wonder if that’s why the Dolts didn’t use ‘em.”

“I dunno. They seemed pretty attached to their ‘cycles. The way Nilsson was sobbing over his ‘Snookie’ after we pulled him back to his feet...” Summer mused.

“I still feel kind of bad about that,” Reed admitted. “Like we ripped up his teddy bear or something.”

A soft chime filled the room as the door opened. Reed stood up to meet the new transfers coming inside, extending his hand to the shaggy bear Fuser. “Heinrich, Sasha! Welcome to the *Whirlwind*. We appreciate the help.”

“Are being glad to be here.” The bear waved. “Will be different, but not so very different.”

Sasha added, “Something tells me we’re all going to be expanding a lot beyond Harmon Gulch and Pleiades before too long. Half a dozen other provinces are already starting to make noises about voting out their DOLEB franchise and asking us to come in and organize a local Marshals branch for them. Something about the idea of local law sounding a lot better than having outsiders imposed on them.

“Plenty of trustworthy serial strikeouts like ourselves to fill the ranks,” Sasha said.

“Da, Sasha. Not all of us are good or lucky at prospecting,” Heinrich admitted. “But wish to remain here in the Dry anyway.”

“Well, I think you’ll make a great lawman,” Reed said. “For now, though, let’s go to the Seven Sisters. They have a great non-fab microbrew lager here. And if you like White Russians, they have the best in this part of the Dry.”

“If good enough for Dude, good enough for me,” Heinrich said, thumping his chest. “Lead on, my friend.”

**To Be Continued**