

Longer Fused, More Foxed

By Robotech_Master

Charlene

Just a couple of minutes after we left the garage, we pulled into a driveway between a pair of strip-built apartment buildings in a somewhat seedy neighborhood. The next building over was a lumberyard warehouse, with a railroad track running through the yard for convenient loading and unloading. The apartments were two rectangular buildings that faced each other across a common asphalt driveway, with a set of skimmerports at the rear.

Rufia pulled up on Yvonne in front of the first apartment on the left, where two doors shared a common concrete-step mini-porch. “Here we are!” She opened the door as Yvonne converted back into her Walker mode. I climbed down from Fiona and she converted as well, and

we followed Uncia into her apartment.

It was, not to put too fine a point on it, a mess. Empty soft drink bottles and food wrappers, discarded RIDE part and media chip boxes, dirty clothes, dirty dishes, and who knew what all else littered the floor...and the desk, and the sofa, and every available surface. Shelves were crammed full of seemingly random junk—everything from old comm gear to stuffed toys.

“Make yourselves at home!” Rufia invited, pitching some trash off a mostly-buried couch and flopping down. “Sorry ‘bout the mess.”

“This isn’t a *mess*, this is after bein’ a *disaster area*,” Fiona sniffed. “How can ye even *live* like this?”

“We’re not really here all that much,” Yvonne admitted. “I think it gives her more incentive to find a job so she can get out in the open. Weird thing is, she’s *insane* about policing campsites for litter.”

“Well, sure,” Rufia said. “You can mess up your own room, but you *don’t* mess with Mother Nature.” She pointed to the hallway across the room. “Your bedroom’s the one on the right. It’s a little cleaner ‘cuz I don’t live in it, but I do toss a lot of extra junk in there. Just pile it up on the floor to get to the bed and you’re cool.”

Not sure what else to do, I went into the indicated bedroom. There *was* a lot of junk in the room, mostly empty shipping boxes that she’d tossed in here thinking she might have a use for them someday. I guess some behaviors are constant down the centuries.

“Well, at least it’s not a self-storage locker,” I reflected, starting to pile boxes in one corner.

“I suppose that’s after bein’ true,” Fiona admitted,

sitting on her haunches in the doorway and watching.
“Even if the self-storage locker *was* tidier.”

After a while, I had enough room clear to flop down on the bed, and enough floor space for Fiona to flop down inside and shut the door. “Ye know, ye don’t really need t’ use the bed. Ye could just sleep inside of me,” she pointed out.

“What, you mean sleep while we’re Fused?” I said. “I can do that?”

“For a certainty,” she said. “In fact, it’s what ye’d do most often when we’re out in deep desert. Much more efficient than tryin’ to futz around with a tent. And I can even move the body around and be doin’ other things while you’re sleepin’. Such as clean up this pigsty.”

“Or go out on the town and enjoy yourself?” I asked.

“Well, yes, that too—in theory, at least,” she said.

“Hmm. Well, as long as I got a good night’s sleep, I’m not sure I’d really care what you did,” I said. “As long as I don’t wake up in a Nextus prison or something.”

“My fetter wouldn’t let *that* happen,” Fiona said.

“It was just a joke anyway,” I said. “To be honest, it sounds like a nice idea. Fusing with you did feel pretty comfy.”

“And no havin’ to worry about PJs, either,” Fiona said.

“That’s another bennie,” I agreed.

“Hey, you two, I may have a job lined up for us!” Rufia called in from the next room. “Some Earther tourists wanting to try their hand at Q’specting. Feel like spending a few days out in the middle of nowhere?”

“As long as we’re getting paid for it, it sounds just fine to me!” I replied.

“The nice thing about working for tourists is they don’t usually stiff ya,” Rufia said. “They’re not gonna bring *just* enough money to get here and then be broke. Of course, they do also tend to be idiots, so it all balances out.”

“You think they’ll actually find anything?” I asked.

“Who knows? Sometimes it happens we come on a vein worth calling out a platform for. Other times there’s just enough for our RIDEs to grind out with a mining pak and bring in for a few thou. Either way, we each get 10% of whatever gets found as part of our guide fees. Sometimes it’s even enough to buy dinner on.”

“And with her appetite, that’s saying something,” Yvonne put in.

“So, still a few hours left in the day,” Rufia said.

“Wanna go out somewhere, hot stuff?”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass,” I said. “Gonna stay in and read. Lot of history to catch up on.”

“Okay, well, as the nurse said to the doctor, suture self!” Rufia said. “Vonnie and I are goin’ out for some beers. Back later. You got our codes if you need us!”

“Thanks!” I said. “See ya!” I heard the door close as they left, then flopped down on my back on the bed. I glared at the way my chest still rose up in front of my face. I supposed I was just going to have to get used to that.

Fiona came over and rested her oversized fox muzzle on the edge of the bed, looking up at me out of big soulful fox eyes. “So what now, then?”

“Like I told her—reading.” I reached for my tablet. “I don’t feel ready to face the world, so I might as well figure out what the world did while I was away.”

“If ye want, I could be after settin’ up a virtual space for ye to read in Fuser,” Fiona offered.

“So you can have the use of my body?” I asked. It felt a little weird to be talking about lending my body to a giant fox.

“It would let me tidy ‘round the place,” Fiona said. “I’d keep a window open so ye could watch what I’m doin’.” And, of course, she knew she was being monitored moment to moment by several RIDEs, so she wasn’t about to do anything chancy without my consent.

“Huh. Well, if I can help clean up without actually having to put in the effort myself, by all means let’s do that.” I stood up and let her flow up and over me, so that I was a full furry fox-woman again.

Then I felt ghostly arms around my waist pulling me “back” away from behind my eyes, and then I was standing in the middle of the forest with a big display screen in front of me showing the view of my room.

“There ye go, then,” Fiona said. She was standing next to me in our Fuser form. “Just think ‘bout what ye want to be readin’ and I’ll call it up for ye.” She waved a hand and a camp chair appeared for me to sit in.

I glanced at her, this being my first opportunity to see what we looked like from the outside. She was a rather busty fox, with a bushy, swishing tail, a mischievous gleam in her eye, and a mane of long red hair strongly resembling my own. I didn’t remember having that hair in Fuser form in the “real” world.

Fiona caught the tenor of my thought. “Oh, the hair? It’s an option. I can project it in hardlight if I feel like it. Mostly I don’t bother. But it’s not any extra energy to be

havin' it in here."

"I kind of like it," I said.

She curtsied. "Thank ye! Anyway, I'll be lettin' ye get on with your readin' now. Enjoy yourself!" Her fox avatar faded away. In the real-world monitor, I saw our arms reach out and start picking things up, but didn't feel the slightest twinge of movement in my arms from in here. Well, good enough. I pulled up the first of the history texts that Rochelle had downloaded to me and started reading.

It's an interesting experience, reading the "future" history of your world from two hundred years on. It makes everything look like science fiction, except you know it's real. You're trying to figure out how the world you knew transmuted into this Alice-in-Wonderland experience, but even if you can sort of get the sense of it in the broad historical strokes, it's still really hard relating it to your everyday life.

As I read and glanced up from time to time, I saw the bedroom gradually improve. Then Fiona started on the living room, filling trash bags with crap and trotting them out to a dumpster. I definitely approved of the change in the living space.

After I had my fill of history, I flipped to one of the newbie RIDE guides Rhi had given me. The technology primer was interesting. I hadn't realized the basic technology for gender-changing Fuser nanites had been originally developed on Earth, then improved here on Zharus. I didn't expect something that bizarre to come out of the place I'd used to think of as "home."

Something else that caught my attention was the tech restrictions that made it illegal to take RIDEs or anything

used in making them off of Zharus under almost any circumstance. It seemed Zharusians were a bit paranoid about attracting too much attention from Earth, which had developed a somewhat acquisitive reputation in recent decades. If they understood how good our tech had become, it was feared they might not hesitate to invade.

That was a little bit troubling. I didn't like to think of my old homeplace as "the bad guys." But places can change in 200 years. I doubted its Founding Fathers would have recognized 20th century America, either.

"Iffen ye want, I've me own manual in storage still," Fiona offered. "It's supposed t'be burn-on-reading classified, but yer already after bein' my operator so neither of us can be gettin' in any worse trouble over it."

"Thanks, but maybe later," I said. "I'm starting to think I'm still a bit orbit-lagged. Probably going to want to go to bed soon."

"Just say when, I can lull ye right to sleep," Fiona said.

"Maybe in a bit." I turned my attention back to the screen showing the view through my eyes. "Wow, you're really making a difference in that room."

"Thank ye! It's relaxin' to be doin' a little housework. It's a change from all the other stuff we've been doin' the last couple days," Fiona said.

"What do you think of the job Rufia's got lined up?" I asked.

"Could be interesting. I can't remember the last time I was out in the Dry Ocean. And of course *you* never have." She chuckled. "Emptiest place ye've ever seen. Quiet, too. But scenic. Maybe we'll make some good memories there."

"I hope so. I could use something good. And the quiet

sounds nice, too. I need some time to relax.” I yawned virtually—and felt from Fiona’s startled reaction that I’d just made my body yawn, too.

“All right, that’s it then. Say night-night. I don’t need ye makin’ me yawn while I’m tryin’ t’do housework.”

I chuckled. “All right. See you in the morning.” Just for fun, I decided to try to resist going to sleep and see if she was still able to make me.

As it turned out, she was.

Jamie

“Hey, Jamie, coming surfing today?” The cheerful shout of my new friend Dayla outside my second-story window only served to depress me, as I didn’t know if I’d be surfing with her today or any time in the foreseeable future. It was time to say goodbye.

I threw open the window and leaned out. “Sorry, Day,” I said, “but Mom, Dad, and I are off to Uplift this afternoon. I don’t know when we’ll be back. So this morning’s all packing.” I stared out wistfully to where Dayla was sitting on the back of a dolphin floating in mid-air outside. “Hey, Donna,” I said to the dolphin, who chirped a friendly greeting back.

Dayla and Donna were of similar appearance in a lot of ways. They had the same shiny gray hairless skin, same glowing tribal tattoo designs down the sides of their bodies. Dayla just happened to be human, with arms, legs, slim streamlined breasts beneath the light blue one-piece swimsuit she was wearing—and also a stubby dolphin tail and subdued flukes and fins. Donna, of course, was a tattooed *actual* dolphin, though she could just as easily become a sleek skimmer bike with the same tribal designs in glowing paint highlights.

The two were a Fuser pair—a human and her RIDE, or

maybe a RIDE and her human. And while the body changes Dayla had gone through were a bit extreme for me to want for myself, I was *hella* envious of the closeness they shared. Ever since I'd come here and found out exactly what they were, I had wanted a RIDE for myself—even just a rental to use during my vacation—but Mom and Dad had put their feet down. We were just here for five months or *maybe* a year if the money held out that long, and after that we'd be going back to Earth—and we couldn't take the RIDES home with us because of laws against taking Zharusian tech out of the star system. And Mom and Dad knew I wouldn't want to give up my new “pet.”

“Well, comm us if you change your mind,” Donna chirped. “We'll be out by Kelso Reef, same as usual.” Without waiting for a response, they flipped backward, Fusing in mid-air and splashing back down in a single fully-anthropomorphic-dolphin body into the bay our condo overlooked. I sighed and muttered, “Showoffs,” before heading downstairs to breakfast. We had a lot to do today.

Mom and Dad already had the table set with bowls of muesli garnished with fresh pineapple and papaya, a pitcher of milk in the center of the table. Breakfasts tended to be cold and fast around here, as it was too warm to want to do extra cooking and there was just too much to do to spend too much time preparing a breakfast. Today was no exception, though as I told Donna most of what we'd be doing was packing. We'd spent most of our first month on-world sampling the delights of Aloha, Gateway to Zharus, but now it was time to go beyond the gate and see what

else the world had to offer.

Mom had her light brown hair up in a bun, and was wearing one of the sundresses she'd fabbed on the ship after looking up local fashions. The nice thing about the planet living in the grip of a twentieth-century fad is that there were decades' worth of fashion designs on file to choose from. I was partial to the polo shirts with the little alligator on them, myself.

Dad was in Bermuda shorts and a bright floral print shirt—looking every inch a tourist and glorying in it. He had short dark hair and a neatly-trimmed mustache, a look he'd modeled after 20th-century actor Tom Selleck. The effect was slightly spoiled by the bits of red-spotted toilet paper stuck to where he'd cut himself shaving. He still wasn't entirely used to using an old-fashioned sharp metal safety razor. Mom was after him to go back to depilator cream or at least use medical nanos to fix the cuts, but Dad insisted on getting as much into the spirit of the whole twentieth century thing as any member of the Society for Creative Anachronism—at least when he wasn't expected to do any swimming that day. (I'm sure he thought that we never noticed the little squeeze tube of Nano-Heal ointment he tucked into his hip pouch on days we spent at the beach.)

They had already poured the milk and started on their own bowls of cereal by the time I came in. "Morning, son!" Dad said cheerfully. "Looking forward to our 'Uplifting' experience today?"

"I'd rather stay here," I said honestly. "I've made a bunch of friends, we have a lot of fun out surfing..."

"You know it wasn't the plan to come all this way and

then stay in one spot,” Dad said. “If we were going to do that, we could just have gone to California again.” Then he grinned. “Besides, you never know—we might strike it rich!”

We were going to be prospecting for Qubitite after we’d gotten settled in at Uplift. Of course, there were plenty of Q-prospecting operations around here, but Dad had done his research. The places here were designed to give tourists who didn’t want to range much beyond Aloha the idea that they had “prospected” without any chance that they might actually *find* something. They used old claims that had already been worked out but they’d go back in and re-salt with a bit of refined Q that tourists could squeal over.

Not for my Dad, that sort of thing. He didn’t want to settle for a guaranteed “strike” worth less than he’d paid for the ticket. He would be content to find nothing at all as long as there had been the honest-to-goodness *chance* that he might find something real. And honestly, there *was* still that chance. The continent was big enough that millions of square miles still remained completely unplumbed. And Uplift was where the *real* prospectors and miners worked from, and we’d be getting a couple of those to go out with us and guide our expedition.

The upshot was that we’d go all the way across the continent to where all the real miners hung out so that Dad could play at us being fake ones. I didn’t see the point, and was annoyed at having to leave my new friends. Oh, sure, we’d keep in touch by mesh mail but we were just month-long acquaintances with no really deep attachments. We’d gradually drift apart. Sad. Of course, it

would happen eventually anyway even if we spent the whole five months here, but that was why I wanted to put it off for as long as I could. But it looked like I'd already reached that limit.

But there was nothing I could do to change it. And if I bitched about it, I'd just spoil Mom and Dad's vacation and make them both mad at me. And I was hella lucky they'd even decided to take me along at all, since this had originally been supposed to be a retirement second honeymoon for them until a lucky windfall moved it up. So I did my best to put on an upbeat attitude. "Sure, Dad," I said. "I guess I kinda *am* looking forward to that part."

Yeah, maybe we *might* strike it rich. So rich that maybe Mom and Dad would decide to settle here and I could get a RIDE after all. Yeah, and pigs would fly. Well... actually, around here pigs *could* fly. *Every* animal RIDE could fly, because they all had lifters built into them. So maybe there was hope after all?

"Good news is, there's a lot less packing do do than we thought," Mom put in. "So if we hurry, we might be able to get it all done in an hour or two, so you could spend a few last hours with your friends before the suborbital shuttle flight leaves." She always did know how to manage me.

I poured the milk and dug into my cereal. "Sounds great to me!"

So after spending an hour packing up everything in the condo, I was able to get in some last-minute surfing and diving with Dayla and Donna and the rest of their crew. They were a bunch of friendly local sorts who enjoyed hanging out with tourist kids and seeing their

home through new and different eyes—and having us tell them about the places we come from. There were a couple of other tourists I'd met with them, some of whom I might see again later in other places.

They almost all had RIDEs, of course. There were several dolphins and porpoises, a seal or two, a sea otter, a few with amphibious-equipped land-animal RIDEs, and one guy with a huge orca that could carry half a dozen passengers in his submersible skimmer form. He kept the internal passenger and cargo space in his animal shape, too, and was a bit of a prankster—his favorite trick was slipping up under unsuspecting swimmers and gulping them down into his passenger compartment. We all blamed whoever had the bright idea to name him “Jonah” in the first place.

Several of the crew who had “open” relationships with their RIDEs had offered to let me Fuse to try it out, but my parents had forbidden that, too, even for the RIDEs that didn't have extreme changes with long change-back cooldowns. They claimed they didn't want to have to mess with the nanosurgery to get rid of the ears and tail that came with Fusing afterward. But I suspect it was more that they didn't want me to fall even more in love with the idea of having a RIDE of my own.

Anyway, we laughed and joked, did some surfing and diving, and said our goodbyes. Then it was back to shore to meet the sub.

After I'd changed back to my dry land clothes, I walked up the path to the aerodrome bus stop, taking one last look around. Off in the distance, across the bay, I could see the slim silver thread stretching to the sky that

was the space elevator we'd ridden down. It was so *hella* big it didn't seem real from here, like one of the matte paintings in the 20th-century movies they were all so crazy about on this world. Funny to look at something so insanely huge and think *we* built that. We puny little hairless apes.

Aloha wasn't just an *outworld* tourist destination, of course. It was pretty and scenic enough, with enough fun things to do, that people came from all over the continent and even as far away as Laurasia to visit here. Even people with RIDEs. I saw a lot of folks around who had ears and tails with suspiciously large animals following them, or who were even wearing RIDEs themselves. I walked by a beach archery range, where a short raccoon Fuser in a floral print shirt even brighter than my Dad's was clutching a replica 20th-century Nikon camera almost as big as she was. A hawk Fuser carrying a bow and wearing a quiver was posing for photographs against the backdrop of the distant Alohan Elevator.

I chuckled and walked on. It was pretty neat to see this kind of thing, actually. Part of the magic of the place was that even locals weren't immune to its charms.

I caught the bus to the aerodrome with plenty of time before the suborbital was due to leave. Mom and Dad were waiting for me, and we lined up for the shuttle in the departure lounge. "Have fun?" Mom asked.

"Yeah," I said, sighing a little in spite of myself.

"Don't worry, you'll make new friends in Uplift," Dad said. "And we'll come back a couple of weeks before the ship leaves so you'll have that time, too."

"I know, Dad," I said. "But I won't make any new

friends out in the middle of the desert. There won't be *anything* to do out there."

"It'll give you time to catch up on your reading, then," Mom said, looking at me meaningfully.

"Yeah, I know," I said. And I got the message. Again, I determined to make the effort not to bring everyone else down. So I forced a grin. "I gather we're going all the way back up into space again for this hop?"

Dad grinned. "Yeah, isn't it *neat*? We'll go up and down a lot faster than the elevator took us. And we'll have a great view of the continent at the top. I'll be taking lots of pics."

It was kind of neat seeing Dad so enthusiastic. His sysadmin job had been a real grind those last few years. When a start-up investment had unexpectedly ballooned in value and made it possible for him to take early retirement *and* the trip he and Mom had been saving for for years, it had been like winning the lottery for him.

"They sure do use suborbital transport a lot on this world," Mom said. "We have suborbital spacelines back home, but almost nobody owns their own ship. But here suborbital shuttles are something you might find in people's garages."

"Well, they're not quite *that* common," Dad said. He liked to come the know-it-all, which is probably why he did so much research. "But this planet is so much bigger than back home, they have to have faster ships just to get anywhere. You know the speed limits on their freeways would make a German autobahner blanch?"

I was still a little surprised we'd come all the way out here for this trip. There was lots of stuff to see on planets a

lot closer to home, after all. The Cavorite Caverns of Centauri, for instance, or even the famed Proxima Bars. Why come so far out that it took most of a year to get here?

Part of it, I guessed, was the whole California gold rush thing surrounding Q, which was probably why Dad was so eager to go a-mining. There wasn't anywhere else in the galaxy you could get in on that kind of experience, and so many people had left Earth for it already that there were constant rumors the planet was going to start cracking down on departures.

And there was also the bragging rights thing. Zharus was, at the moment, the farthest colonized planet away from Earth. So if you're going to go on a trip, why settle for one of those *close* places? When you get home, you can tell your friends that you went literally as far away from home as you could possibly go.

But there was the allure of the mysterious. Though Mom and Dad were too straight-laced to admit it, I'm sure they had been drawn in at least in part by the planet's reputation. Zharus seemed to have made some kind of breakthrough involving superfast sex-change nanites, and it also had something to do with the robotic pet animals called RIDEs that everyone had. Apparently having a RIDE caused you to change sex or something. The stuff I'd read about it was a bit unclear, but some people claimed that over the last thirty years or so the whole planet had been going bisexual—people there were used to banging anything and anyone, and they'd do it with you at the drop of a hat.

Of course, I didn't believe *that* even before I got here, and after I had been here for long enough to work up the

nerve to ask about it, Dayla and Donna straightened me out (so to speak). When you Fused with a RIDE—put its body on over you as your outer skin—if you weren't the same gender the RIDE was its nanites would change you to match. It was necessary for operator compatibility.

Since there were a lot more female RIDEs on the market than male RIDEs, they were a lot cheaper. This led to a lot of guys choosing to become girls in order to afford mining equipment—and sometimes people bought the wrong gender by mistake and didn't find out until it was too late.

It wasn't as widespread as all the stories made it out to be, but it was common enough that most people had at least one family member it had happened to. As a result, they tended to grow up knowing that it could or possibly even *would* eventually happen to them, which made them a bit more flexible in their thinking about genders and sexuality. What if it happened to one half of a married couple but not the other? How would you both deal with it? That kinda thing.

As for me, I found it *hella* freaky, maybe even creepy. I mean, I liked to think we'd gotten pretty cosmopolitan about that kind of thing back on Earth. People who thought they'd been born the wrong gender could correct it in a matter of hours. But it hadn't been something we had to think about and make *contingency plans* for in case it ever happened to us. Either way, I strongly resolved that before I ever did buy a RIDE for myself, I'd be sure to lift it up and check underneath.

“Oh, look, they're boarding now!” Mom said, snapping me out of my reverie. “You checked our luggage, right?”

“I’ve got the claim ticket in my wallet,” Dad said as we joined the forming line.

“Well, then, off we go into the wild black yonder,” Dad said. “This should be fun.”

The boarding experience was a little less efficient than the airlines back home, but then the airlines back home had longer to get it right. It was done quickly enough, and we got seated in the cushy first-class acceleration couches quickly enough. By mutual agreement, Dad got the window seat, and I got the middle. Mom has a touch of agoraphobia, so she took the aisle seat.

“Thank you for visiting us in Aloha,” the stewardess said over the intercom speakers. “We hope you enjoyed your stay, and that you will return to visit us again soon. Remember that, in the language of Hawaii on Old Earth, ‘Aloha’ means both goodbye and hello. So as we said when you arrived, we say again to you now: Aloha. May the rest of your journey on Zharus be a safe one.”

The stewardesses went down the aisle making sure that everyone had any loose items like purses or luggage or even tablets and comms stowed. No one was permitted to have anything out that might turn into a missile when gravity shifted abruptly. I envied the people ensconced in their RIDEs, since they’d still be able to browse the net and read books and watch movies and things in their HUDs. We weren’t even allowed interface specs unless they had straps on them.

And after that, we launched. We took off down the runway like a normal flier—or “airplane” as we call them back on Earth—but then we angled almost vertical for our

ascent. We had been warned, and this was why all loose objects had been put away, but it was still quite an experience. Suborbital flights on earth didn't use quite as steep an angle of ascent, probably because they had less distance to cover.

The sub did have some very cushy seats, and powerful inertial dampers, I'll give it that. I barely even felt pressed back in my seat. Still, next to me on one side Dad was whooping with excitement, and Mom was covering her face with her hands and waiting for it to stop. I just stared past Dad out the window, watching the cloud layers whip by and the sky grow darker, and waiting for us to level out.

At the top of the arc, Dad snapped photos like crazy and Mom kept a vacuum-pumped sick bag to her face. I'd hoped we'd get some weightlessness at the top of the arc, but the sub was fully equipped with inverse-lifter artificial gravity generators, so our feet never strayed from the floor.

"C'mere, look at this," Dad said, pressing his face to the window. "That's the Dry Ocean, down there. We'll be out in that in a few days, seeking our fortune. And over there's the Western Wall mountains."

The mountains were *hella* impressive. You could still make out their towering height even from up here. How tall were they from down below? And there was this sort of gash in the land just east of them that was in deep shadow at this hour of the afternoon. The shadows were lengthening off to the east, where we were going. We were going to lose several hours out of the day from jet lag.

Even Mom came over to take a look—this far up, there wasn't enough of a frame of reference to trigger her acrophobia, I guess. "It's so *big*," she murmured.

“The continent has about 120% the land area of all the continents of Earth put together,” Dad said. “You could put all of North America in the middle of the desert and it would rattle around like a pea in a pod.”

“And we’re really going to be traveling out into that?” Mom said. “Thousands of kilometers away from civilization?” I don’t think it had really hit her before just how deep into the desert we’d have to go to find qubitite.

“We’ll have guides and the best equipment,” Dad said. “We’ll be *fine*.”

Somewhere, Murphy was laughing.

We landed in Uplift about half an hour later. We’d combed ahead, so a shuttle skimmer in hotel livery was waiting with a young man dressed in bellhop’s uniform standing in front of it. He approached Mom. “Ah, Dana Skyler?”

“Kelly, actually,” Mom said, half-smiling. It was one of the old, common mistakes that happened frequently with our family when registration was by name without photos or gender notation attached. She nodded to Dad. “That’s Dana. You know, like 20th century comedian Dana Carvey?”

“Or the actor Dana Elcar, who played MacGuyver’s boss,” Dad chimed in. The mistake had happened so often, they’d both looked up a lot of historical Danas. Kellys, too, but there were a lot more of those.

“Ah, um, right,” the man said, consulting a tablet he held in his hand. “And your...daughter, Jamie?” He looked from me to the tablet and back.

That was the *other* common mistake. “Son,” I said.

“Honestly, they need a tick box for gender on that registration form.”

“Sorry about that.” He chuckled. “Though as you’ll see, it really doesn’t make too much difference around here anyway.”

“So we’ve heard,” Mom said dryly.

“Ah, anyway, load your stuff in, and we’ll get you to the hotel. Your room’s already prepared.”

The sky was darker than my body “felt like” it ought to be, though given that the day was longer than it was supposed to be it kind of canceled out. Not that it mattered anyway. The same nanos that let us adjust our 24-hour body clocks to the 30-hour Zharusian day would also let us skip over jet lag. In fact, nobody even back on earth had suffered from jet lag for like fifty years. So we could crash out for the night and wake up bright and early for our mining tour to commence tomorrow morning.

“Really kind of ironic, don’t you think?” Dad asked after we’d all settled into the rear compartment of the skimmer, separated by a sound-proof wall from the driver. “Planet of gender-changers and they still think you’re Dana?”

“Yeah, it’s a real laugh riot,” Mom said. She was still a bit tired from the flight.

“I would think unisex names ought to be popular around here,” Dad continued. “After all, you never know what your kid might be by the time he’s grown up.”

“Give it a rest, would you?” Mom grumbled. “I’ve got a headache and the med nanos haven’t kicked in yet.”

“Hey, guys, what do you think our hotel will be like?” I said. “I’m looking forward to seeing what the differences

are from Aloha.”

“Well, there’s a different view, for one thing.” Dad pointed out the window, up to the dome that covered the section of city we were in. “We’re in an arid zone, right on the edge of the Dry Ocean, so they put domes up to keep the climate livable.”

It really was hella impressive. Back home they didn’t use hardlight nearly this much. In a report I did for school—yeah, I still had to do school assignments even on our vacation trip—I theorized that it was because everything was so old around there, they’d gotten in the habit of building permanently, to last, even when they didn’t really *need* to. But here everything was newer, not as permanent. So they didn’t care if their hardlight dome might go down if they cut the power. They just wouldn’t cut the power. And I gathered that they knew a bit more about the stuff here, too, so they could power it a lot more efficiently than the projects back on Earth did it.

The hardlight wasn’t the only construction difference, of course. There was a lot more use of temporary and portable building modules. It was true in Aloha, and I was seeing it here, too. There was this one place—a garage I think—that we passed on the way to our hotel that was just a big maze of them.

But there were a few skyscrapers, too. Not as many as in the older cities in Laurasia, which we might tour in a few months if we got around to it, but a few of them. It looked like a couple more were under construction. Though the dome meant there was a limit to quite how tall they could get, of course.

Our hotel was one of the taller buildings that didn’t

quite meet the category of skyscraper. 15 floors, and our room was on the 14th. Dad really was sparing no expense on this vacation. But the rates were cheap enough after the currency conversion that our Earth dollars really did stretch a long way. And both Mom and Dad had saved a lot of money on our fare by taking full-time shipboard jobs that paid board and travel expenses for all three of us plus a little left over to boot. I even worked a little part-time as well, as a cashier in one of the shipboard shops.

Plus, Dad was still secretly hoping to strike it rich. I chuckled as I thought about it, then when Mom and Dad both looked curiously at me said, “Oh, sorry, just remembering a book I was reading.” Dad shot me a suspicious glance, but then we were at the hotel and it was time to relocate to our rooms.

Once we got everything unpacked, I pulled out my tablet and sent a quick media mail to Dayla, Donna, and the crew, then pulled up the research files I’d been compiling about Dry Ocean geology. Dad might have been a dab hand with Google but I was no slouch myself, and— all right, I’ll admit it. I wouldn’t exactly mind striking it rich myself. So I did my own source checking. Of course, all my book-learning wouldn’t necessarily amount to much beside the actual experience of the guides we were getting—but it couldn’t exactly *hurt* either, right?

After I spent a couple hours reviewing and doing a little more basic searching, it was time to go to bed. We had a busy day ahead of us tomorrow, and the nanites needed sleep-time to readjust us. We went to sleep and undoubtedly all dreamed of the fortune in qubitite that awaited us. I know I did.

The next morning we were back down at the aerodrome, bright and early, checking over the prospecting skimmer Dad had rented. The *Annabelle Lee* was a big old thing, about sixty meters long, and looked kind of like a flying yacht but without any sails. Well, I imagine it could have hardlight sails if it wanted to. But the important thing was, it had some great engines, a full suite of Q-detecting sensors, a spacious hardlight-lined cargo bay to fill up with ore to bring back, and full hardlight shielding to keep any Q contamination out.

We were up on deck checking it out when a call from below told us our guides had arrived. “Ahoy the ship!” the Elk Fuser called up from below. “Permission to come aboard?”

I glanced over the side to take a closer look. There were two of them—a tall female elk and a slightly shorter, hella curvaceous fox. She looked a lot like one of the BBV “pleasure support” lines I’d read about in some of the magazines—a line of RIDEs engineered to...provide certain services to Fused and un-Fused humans alike.

Which wasn’t to say anyone who had such a RIDE was necessarily into *providing* those services—as Dayla had told me, when used models came up people tended to take whatever they could get. Still, I didn’t think I was going to mention what I’d found out about BBVs to Mom and Dad. Because you never know, maybe she *might* be interested... look, I’m a teenager, okay? Hormones and all that.

“Come on up!” Dad called down, and they did just that, boosting up over the side with their RIDEs’ lifters and setting down in the middle of the forward deck. They

de-Fused, the elk and fox gathering themselves off of their bodies into animal forms and leaving a pair of humans with animal ears and tails standing on deck before us.

The elk pilot was still tall, and unmistakably female, but was also built rather like a concrete wall. Big and brawny, ruddy complexion, and of course elk ears that flipped around as she spoke. She was wearing jeans and a vat-leather cycling jacket. She *had* to be a crossrider, because I found it hard to believe any natural-born woman could be built that way. “I’m Rufia,” she said. “This is my apprentice, Charlene. And these are our RIDEs, Yvonne—” she indicated the elk “—and Fiona.” She nodded to the fox.

And *wow*, Charlene. There was *no way* that this woman could be a crossrider. She was built about along the same lines as her Fuser form, with lush curves and a chest that stretched the “Hard Rock Cafe: Sturmhaven” t-shirt she was wearing in interesting ways. Her heart-shaped face was framed in a mane of voluminous fox-red hair that fell to her waist. It mostly hid the fox ears poking up through it but perfectly matched the big fluffy fox tail behind. I hastily picked up a box of supplies that I could conveniently hold at waist height and hoped nobody was noticing my embarrassing reaction. Damned hormones.

Not that someone who looked like that would ever give me the time of day *anyway*. I mean, duh, I’ve read a lot. I know what worldly older women usually *really* think of horny teen-aged boys. And I was smart enough to know that if I even so much as *tried* to flirt with her, the only thing that would happen would be I’d embarrass myself. Of course, that didn’t mean I wouldn’t still be doing a lot of fantasizing and daydreaming, especially in my bunk at

night.

“Good to meet you in person,” Dad said. “You come highly recommended. A couple of my friends back home said they had you as a guide when they were out here two years ago. Walter and Geraldine McLinden.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember them.” Rufia grinned. “They did a little Q-mining, too, though they spent most of their time checking out the night life here in Uplift and down in Nextus. But I’m good at that, too. I can show you how and where to do anything you wanna do, anywhere on the continent.”

Dad nodded. “Well, if the mining trip goes well, maybe we’ll have you show us some of the other sights, too.”

“We’ll be happy to,” Rufia said. “So...good boat you’ve got here, but you don’t seem to have any RIDEs.”

“We didn’t really figure we’d need them,” Dad said. “I didn’t think it would be fair to any of us to form possible attachments to pets we wouldn’t be able to take off-world with us when we leave.”

“Pets, he says,” Yvonne, the elk RIDE, said. Dad was visibly startled. He’d never spent much time with Dayla and the crew, and I think he thought of RIDEs as little more than skimmer cycles that could act like pet animals. I don’t think he’d ever had one talk to him before.

“Sure, an’ it’s at least a step up from bein’ called ‘equipment’ as we usually are,” the fox, Fiona, replied in a thick Irish brogue.

Rufia chuckled. “As you can see, RIDEs are far more than pets. They’re people. In this case, they’d be people you hire to help with the expedition. Because apart from

being people, they're also Q-proof survival suits in case the expedition hits a snag. Safety first."

"We really don't want to get stuck with animal ears and tails, though," Mom said.

"A lot of tourists I talk to actually *like* those," Rufia said. "They wear 'em proudly back home as 'proof' they were on Zharus. And they can get 'em lopped off at a nanomedical clinic either here or on earth any time they want."

"C'mon, Dad, let's get RIDEs too, huh?" I said. "I really wanna see what Fusing is like!"

Dad shook his head. "We've *got* emergency survival suits. They may not last more than a few hours under Q, but that should be plenty of time for you to comm in a suborbital rescue." He cleared his throat. "Is this going to be a...problem?"

Rufia shook her head. "Oh, no sir, no problem. If you'd rather not use RIDEs yourselves, we can work around it." She shrugged. "Then Charlene and I will inventory your other supplies, and we can start as soon as I'm sure we're well-stocked." She held out a hand to Dad, and he took it and shook, rubbing his hand a moment after she'd released it. "C'mon, Charlene, let's go below and see what they've got."

I watched them go down the stairs into the skimmer's lower deck, followed by their RIDEs. I turned my whole body to keep the box of supplies between me and them as they went. Damned shame they hadn't been able to talk Mom and Dad into going with RIDEs, but I guessed it was only to be expected.

Funny thing...much as I was staring at Charlene, I

noticed *Dad* was staring at Yvonne and Fiona. On the ship, he'd been so dismissive of the claims that Zharus could have found "true" AI that he'd never actually bothered to seek out any examples of it since we got here, even after I'd invited him to swim with Dayla and the crew. Well, now he was going to be getting some concentrated exposure—and they were going to be getting concentrated exposure to *him*. I hoped the elk and fox enjoyed Turing tests.

Charlene

So the morning after we'd agreed to work with Rufia, we got up early, pulled on our clothes, and headed out to ride our RIDEs' skimmer forms to the aerodrome. "Okay, so remember the ground rules," Rufia said. "I do all the talking, and you do all the learning."

"Gotcha," I said.

"And remember, they're tourists, so they're gonna be idiots," Rufia continued. "It's our job to save them from themselves without them ever *realizing* they're idiots, because nobody likes being made to *look* like an idiot and then having to pay for the service."

I nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense."

As we got closer to the hangar where we'd been told to meet, Rufia Fused and I followed her lead, figuring it best to approach the ship this way. "Ahoy the ship!" Rufia called. "Permission to come aboard?"

"Come on up!" So we did, and I let Rufia do all the talking as she'd said. There were three tourists—a father and mother who looked like they were maybe early middle-age, though they could be in their sixties or seventies given the anti-aging tech, and a teenaged boy. Who was...staring right at me, and holding a box of supplies suspiciously below his waist. Oh joy and rapture.

The business relationship didn't seem to start out on the best of feet. Rufia felt that the tourists should rent RIDEs for use on their expedition, and they didn't want to. (Well, the parents didn't want to. The horny kid did, but they weren't inclined to listen to him.) For a moment I thought Rufia was going to throw the deal over that, but instead she backed down and led us below to check their supplies.

As soon as we got below, both Rufia *and* Fiona broke out giggling. "Did you see how he was *looking* at you?" Rufia said.

"Sure, an' he was even lookin' at *me* the same way 'fore we even boarded," Fiona chimed in. "Oooh, he's got it *baaaaad*."

"And I'm going to be stuck on the same boat with him for a week," I groaned.

"Not necessarily," Fiona said. "After all, you've a RIDE. Ye and I can fly off into the wild Q yonder an' they won't be able to follow."

"We'll still have to come back sooner or later, though," I grumbled.

"Yeah, I'm *really* not happy they're skipping RIDEs," Rufia grumbled. "It's asking for trouble, depending on just the two of us to punch comms through. What if there's a bad storm or something?"

"It sounded like they were going to go with someone else if you insisted," I said. "So why didn't you?"

Rufia shook her head. "Because I'm the best damn guide they could possibly get, and I have this damn fool sense of responsibility when it comes to seeing disasters I could have prevented. I just know if I let them go with

Rooster, or Sammy J, or any of the other local guides-for-hire, I'll be reading next week about their dessicated corpses being found in the desert and feel all guilty."

"Also, she *really* needs the money," Yvonne added helpfully.

"That too," Rufia groaned, pausing briefly to slam her head against a bulkhead wall. "Well, c'mon, let's inventory these supplies. Maybe we'll be lucky and they won't have something vital they need, and we can't order it, and they'll give up the whole expedition."

But no such luck. Apart from the lack of RIDEs, the ship was as admirably provisioned as we could possibly have hoped. There was plenty of food, water, medical supplies, hydrogen for the tokamak, fuel cells for the emergency generators, and sarium cell batteries for floodlights and portable equipment. There was even a good supply of the disposable mining gear that Fiona said humans had used before they had RIDEs. "Ye just know somewhere there's still warehouse after warehouse full o' this crap, an' they have to be sellin' it off somehow," she grumbled.

"But it still works, right?"

"Yeah, but how're they supposed to be usin' it without RIDE protection?"

"Maybe after dark before it gets too cold?" I suggested. "But I guess we'll end up doing most of the digging anyway."

"Well, the lion's share will be done by the heavy equipment built into the skimmer itself," Rufia said. "If we do find any Q, it'll probably be pretty near the surface. The onboard drill and hose should be enough to slurp up any

small lodes. Who knows, they might even break even on the rent for this thing.”

“And, o’course, finding the Q will be *our* job,” Fiona said. “Not that it’ll be a problem. I was used fer sniffin’ out Q fer a couple o’ years, an’ got pretty damn good at it. And that was with me sensors locked down to civvy levels. Now I’m not pretendin’ anymore, it ought to be fun to see just what the ol’ sniffers will do.”

“That being the case, I guess we might as well get back topside and tell them we’re ready to go,” Rufia said. She grinned at me. “And while I’m steering the ship, you can have fun holding off the teen libido. Trial by fire, girly.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, *terrific*.” But I followed her back up the stairs to the deck. It was time to start earning my salary.

We headed back up to the deck and Rufia reported in to the family, who were still standing around admiring the view over the railing and checking out the controls at the helm station astern. They all three looked up as we returned.

“You’ve got a well-stocked larder down there,” Rufia said. “Looks like we can move right on out. You’re sure I can’t talk you into going with some RIDEs?”

“Positive,” the father said coolly.

Rufia shrugged and moved back to take up station behind the helm. “Then qubitite, ho!” Under her command, the skimmer lifted into the air and moved off the aerodrome field toward one of the extra-large sandskimmer desert departure lanes. The kid, Jamie, was already at the bow railing watching us move, and after a

moment I joined him, making sure to keep plenty of separation between us. I had to admit it was quite a view from up here—it even seemed to keep Jamie mostly distracted from staring at the view right across from him.

It only took a few minutes to get us out of the city and into the desert, then we laid in a course to the southwest and rose to an altitude of 300 meters, then accelerated to around 800 kph. Soon we were whizzing along through the sky. As soon as we were well underway, Rufia set the autopilot, and she and Yvonne came up to join me at the railing. Jamie moved a little farther away, to give us privacy I guess.

The weird thing was, as fast as we were going, and outside in the sun like we were, the air around us was air-conditioned cool and completely still. “It feels wrong somehow to be moving this fast but not even feeling the slightest breeze,” I said.

“That’s the hardlight aeroshields for ya,” Rufia said. “We’re fully-enclosed in a sealed, climate-controlled, streamlined invisible hamster ball.”

“Oh yeah?” Yvonne piped up. “Well, where are the streamlined invisible hamsters then? Tell me that!”

“They’re invisible, silly elk, you can’t see them,” Rufia said without missing a beat.

“Well played, ma’am,” Yvonne conceded. “Well played.”

Rufia grinned at me. “Missing the feel of the wind in your hair, huh?” She chuckled. “As much hair as you’ve got, it would take quite some wind to stir it. But...yeah, that *can* be arranged, girlie! Vonnie?”

“On it!” Yvonne replied.

And suddenly a gust of strong, hot, dry wind hit me right in the face, sending my hair streaming out behind me and nearly knocking me over before I hastily grabbed for the railing. “Whoa! What did you just do?” I yelled over the howl of the wind.

“Opened a teensy little hole in the shell.” Rufia grinned, leaning forward to feel the breeze in her own hair. “Just a couple centis wide, right in front of us. Much larger and we’d be getting a hurricane-force blow. But this is just right, don’cha think?” She ran her hand quickly through my hair and grinned.

“Hey, cut that out!” I said, swatting at her hand and nearly losing my grip on the railing. “Whoa.”

“Little too much wind?” Rufia asked.

“Just a little new to have something pulling me backward that much,” I admitted. “The tugging on my scalp feels really weird after having my hair short for so long. But it’s a good kind of weird. I like it.”

“It *looks* good, too,” Rufia said. “Which is why *I* like it. And speaking of which...” She nodded past me in the other direction. I turned to see Jamie moving a bit closer, undoubtedly drawn by the spectacle I presented. He was staring fairly unabashedly at me, in fact. Much as I wanted to, I couldn’t really blame him. I’d been a teenaged boy, too, not so very long ago. And considering how I must have looked at the time...

“I think I’ll just leave you to it,” Rufia said, sidling away. “The autopilot’s set, Vonnie and Fiona are monitoring it, and there’s nothing for us to run into for kiloklicks anyway. So if you need me, I’ll be in my bunk.”

“Heeeey!” I protested, but it fell on deaf ears. She

disappeared, leaving me all alone with the libido. His parents seemed to have gone belowdecks as well—I don't think his mother had much of a head for heights.

I should be fair, I guess. Even if he couldn't stop staring at me, he was at least pretty well behaved about it, on the whole. He didn't try to crowd me or put any moves on, just seemed content to watch. After a while, I sighed and waved him closer. *Let the conversation begin.*

Jamie

As we headed out into the desert, I stayed near the bow of the ship, watching the land go by—and watching the other scenery close to hand, too. She really was gorgeous—everything a teenaged boy would want to fantasize about, right there close to hand. Then, as I watched, it got even better—Rufia and her elk did something, and suddenly a breeze came out of nowhere, sending her hair streaming straight back behind her as she leaned forward into the prow like the figurehead of a ship.

I wasn't close enough to make out what they were saying, especially over the noise of the breeze. But then Rufia looked at me, grinned, and made a little come-here gesture behind Charlene's back before excusing herself and slipping back down belowdecks with Yvonne right behind her. I was left alone on the deck with Charlene, and with her fox Fiona who was curled up back behind the helm station.

Prompted by Rufia, I came a little closer to Charlene—but not *that* much closer. I hung back, just watching her... watching her hair blow in the breeze, watching her ample curves do interesting things to her T-shirt...maybe drooling a little...

Then she looked up, glanced over to me, and waved

me over closer. “Hey, kid. Jamie, wasn’t it?” she asked.

Part of me squealed, *She knows my name!* and blushed while the rest of me went, *Duh, of course she knows it, it was on the contract.* “Uh, yeah,” I mumbled, hoping she wouldn’t see the blush. “Jamie Skyler.”

“Nice to meet you, Jamie,” she said, and I shivered from my head to my feet. Her voice was as melodic as her body was gorgeous. When she spoke like that, with her fox ears swiveling toward me, I could honestly believe she thought it *was* nice to meet me...not that I was some creepy dork who followed her around staring at her. “So, is this your first time on Zharus?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said again, mentally fumbling for something I could use to prolong the conversation so she wouldn’t get bored and give up on me. “We spent a month in Aloha, then came here.”

“Aloha, huh?” she asked, brushing a wind-blown lock of hair out of her face. “I haven’t been there yet. What was that like?”

“Oh, it was pretty neat!” I said. I started talking all about Dayla and her crew, my brain pretty much running on autopilot while I took the chance to examine her that much more closely. There was something about her voice that felt familiar, a twang I hadn’t heard much on this planet. “You’re from Earth, too, aren’t you?” my mouth said almost before my head had figured it out.

Her eyes widened just a little. “How’d you tell?” she asked.

“Your accent. It’s different from most of the ones I’ve heard around here. You’re from the south, right? We’re from New Yorktropolis.”

“New York...*tropolis*,” she said, shaking her head.
“Um, right. I’m from southwest Missouri. The Ozarks. So yeah, sort of the north edge of ‘south’.”

“Why’d you stay here?” I asked, realizing too late it was kind of a personal question and blushing again. She didn’t seem to notice. Instead, she sort of looked away for a long moment, like she was puzzling over her answer. I could sort of instinctively tell whatever she was going to say wouldn’t be the whole truth, just what she thought was “safe,” but I was okay with that. Anything was more than I had a right to.

“Well, by the time I got here, there really wasn’t much left for me back on the homeworld,” she said after a moment. “So I figured I might as well stay.”

“Oh,” I said. Well, that was fair.

“So what about you? Think you might want to stay on our fair planet?” she teased, turning it around.

“If I were old enough to say I wanted to and have it stick, I might,” I said. “It’s a great place. Nice...scenery.”

Then she pursed her lips and sort of *looked* at me, and I knew I’d gone a little too far. “Yeah, I know a double entendre when I hear one,” she said. “You know, not every woman would be cool with you staring at her, right?”

My face must have been *glowing* by now. “Er...sorry,” I said. I tried to look away, but she was like a magnet and my eyes were like iron filings—they just kept getting pulled back.

She sighed. “Hell. If you want to look, look. I was a teenager once, too.”

“S...sorry,” I said again. “I just...well, you know.” I wanted to apologize more. I wanted to throw myself at her

feet and beg her to take me as her devoted slave...or just *take me* then and there. I wanted to throw myself over the railing, hardlight shielding or no, and bury myself in the desert sand. What I did was just to clam up and stare out at the *real* scenery for a while. She did the same, pretty clearly waiting for me to have the next word.

So, to change the subject, I asked, “What do you think our chances are of finding any Q?”

“Honestly? No idea,” she said. “This is my first-ever mining expedition, though Rufia’s been on a lot of them and Fiona did some mining for one of her previous owners. Between them, I figure our chances are pretty good. And at least we know we’re looking where no one else has—or at least where no one else has registered a claim.”

I already knew they’d cross-referenced computerized claim records with satellite charts to find areas that hadn’t been mined before, and then gone over the sat views to look for likely formations. You couldn’t find Q for certain except from close up, I knew from my geology reading—the sensors only worked at close range. That was why prospecting was still by and large done by humans out in the field. But you could still look for places that looked like the sorts of places you *might* find it.

Of course, while my brain was busy thinking about other things, my traitor tongue got away from me again. “What’s it like having a RIDE?” I blurted. “Especially one of...*that* kind?”

She blinked, then smiled. “That’ kind? You’re thinking Fi’s a BBV, are you?”

“I...er...no...um...isn’t she?” I asked.

“Not quite,” she said. “Though she *was* built on a modified BBV frame, she’s sort of a custom job. *Not* actually a pleasure RIDE. Though she likes to make people *think* she is, the little minx.”

“I...uh, see,” I said. Well, there went *that* daydream. “But what’s it like being with her all the time?”

“Well, she’s a bit high-maintenance,” Charlene said. “And a couple of times I’ve been tempted to trade her in. But I don’t know if anyone would even want such a beat-up old thing, so I guess I might just as well keep her.” She grinned over my shoulder.

I had to laugh. “And she’s also listening to every word we’re saying, isn’t she?”

She chuckled. “Got it in one.”

Then I felt a decidedly chilly nose press into the back of my neck, and a friendly slurp from a huge wet tongue.

“Hey!” I yelled, turning. “Cut that out!”

Fiona simply gave me another lick on my face. “You’re a cute boy,” she said. “An’ ye never know. Maybe afore this trip’s after bein’ over, you and me and Charlene might slip behind a leetle sand dune, just the three of us, and...” Then she whispered things in my ear that made me *really* blush, and wish for another crate of equipment.

“Um...I think I left something downstairs,” I said, and hastily excused myself. I knew they were giggling at me as I left, but I didn’t really care. If I couldn’t have a date with Charlene, I could at least have one with my bunk.

Dana

So we were underway, at last! Off on the great mining expedition that I was aware my son tolerated and my wife regarded as the one great boondoggle I was to be permitted in exchange for bankrolling the rest of the trip. They thought they were keeping their true feelings safely secret from me, but a father knows these things. But that was all right. As long as they let me have my way, I didn't care what they thought.

I had taken up a station in a deck chair by the helm station of the boat where Rufia and her RIDE were working. They'd shown me the basics of how to steer and pilot, and offered to let me take the helm myself when we got out in the desert where there was no license required, but Kelly had been looking a little green around the gills already and I had no desire to make her even more airsick than she was already going to be, so I politely demurred.

At the moment, I was watching Jamie and Rufia's assistant Charlene, standing up by the prow of the ship. Charlene really was something special in the looks department, and I couldn't blame Jamie for drooling. If Kelly hadn't been around, I might just have done some drooling myself.

Her body had clearly been sculpted with some care,

and there was no way she'd grown that long, flowing hair the natural way. With the rampant nanotech here, it wasn't surprising to find so many perfect bodies. I'd even considered the possibility of dropping into one of the nano clinics to shed a few pounds myself while we were here, but imagining the looks I'd get from my wife was enough to dissuade me.

Anyway, it was kind of funny to watch Jamie so obviously trying to play it "cool," or at least what he thought "cool" was, while standing next to this sculpted goddess of a woman who was clearly doing her best to send ward-off signals that he wasn't getting.

Then that fox RIDE of hers padded up behind them, nosed Jamie in the neck, and slurped him on the face. Then she apparently leaned close and whispered in his ear, and Jamie turned crimson and scuttled away like his pants were on fire. Which they probably were. I chuckled. Oh, to be that young again.

The two of them stood up there together, the foxy woman and the foxy robot animal. They seemed to be talking with each other, and I watched with frank curiosity. Everything I'd heard about these RIDE animals since coming to the planet was how smart they were. They were "real" AI. It was true!

Of course, I didn't buy it. The hunt for "real" AI had been going on for centuries. It still *was* going on, back on Earth. But the most they'd ever been able to come up with was something that could charitably be called "not as dumb as a sack full of hammers," but not something you could really think of as "smart." And if it *had* been developed somewhere, how could it have happened in a

middle-of-nowhere place like this? Did they really not have anything better to do with it than stick it into robot animals that turned into sex-changing furry PJs? And if it really was “all that,” why weren’t they letting it off-planet to wow the rest of the galaxy?

Of course, it was all well and good for me to ask that *now*, after I’d dragged the family out on a wild goose chase for the magical mystery metal that supposedly made the whole thing possible. But that people were willing to pay money for this stuff was at least a verifiable fact, and I *was* willing to believe how effective the batteries made with it were. I hadn’t had to charge my camera once since putting one of those batteries in it when we got here, and I’d taken thousands of shots. I was going to be sorry to have to leave that battery behind when we left.

I’ll admit I was a little intrigued by Jamie’s stories about his friends and their RIDEs, but not enough bother investigating more fully. There was so much other stuff to do on the beaches and in the resort that I somehow never got around to it. And the physiological changes that came with them bothered me.

Back home you did get plenty of people with cyber implants (I had a few myself, though just little things to help me in my work. Computer memory and media readers, that kind of thing) but at least those were normal technology. It was a matter of record how they worked, and how they interfaced with the human body. But ears and tail, those were nanotech biology, which was all weird. You could take machines out, but this was a change to your body itself that you actually had to *rebuild* parts of it to get rid of.

And that was without getting into the weird stuff that happened with bird or sea creature RIDEs that you couldn't have fixed so easily. It was why I'd expressly forbidden Jamie from any Fusing at all—I was worried he'd come back from the beach with a beak or something that we couldn't get taken off for three years. Or breasts.

Maybe that was why I'd reacted so badly to Rufia's suggestion at the start that we should get them for our expedition. This was the trip I'd been looking forward to for so long. I didn't want it polluted with feeling like bits of my body weren't *me* anymore, even if I could have it fixed later. Maybe RIDEs were necessary for living and working full time in the desert, but surely we could get by without them for just a week or so, right? I could tell Rufia disagreed with me, but thankfully she didn't want to make an issue of it.

But now that I watched the RIDEs walking around, talking with their owners as if they really *were* intelligent, I was starting to have my first few intimations of second thoughts. This was the most time I'd spent in close company with them since we'd gotten here, and there did seem to be more to them than Eliza engines and animatronics. But still, a sufficiently talented programmer could fake a lot.

I tabled those thoughts as we went belowdecks to eat breakfast in the ship's tiny little galley. The RIDEs stayed on deck, and there was just enough room in there for the five of us: me, Kelly, and Jamie around the table, Charlene across from Jamie, and Rufia leaning against the wall.

As we ate, Rufia, regaled us with stories of the other tourists she'd guided, with names suitably changed to

protect the guilty. I'd still been a little awkward around her due to the whole RIDE thing, but by fifteen minutes into the meal, the ice had been broken for good. You wouldn't expect it from someone with that appearance, but Rufia had a sort of easy charisma. There wasn't anything *artificial* about her, like she didn't feel the need to pretend to be something she wasn't.

And I noticed something about the way she told the stories. Even as we laughed at the mistakes the other tourists had made, she made sure we understood why and how they made them, so *we* wouldn't be likely to make those same mistakes—while at the same time not implying that she thought *we* were so dumb that we would have made them if she hadn't warned us. (Even though we surely *were* that dumb, I had to admit in many of the cases. I wondered if sometime in the future she'd be telling other tourists about the family dumb enough to go into the deep Dry without taking RIDES along?) That's kind of a fine line to walk, and I silently applauded how good Rufia was at her job.

After breakfast, we all found our own different places to hang out aboard the skimmer. It was going to be at least another day and a half before we got to the area Rufia had marked out as a likely, unclaimed-yet spot, so we had to find ways to occupy our time.

We still had net access and would for another few hours 'til we passed into the heavy solar storm zones, so we made the most of it. Jamie and Kelly mostly downloaded media and games—more of the 20th-21st century pop culture this planet was so ga-ga over. If they found anything good I'd watch it with them later. Jamie

also sent another media mail to those friends of his back on the beach.

Meanwhile, I downloaded everything I could get my hands on about RIDEs. All the stuff Jamie had downloaded for his own mesh was a good start, but it was mostly layman stuff. I snagged all the technical documents, peer-reviewed papers, and schematics I could get my hands on. Stuff that *I* could check for fallacies and inconsistencies. I knew that Jamie was laughing at me when he saw the titles filling up the public directories of my mesh, but I didn't care. I was curious now.

While everything was queuing up for the download, I managed to engage Fiona in a conversation. I don't know what I was expecting, but whatever it was, I got something else. I started out with the usual sort of questions you put to a computer to try to see if it could handle them.

“So, what would you say if I asked you to evaluate the following two statements: ‘The next statement is true. The previous statement is false’?”

She glowered at me and replied, “I'd say you're a bloody great wanker with *way* too much time on your hands.”

Unfortunately, that was exactly the sort of response an Eliza program would throw to an input it didn't understand. So I still couldn't know for sure. “Try to see it from my perspective,” I insisted. “I'm just trying to figure out how you work.”

Fiona sniffed. “No you're not. You're after tryin' to poke me with sticks until ye break somethin'. Stop playin' at bein' Captain Kirk t' hold onto your own damn preconceptions.”

It occurred to me that she was right. If she *was* fully intelligent, treating her like a dumb machine I was trying to choke up with a paradox *could* be seen as kind of insulting. Granted, for that to be the case I'd have to accept I was wrong, which I still wasn't sure I was ready to do. But if I *was* wrong, then there was no point building up bad blood between me and one of the only two close-at-hand representatives of the greatest miracle to hit computer science.

"All right, all right, guilty as charged," I admitted, holding up my hands in surrender. "But you're just too good to be true! Hundreds of years of computer science says you should be impossible."

"Everything's only impossible 'til it's not," Fiona said. "Used t' be 'twas thought goin' faster than 100 kph would cause all manner o' health problems. An' yet here we are, light-years from Earth, an' ye got here in less than a single year. Einstein would be after havin' a cow."

I just couldn't *decide*. She could be real. She could be a particularly complex Eliza routine. (Though even that would be impressive.) That hokey cartoonish Irish accent wasn't making it any easier to find in her favor. It was tempting to try another paradox, but if she *was* an Eliza it wouldn't tell me anything anyway. So I settled for asking, "But how can you even *be*?"

"Ye've downloaded the papers," Fiona said. "Hell, it's thanks to the very thing were after goin' t' dig from the ground t'day, it is. Some'v the stuff we dig will someday be me very own dear brothers an' sisters, nieces and nephews. Just like silicon made computers, Q makes us." She looked askance at me. "You're still lookin' at me like

some neat new toy ye found ‘neath your Christmas tree. Get it through yer head—I’m not after bein’ *artificially* intelligent, I’m *really* intelligent. Sentient. Sapien. A *real live girl*, but one who goes ‘round on four legs most’v the time.”

It was the most frustrating thing in the world to be faced with someone who *seemed* to be real but I just couldn’t make up my mind. “But how can I *know* that?”

“Ye could just *trust* me,” Fiona said wryly. “I’d invite ye t’ Fuse and find out, but I’m a-feared ye might not take so well t’ bein’ a woman for the next three years. An’ your wife wouldn’t be best pleased with me either.”

“Hmph.” It actually was starting to be pretty tempting to try a Fuse. Oh, not with *her*, of course, since she was the wrong gender and all. But if I could have actual mind-to-mind contact with a fully rational artificial intelligence, might it not be worth a little remedial nanosurgery afterward to experience it first-hand?

So I wandered off to be alone with my thoughts for a while, though not before I heard Fiona saying to Jamie, who’d wandered up during the conversation, “Your Da’s not a bad man, but he is after havin’ some trouble with new ideas. But then, don’t we all?”

Just what I needed—sympathy from a machine. I grumbled and found a private spot to open my mesh and start in on the documents I’d downloaded. I had a lot of reading to do.

Kelly

I was more than a little mad at my husband. There he was, sitting in his little deck chair reading from his tablet as we flew through the air, over empty desert sands. You might think I was annoyed at him for coming all the way to a remote planet at the ass-end of the galaxy and then not even taking it in, but no, the big thing that annoyed me was what he was reading about.

Behind me, Jamie was talking to Yvonne, the elk RIDE belonging to our guide Rufia, about this new fascination Dana had developed for RIDEs. “Oh, sure,” Yvonne was saying. “It’s the experts in what passes for computers in the rest of the galaxy that we freak out the most. Because they know better than anyone else that we’re ‘impossible.’ Usually takes a day or two for them to come around.”

I had to admit, she had my husband pretty well pegged. Once he’d been penned up with a couple of RIDEs and had to interact with them rather than go on assumptions, they went from being weird sex-change toys with delusions of thinkiness to possibly the next great breakthrough in computer science. You’d think he’d personally discovered them himself. I kept having to bite my tongue to keep from pointing out that they’d been

invented over thirty years ago and probably *someone* else already knew about them by now.

“So, congratulations, kiddo. I’d bet you real money—which I actually *have*, unlike some people—”

The “THPPPPT” sound that followed was Rufia blowing a raspberry at Yvonne, who continued unperturbed.

“—that you’ll have at least a rental RIDE within 30 hours after you get back. Your dear old Dad won’t want to keep his hands off. Hell, if we weren’t both the wrong gender I’m sure he’d already have been pestering Fiona and me for a chance to Fuse and try it out.”

I wasn’t sure I’d go *that* far. We’d both agreed so far that we didn’t want to deal with any body changes. Even if a lot of tourists *did* consider them to be some kind of built-in souvenir they could take home with them, unlike all the stuff Customs confiscated, that didn’t mean *we* were going to be that way. I could just imagine what the neighbors would say if I came home with cat ears and a furry tail.

But...Dana sure was getting interested in some of the stuff he was reading on that tablet. Every so often when I was nearby, he’d look up and say something like, “Did you know that blah blah blah blah has blah blah blah blah in it?” Well, it was actual words, not blah blah, but for all of it that I understood it might as well have been. When he got in these technical moods, all you could do was smile and nod, or else spend half an hour looking up everything in a dictionary to try to follow him, by which time he’d already be two more hours ahead.

And I didn’t need a dictionary to figure that his resistance to the idea of body changes was starting to

erode—while mine was still staying right exactly where it was. This didn't exactly bode well for a peaceful vacation to come.

But I knew better than to let myself brood about it. If he was going to get interested in RIDEs, he was going to be interested in RIDEs and anything I did to try to turn him off them would just make him all the more fascinated. Best just to let him burn the infatuation out of his system on his own—and perhaps learn a little more about RIDEs myself if only so I could keep up. When Jamie and Yvonne wandered back up to the prow to watch the desert go by, I saw my chance and wandered along with them.

Yvonne really was an impressive piece of work, just looking at her. She looked exactly like a real elk, of the sort I'd seen from a distance at Yellowstone but never been this close to. The brown furry pelt, the mobile ears, the liquid eyes...the only place the illusion fell down was that the eyes were far more intelligent than any dumb animal's, and of course she was able to hold a conversation. It was all hardlight, of course—I'd seen the metal when she dropped the light for Fusing and de-Fusing—but impressive all the same. And I'd always liked deer and elk, even as a little girl, so I enjoyed the chance to be this close to something—or *someone*—who looked like one.

She nodded to me as I approached. "Hello, Mrs. Skyler."

"Call me Kelly, please," I said. "You're really based on a real elk?"

"Real elk genetics and mental engrams," Yvonne said. "But smarter. More neural connections. My neural net's on a par with the organic one inside your head. Maybe a little

better, if I do say so myself. No offense.”

“But you don’t, um, *graze* or anything?” I asked. I knew it was a dumb question as soon as I said it—I mean, come on, she was really a *machine*—but she just seemed so *real* in all other respects that how could I really know she didn’t?

Yvonne laughed. “Not out here in the real world. But there’s virtual spaces where we can pretend. Gives us a bit of a sense what it would be like to be real elk. Even if it’s not *really* real, we’d never know the difference anyway.”

Moved by something I didn’t fully understand, I started to reach out a hand, then stopped, feeling my cheeks burn. “Can I, um...”

“Touch my fur?” Yvonne chuckled. “Sure, it’s a natural impulse. I don’t mind. That’s what the fur is for, really—to feel natural to me and to you.”

So I reached out my hand slowly to her neck and ran my hand gently along her furry pelt. “It feels so soft...so *real*. I didn’t realize hardlight could be so detailed.”

Then she gave her head a good shake, ears flopping around. I squeaked in surprise, then had to giggle at the silliness of the gesture. “You really are...”

“Just like a real elk?” Yvonne chuckled. “We are. That’s what we’re meant to be. At least those of us lucky enough to live somewhere like Uplift. They believe in hardlight fur there. If we’re stuck somewhere like Nextus...” Her furry pelt flickered out, leaving the cold sculpted-metal form of a silvery elk standing there. She turned her head to look at me out of glowing fiber-optic eyes. Her voice even sounded more metallic this way. “This is how I spent the first few years of my life.”

Now I reached out to touch the cold metal, contrasting it to the warm fur. “How does that feel? To you, I mean, being like that?”

“It wasn’t so bad when I didn’t know about anything else,” Yvonne said. “Now it feels like being stuck in a tin can.” Her pelt flickered back on. “They don’t hold with hardlight in Nextus, at least for working type RIDEs. The official reason is that it wastes power, means we go shorter between recharges. But I’m just fine with having to power up more often. That’s what tokamaks and polywells, or for that matter fuel cells, solar, or whatever, are for.”

There was something I’d been wondering for a while, and this seemed like as good a time to ask it as any. “But what is it like...um...being worn?”

“I don’t think I can really describe it to you,” Yvonne said. “It’s the old color-to-a-blind-man thing. Comparing sensations from human memories I’ve touched, well, it *mostly* feels like being human feels, because we feel what our operator feels—a single furry animal-humanoid body. But on another level, we’re aware of the hollow space inside us with a living being in it. Humans I’ve shared the memories with describe them as ‘really weird.’”

All right, that was new. “You can share memories?” I asked. So if I Fused with her, I could actually know what it was like to *be* her? Or any other RIDE, for that matter?

“Yeah, when we Fuse. Oftentimes riders and RIDEs share their whole lives with each other when they first partner up. I’d offer to Fuse with you and show you—Rufia would be cool with it—but I don’t think you want elk ears and a tail for the rest of the trip.”

Well, I hadn’t expected *this*. Dana was still over there

reading his little books, and *I* was the one who was being tempted to Fuse. Wouldn't that just burn his biscuits if I did and I got to go around the rest of the trip wearing the furry proof I'd gotten to do it before he did, since the only way *he* could do it right now would involve a little three-year side-trip?

But...no. It'd just make him mad at me, and part of the secret to a successful marriage was avoiding doing little things that made your spouse mad at you *intentionally*, because goodness knows you'd end up doing enough of them by accident. But Yvonne was fascinating enough that it was definitely tempting. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"So you know about me," Yvonne said. "Why don't you tell me about you? Who is Kelly Skyler?"

And that made me smile. As anyone will when invited to talk about herself, I guess. "Well, I'm a fitness and physical therapy coach. I met Dana when his New Yorktropolis company came out for a series of weekend retreats at the resort in California where I worked. The retreats ended...but he kept advancing." I chuckled at the recollection. Dana had been a little cuter back then, but still kept most of his more endearing traits even now. And his more annoying ones.

"There a lot of call for physical therapy these days?" Yvonne asked. "I thought nanomedicine had largely made that obsolete."

"Well, *your* nanomedicine is...a lot more advanced here than back on Earth," I said. "Because of this sarium wonder-stuff of yours. I'm not sure how I feel about that. This stuff you have here could save a lot of lives back on

Earth.”

I guess that was another part of why Dana’s research craze was annoying me a little. I’d already had mine and gotten it out of my system. Shortly after we’d gotten here, I’d watched him secretly apply his handy little tube of Nano-Heal and his cuts closed right up in *seconds*. I *knew* about nanomedicine, or at least Earth’s nanomedicine, and that just didn’t *happen*. But around here it did, because of this new sarium super-battery tech they’d invented and refused to share with the rest of the galaxy. The nanites could store a lot more energy, which meant they could do a lot more, a lot faster, than the puny versions from Earth.

“Yeah, but the problem there is Earth’s government is fond of shiny things, and it wants them all for itself,” Yvonne said.

And that was something I already knew, and why I wasn’t as angry about the sarium export ban as I could have been. “I’d like to be able to argue that, but I can’t.” I sighed. “I’m not exactly thrilled with our present government myself. You know how hard it was to get our tourist visas? If we’d put it off any longer we might never have gotten to come at all.”

“There’s a lot of Q in this desert, but I don’t think we could supply the whole galaxy,” Yvonne said. “They’re trying to figure out a way to synthesize it like they did cavorite for lifters, but so far it ain’t happening.”

“And that’s why they don’t let anyone take any of it off-planet?” Jamie put in.

“Right. I guess they sort of hope Earth folks will dismiss our stuff as rumors if they don’t have it waved in front of their noses.” She nodded to him, then looked back

to me. “So...do you have a lot to do as a physical therapist on Earth, then?”

“I have some,” I said. “But lately I’ve been getting more work on the physical fitness side of things. That’s what I did on the cruise ship to help pay our way here. It was kind of fun, really. I’d never worked on a cruise liner before. There were some great employee perks.” The ship had such good facilities that it was almost tempting to stay aboard instead of go down to the planet. It paid well, too. Not only had it covered the costs of getting here, but the money the two of us had brought in had increased our vacation budget by about 10%. (And Jamie’s part-time job had given him some extra spending money.)

“Lot of fatties on that cruise ship?” Yvonne asked.

I chuckled. “A few. But with ten months to work on them, I’m proud to say I was responsible for a total of over 600 lost kilos.” It really was an accomplishment, though I treasured the memory of all those vacationers’ delight at being able to look good in their new swimsuits for the planetary trip more than I did the numbers. “And I’ll probably try to beat that record on the trip back.”

“Awww, you’re going to leave us?” Yvonne teased. “Not fall so much in love with the place that you go native?”

I grinned at her. I couldn’t help it. “Find us a fortune in qubitite and we’ll talk. For right now, I just want to make our budget stretch to the next liner.”

Yvonne grinned back at me. “We’ll do our best!”

And so help me, I believed they might actually do it. I know Jamie was grinning like nobody’s business. I guess he expected that with Dad going RIDE crazy, and me

making friends with one, his hopes for having one of his own might not be so forlorn after all. Well, sure, kiddo, get your hopes up. For that matter, it might be worth doing a little hoping myself.

Jamie

As the day wore on and net access faded to the occasional laser links supplied by Yvonne—which depended on having a sat in view, a clear shot at it, and a cooperative elk—we found other things to do. We ended up spending a lot of the late afternoon and evening in a seven-headed game of *Trivial Pursuit: 20th Century Edition*. I had wondered whether it was really fair to let the RIDEs play, but it turned out that without reliable net access they were limited to what they had in their own internal databased, which for trivia weren't necessarily any better than the good ol' Mark 1 brain. (Either that, or they were intentionally letting us win, which was another good possibility.) Needless to say, Rufia skunked all the rest of us at twencen trivia—after all, she had been immersed in it for years now—though Charlene did come pretty close.

Supper was another crowded affair, with the five humans in the galley and the two RIDEs up top, though tapped into the conversation through the intercom. We'd gotten too friendly over the game to want to cut them out of it.

The meal was reheated military surplus ration packs—not exactly appetizing after a month of Alohan food, for all that the packs claimed to be “gourmet”. Mom expounded

“Skyler’s Law of Gourmet Food,” which is that anything that has to *claim* to be “gourmet” on the package is, by definition, *not*, and we all chuckled even though the joke was an old one for the family. Still, Rufia chowed down cheerfully on her pack, complete with loud smacking noises, and the rest of us were inspired by her enthusiasm.

During a lull in the eating, Dad spoke up. “I’ve been doing some research on RIDEs.”

“Ye don’t say?” Fiona muttered through the intercom. Dad ignored her.

“You know, now I’m kinda starting to regret not renting some RIDEs after all,” Dad continued.

“They’re pretty useful in the Dry Ocean,” Rufia said noncommittally. “And if you hit it off, they’re great friends, too. Ain’t that right, Vonnie?”

“I dunno if I’d go that far in *your* case,” Vonnie said cheerfully over the intercom. “But we’re great *acquaintances*, at least. Or maybe great *enemies*.” Rufia blew a raspberry at the speaker.

“How did you and Yvonne ever meet, if it’s not too personal?” Mom asked.

“Oh, it’s not too personal,” Rufia said. “Not sure how interesting it really is, though. My best bud Ryan and I had been on-planet a couple of years, long enough to learn how things worked around here—”

“You’re not from here originally?” Dad asked.

“Nah, we came in steerage on the *Spruce Goose*. A whole year it took us back then. You ten-month speed demons don’t know how good you’ve got it. So anyway, we ended up stuck in a podunk little polity named Burnside, but we’d saved up a little cash from odd jobs and heard

Uplift was the place to be. So we took a few weeks to hitch our way there, get set up in biz for ourselves. Had some lucky breaks along the way—Ryan fixed a guy’s skimmer, he turned out to be an Uplift property owner, ended up giving Ryan a great rate on a rental, but that happened later.

“But anyhow, we’d done our research and we already knew mining wasn’t the life for either of us—but there was plenty of stuff we could do those miners would pay top dollar for, you bet’cha, ‘cuz mining takes up so much time you don’t have it to spend on doing other stuff, but you’ve usually got money. And since neither of us thought we’d make good hoo—ah, *bartenders*, Ryan decided to open a garage and I figured comm-tech was just about my speed—I’d been a comms hobbyist all my life back on Earth, so I knew which end of a loaded walkie-talkie to point away from me. I just needed the right gear.” Rufia paused to take a bite of the nondescript mess in her ration tray that claimed to be vegetarian lentil stew but could have been anything from river mud to chocolate pudding.

“So Ryan and I went down to the Uplift RIDE auction, and you know, there she was. I’ll never forget.” Rufia smiled dreamily. “Standing right there on the block, this silvery metal elk. Kind of beat-up and dusty, but underneath it all, she was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. ‘Lot number 347E: ELK(f)-HCA-002B (Elk, female. Heavy Communications Armor. Series 2, Revision B). Property of a lady.’”

“Oh, spare my blushes,” Yvonne said over the comm.

“So yeah, I knew what I’d be giving up if I went with her—I forgot to mention, I was a ‘Rufus’ when I arrived...”

She paused to allow for exclamations of surprise from around the table. Somehow, none materialized. As soon as Mom and Dad knew crossriding was even *possible*, Rufia's build made too much sense for it to come as a shock to them either.

She shrugged and continued. "...but after seeing her, I knew there wasn't any other choice. I outbid half a dozen *real* girls for her, and she was *all* mine." She grinned. "Ryan didn't have as much cash as I did—he'd put it all down on the garage tools—and he ended up with...a chassis. The body of a beat-up old lynx RIDE without any legs or tail or anything." She shook her head. "I mean, seriously. A *chassis*? And insult to injury, it turned out... mmm, well, no, that's not *my* story to tell. Anyway, Vonny and I hit it off—"

"Sort of," Yvonne put in.

"—and we've been together ever since, and we always *will* be." She grinned, and dug into her tray again.

Our attention next turned to Charlene, who had been listening and eating quietly. "Can you tell us how you met Fiona?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Not as much of a story, really. I'd been living in Laurasia, and I decided to come out here to meet some...distant relatives. Met Fiona as soon as I landed—she was owned by a taxi stand operator who really wasn't treating her right. So I bought her off him, and we've been together ever since. The end."

"Yeah, some 'first RIDE' stories are better than others," Rufia said, chuckling. "Who knows, maybe yours will top both of ours."

After we cleared away the dishes from supper, we all got together in a room with a big wall suitable for film projection and had movie night. In honor of our long desert trek, we watched a long desert movie: *Lawrence of Arabia*. It was long and boring in some parts (seriously, why did we need ten minutes of just music before the thing even started?) but on the whole pretty neat to see that Obi-Wan guy so young. Weird how it started with the hero dying in a motorcycle crash, though. I thought you were usually supposed to kill the guy off at the *end*.

After the movie, we went out on deck to find the sky was on fire. At least, that's how it looked to us. The weak magnetic field over the desert, combined with the ever-present solar activity, produced an *aurora centralis* show like no northern lights we'd ever seen before on Earth. We all took lots of camera snaps and video footage, even though we knew it would never match actually being there, and finally just put our cameras away to *experience* it.

"It's lucky we can adjust the quantum permeability of the hardlight," Rufia said as we all stood on deck and stared in wonder. "You don't wanna know what the rads we'd be getting otherwise would be doing to us right now."

Finally, we called it a night. The RIDEs and Rufia stayed up to keep an eye on things, with Charlene spelling Rufia about halfway through the night. By the time we woke up, we were well into the deep desert. Stone spires and rock formations rose up below us—none as high as we were, of course, but still very impressive. Dad snapped photos like crazy. One time he asked if we could land so he could get some close-ups of a particularly interesting spire.

Rufia was happy to comply. "Sure thing! It's your

dime, and we're not on a schedule." She was happy to show off the natural beauty of her home, and slowly maneuvered the skimmer around to find the best angle for Dad to snap photos from the deck. But when he asked if he could debark and take some shots from ground level, she regretfully shook her head. "You look at the thermometer?"

"What, it's only 72..." He blinked and looked again. "...centigrade? Oh."

"Yeah," Rufia said. "Now, if you want some close-range snaps, Charlie or I can get them for you, since we've got RIDEs—but that's about the only way. We don't want to contaminate a survival suit in case you need it sometime during the trip—and besides, you wouldn't be that comfy in one anyway."

It's really too bad they hadn't come up with the shutterbug argument before we left. Hell, it's too bad *I* hadn't. I *knew* Dad, so it should have been an obvious call. Dad was a little crestfallen, and didn't take them up on their offer—half the fun of getting the shots was taking them himself. But he got over his disappointment once we were on our way again.

I will admit to taking a few pictures myself. I sent some of them on to Dayla, Donna, and the crew. They'd never been this deep into the Dry themselves; maybe they'd find them interesting.

As Rufia steered the boat, the rest of us—including the two un-Fused RIDEs—gathered in the prow to snap shots and talk about the place. "I can't believe this scenery!" Dad said again. "I'd thought that Monument Valley back home was amazing, but this place puts it to shame."

Mom mostly stayed back from the railing, though she'd gotten easier about the height over the course of the trip. Still, she did (carefully) assay a couple of photos herself.

The RIDEs peered over the railing themselves, staring down into the stone spire studded desert. "It is pretty impressive," Yvonne admitted. "It's easy to forget from just seeing it day in and day out. That's why I like guiding tourists. New perspectives on old scenery."

"It seems pretty quiet down there," Mom said. "Are there any wild animals?"

"No natural ones," Yvonne said. "No native vertebrates, remember? Not many plants, either, and the ones there are are all amazingly old."

"No *natural* wild animals?" Dad asked. "What's an *unnatural*..." He trailed off, as both Fiona and Yvonne looked at him. "Oh."

"Bingo!" Fiona said. "Dozens o' Rides slip their fetters an' make for the desert ev'ry year. Some are after joinin' up with AlphaWolf, a well-known buffoon who's heart's after bein' somewhere 'round the right place, even if he is a bit of a blustering idjit. Others form up their own private little enclaves or just hang around solo. If they aren't usin' up lots of power, they can be after livin' off solar easily."

"You've got escaped RIDEs out here?" Dad asked, looking around as if expecting one to be hiding behind any stone spire.

"A few," Yvonne said. "Not many, relatively speaking. You know how big the desert is. Even if there were thousands of them out here, that'd be an average of one per millions of square clicks."

“Are they...dangerous?” Mom asked.

Fiona shook her head. “Mostly not. Most of ‘em want little more’n t’ be left alone.”

“There are a few, a *very* few, to worry about, though,” Yvonne admitted. “AlphaWolf’s crew has a rep for ‘bodyjacking.’ They’ll Fuse with people and just...not let them out again, keeping control and possession over the shared body. It’s the only way they can have opposable thumbs, which we RIDEs have to admit are pretty handy things to have.”

“But we’re nowhere near the range in which they’re after operating,” Fiona added quickly. “Don’t be worryin’ about them. Out here, nowhere near human habitation, there’s nothing for ‘em to be after wantin’.”

“And anyway, there’s more worth worrying about on the human side,” Yvonne said. “You’ve got *human* animals out here, too. Prospectors, who can be a little surly at the best of times if they think you might want to jump their claim. Bandits and polity crims, on the run from the law—though those mostly stay closer to the polities so they can sneak back in to resupply or commit more crimes. RIDE slavers. Rogue claim-jumping miners. The list goes on.” She shrugged. “Again, given how much empty space there is out here, it’s not likely we’ll run into any of those either.”

“RIDE slavers?” Charlene asked.

“Yeah,” Yvonne said. “Real low-lifes. RIDEs in good condition fetch a lot at auction. So these guys come out, recapture any free RIDEs they can find, and take them back to sell at auction. The Uplift RIDE sale authority doesn’t permit those kind of sales in Uplift when they’re aware of it, but places like Nextus and Sturmhaven allow

it.”

“How can they do that to machines who can think?” Dad asked. Having come round to the idea that RIDEs’ AI was real and not a clever programming fake-out, he was now displaying all the fervor of the newly-converted.

“Pretty easy, actually,” Yvonne said. “We just don’t get the respect we deserve in much of human society, where we’re just considered particularly clever equipment. It’s why we like Uplift so much. Things are still not great there, but they’re a darned sight better than the rest of the world.”

“It just doesn’t make sense,” Dad grumbled. “I mean, if they gave RIDEs full citizenship, the RIDEs could earn money legally, which means they would pay taxes. You’d think the governments would want to be able to collect more taxes.”

“Greed is a powerful force, for sure,” Fiona admitted. “But it may not be as strong as the tiny little lizard part o’ the human hindbrain that says ‘Not like me! Kill it!’”

“Until you can all overcome your inner lizards, this is how it’s going to be,” Yvonne said. “RIDEs escaping, and humans hunting them down. Not exactly a perfect world, but it’s the world we have.”

Dad shook his head. “So if we *do* rent RIDEs, we’re basically buying into a slave market.”

“It’s not *that* bad, at least not in Uplift,” Yvonne said. “RIDEs are a lot better treated there, on the whole. And to a certain extent, a lot of RIDEs are okay with the idea of being sold, as long as they find good buyers. It’s what we’re *made* for.” She shook her head in a cervine shrug. “But if it bothers you that much, you could just buy RIDEs outright

and free them when you go home. I'm sure they'd be grateful. And we don't cost all *that* much."

"Huh." Dad thought about that. "Yeah, I guess that's better than renting."

"If we have the money in our budget," Mom pointed out.

"Maybe we'll strike it rich," I put in hopefully.

Fiona sniffed. "Don't get your hopes up, kid."

"Hey," I said defensively. "It could happen."

We were still chuckling when Rufia abruptly slowed the skimmer. "Hey, what's up? We're not there yet, are we?" Dad asked.

"No, but we just picked up some company on the sensors," Rufia said, coming forward. "We're not alone out here. Vonnie?" Yvonne jumped up and went to Fuse with her, and after a moment Fiona followed suit with Charlene. "What've we got, Fi?" Rufia asked.

Fiona stood at the prow, a foxy figurehead—chest thrust straight out. "I'm after pickin' up six RIDEs, twenty clicks ahead," she reported. "Three active, fully armed—two of them just now cloaked, but not terribly well. Three..." she paused, then spat the words. "...heavily fettered, manacled, an' bare metal."

"RIDE slavers?" Charlene asked.

"Speak o' the devil an' he will appear," Fiona growled.

"Hell." Rufia growled. The skimmer halted, then began to turn to starboard. "Right. We'll detour around them, then."

"What, you're just going to...let them go?" I asked.

Rufia and Yvonne glared at me. "You think we want

to?” Yvonne asked. “If it were just Charlene, Fiona, and us, hell no. We hate those assholes.”

“But we are *not* putting you in danger on our account,” Rufia said. “You’re pure civvies, and taking you anywhere near these bandits would be asking for trouble.”

“An’ for that matter, we can’t even say for sure they’re slavers,” Fiona pointed out. “Just that they’re after havin’ captured RIDEs. Though there aren’t that many other reasons to have RIDEs fettered like that out here...”

“I can’t say I exactly like the thought of being responsible for letting RIDE slavers go,” Dad said. “Couldn’t you just...leave us here and go after them yourselves?”

“You’re our responsibility,” Rufia said. “We can’t just go off and leave you.”

“What if you sent the skimmer up high where they couldn’t get us?” Mom asked. I had to admit, it took a lot for Mom to admit to wanting to be “up high.”

“Mmm.” Rufia looked tempted.

“Look, we’re no dummies. We’ll do whatever you tell us to,” Dad said. “If those people really are taking captured RIDEs to sell, I’d like to be a part of freeing them, even if that part is just staying out of the way.”

Fiona and Yvonne looked to each other, and I could tell they were exchanging silent communications over the next few seconds. Finally, Rufia said, “Right. We’ll do it, but you gotta do exactly as I say, got it?”

“Absolutely,” Dad said.

“I’m gonna send this skimmer back a hundred clicks downrange, and a klick high,” Rufia said. “If we’re not back in an hour, it’ll automatically head for Uplift at top

speed. It gets there, take the log chip to Rhianna Stonegate at the Freeriders garage and tell her what happened. She'll know what to do."

Dad nodded. "Understood." He held out his hand. "Good luck."

Rufia gripped it and let go. "Thanks. See you soon." She lifted into the air, then dropped over the side, followed by Fiona and Charlene. A moment later, the skimmer turned all the way around and boosted in the opposite direction.

Charlene

We stealthed as soon as we dropped free of the skimmer, cloaking to little more than shimmers in the air. *:Well, now, that's impressive,:* Fiona remarked. *:Vonnie's after havin' almost as good a stealth as meself. No way that's stock.:*

:Her best friend's a RIDE tech,: I replied. *:I doubt she's got stock anything.:*

As we approached the ground, we added forward speed until we were skimming over the sand and rock beneath us. We couldn't go as fast as skimmers this way, but we could go much more sneaky. If we were lucky, Fiona told me, they'd never spot us at all, at least until we were close enough for visual contact.

Fiona touched Yvonne with a comm laser. *:What's the plan?:* I asked.

:Wait 'til we see what we're up against,: Rufia said. *:Depending, it might be possible to free the RIDEs and get away without the others even spotting us.:*

:That would be nice,: I sent.

I still wasn't sure whether *I* had any business being along on this. Rufia had called the family civilians, but I wasn't exactly any less of a civilian myself. Fiona was the one with all the covert ops experience here. I was just a

barely-trained colonist a hundred and fifty years after my time.

:Don't ye be worryin' after it,: Fiona sent to me. :I'm after havin' enough experience for the both of us. Just ye follow my lead an' we'll be fine.:

I hoped she was right. But even so, I didn't regret coming along for one moment. Ever since I'd Fused and learned how strange and wonderful RIDEs really were, I knew I couldn't turn my back on someone taking three of them in to sell back into bondage.

The twenty-klick flight only took about ten minutes at Fuser speed, though a few minutes before we got there we cut our speed dramatically to avoid disturbing the sand. Before we were halfway there Fiona was able to refine the view from passive sensors, detecting the uncloaked RIDE and pinning down with 80% certainty where the others were.

The three fettered RIDEs were a huge male lion, a mid-sized female cat, and a small female fennec fox. The lack of hardlight meant their makes and models were easy for Fiona's silhouette recognition database to identify: a heavy assault RIDE from Nextus, medium comms from Sturmhaven, and light scout from Nuevo San Antonio, respectively. *:Cosmopolitan little group they got there,: Fiona remarked. :No way that's after bein' anythin' other'n a free RIDE roundup.:*

:What're they locked down with?: Yvonne asked.

: 'Tis after lookin' like standard Nextus Nano heavy fetter manacles,: Fiona said. :Just a guess, but the config looks right. Will ken more when we get t' visual, but shouldn't be trouble t' hack if ye can paint it with laser.:

At last we approached to within two clicks, moving at a walking pace now as Fiona's sensors tracked. The visible slaver RIDE was a badger, probably medium support or assault. The cloaked units were sized sufficiently to be a heavy and another medium. We were just a bit outgunned in size, though not necessarily in experience.

:If we can get around behind them, we'll have a clear shot at those manacles,: Rufia said. :We could hit the three slavers with heavy ECM bursts at the same time, open it up for those three to get away, then retreat ourselves.:

:Works for me,: Fiona said. :I'm after havin' no desire t' get into a fair fight, let 'lone an unfair one. Important thing's after bein' that they get free, an' we get off without them gettin' a good look in.:

:Agreed,: Yvonne said.

Moving very slowly and cautiously, we slid in behind a sand dune, and Fiona lifted up for a peep over the top at the spot where the slavers had called a halt. The badger was standing in the middle of the space, with a pair of pulse rifles at the ready. The two stealthed ones were across the clearing from her, looking back in the way we had come.

Fiona's stealth was a *lot* better than theirs. We could almost make out the humanoid silhouettes inside the blurry patches, and she assured me that, broad daylight or not, there was no way they'd be seeing us even if they were looking in our direction. The three prisoner RIDEs were huddled together in the space between the three RIDEs, lying down with their heads tucked between their legs. They weren't in passive, though, because the slavers might

have to move them at a moment's notice.

We settled back to the ground and motioned Rufia to the left, around the edge of the dune. We linked with her so we could ride the same laser into the manacles and reduce our exposure, and linked up to penetrate the security on the manacles. It really wasn't hard—like any prison, they were designed mainly to resist escape from within, not penetration from without. It was the work of moments for Fiona to diddle their alarm and prepare them for release.

Then Rufia painted the three prisoners with lasers. *:Hsst!:* Fiona sent. *:Do nothing yet, but prepare to flee! Distraction coming in five...four...three...two...one...:*

Then Fiona and Yvonne sent the unlock, at the same time they pulsed every ECM they had at all three of the captor RIDEs. The invisible RIDEs' cloaks shorted out, and they all three dropped to the ground and started convulsing. The formerly-invisible ones turned out to be a jaguar and a female wolf.

The captive RIDEs didn't wait around. They were gone into the night, three silver streaks. As they passed, one of them sent to us, *:Thanks, sisters. We'll remember you.:*

:Well, that was heartwarming. Let's get the hell out of Dodge,: Rufia sent, turning and skimming away at max Fuser speed. We followed right behind her, waiting until we were a couple clicks away to go to skimmer mode and boost at our best possible speed. With any luck the three slavers would be out of it long enough for us to get out of their sensor range.

We got back to the ship in plenty of time to beat the

deadline, even after we started out heading away from it and looping around to throw off pursuit. As we approached, we announced ourselves by comm so the Skylers wouldn't panic when we came over the edge. We Fused to touch down on deck, then de-Fused after landing. "Mission accomplished," Rufia said, flashing a thumbs up.

"You saved them? Where are they?" Jamie asked.

"We don't know, and don't care," Rufia said. "They're free, and that's good enough for us."

"Probably halfway back to wherever they came from by now," Yvonne said. "Hopefully a little wiser about the dangers of getting lured in by slave-hunters."

"We should be safe for now," Rufia said, "but I'm taking a *wide* detour around that area. It'll add a few hours to the trip, but, well, better to be safe. Thanks, folks. We did a good thing today—and that's something we can all be proud of if we don't find any qubitite at all."

Jamie

It took us a while to come down from the excitement we'd just experienced, even from a distance—especially after the two RIDEs projected their imagery of the incident on the movie screen inside. We thought it was a pity that they couldn't have done more damage to the slavers, but agreed that the important thing was getting the captive RIDEs free, which they had done.

But gradually, things started to return to normal, and save for an occasional grin and fond recollections, we were soon just as bored as we'd been for the rest of the trip in.

As the morning wore on toward noon, Charlene Fused up with Fiona and they went to the foredeck where the prospecting sensor command station was located, retracted below the deck until it was needed. They raised the station and began familiarizing themselves with its use. Fiona was notably unimpressed.

“Damned half-blind old barge!” she growled. “*I* have better sensors than this entire boat!”

“Well, of course you do,” Charlene said. “You're a—” Then she noticed me standing there, and paused. “—custom model,” she finished. I wondered what she'd been *about* to say?

“At least I can link me own sensors into this for when

I'm after scannin' remotely, so that's something," Fiona said.

"Are you picking up any Q yet?" I asked excitedly.

"Just the trace amounts present in the sand," Fiona said. "The geology isn't right for a strike here. Don't be a-worryin', we'll be there soon enough."

After lunch and more "dumb tourist" stories in the galley, Rufia made an announcement. "We're almost to the hunting grounds we picked out. So right now we'll go topside and I'll show you all how to work the sensors."

"What if we aren't good enough at reading them and miss something from our inexperience?" Mom asked.

"Hey, don't worry," Rufia said. "We'll backstop you. We'll be getting the same feeds via remote link, and anyway everything will be recorded to go over later. We're gonna fly a search pattern, so it's not blink-and-you-miss-something. But it's only fair you guys get first crack at it, since it's your trip."

"Oh, okay, cool," Dad said. "Okay, let's see how they work."

A few minutes later the seven of us were all clustered around the hardlight display panel over the sensor station. "The way this works is that we're gonna fly a grid-shaped search pattern," Rufia said. "Well, actually three patterns, to cover more ground. The skimmer will start from the west end, and Fiona will start from the east, and I'll take a chunk in the middle. She'll fly the widest passes since her sensors have greater range, the skimmer will fly the narrowest, and I'll fly somewhere between. When we cover all the ground, we can take closer looks at anything that looks like it might be a hit."

“Sounds like a plan,” Dad said. “You’ve got the grid all plotted out?”

“Several of them actually. There are three or four spots we ought to cover. We can probably hit one of them before it gets dark, and do the rest tomorrow,” Rufia said.

“You think we’ll find anything?” I asked.

Rufia reached down and tousled my hair. I was about five years too old for that, but I somehow couldn’t bring myself to resent the gesture. “Hey, kiddo, if we knew that we wouldn’t have to bother searching it. It’s entirely possible the reason this place hasn’t been claimed is that people have already been over it and found nothing. It’s also possible we’ll hit a mother lode.”

“The truth is probably in the middle,” Yvonne put in. “We’re kinda *expecting* to find a few smallish deposits—nothing worth putting a platform in, but enough to fill the holds and at least let you break even on the rental costs and say you ‘really’ dug some Q.”

“The refineries back at Uplift are after running all day and night just on one-off cargo loads like that,” Fiona put in. “It’s after bein’ the rule o’ things. The big strikes are the exception.”

“But of course we *could* be surprised,” Rufia admitted. “We buy lottery tickets expecting to lose, but we still buy ‘em and we’re surprised sometimes.”

“Speak for yourself,” Yvonne said smugly. “Lottery tickets are just a tax on people who are bad at math.”

“*Anyway*,” Rufia said, “we’re just about ready to start. Don’t worry if you find it boring after the first hour or so. It kinda is. Just be glad you don’t have to do it for a living like some people. There’s a reason I fledged tour guide and

comm-tech specialist instead of going into prospecting full-time myself.” She grinned. “It’s really a lot more fun to sit back and watch other people do it, preferably with shades, a nice cool drink, and a friendly subservient RIDE to stand over you in your lawnchair with a fan in her mouth.” Yvonne looked at her for a long moment, and Rufia shrugged back. “What? A gal can dream, can’t she?”

That got a chuckle from everyone—even Mom. And so, on that high note, we began our prospecting runs.

For the first half hour, it was all hella exciting. We gathered around the scanner screen and exclaimed every time the scanner pinged positive for qubitite in quantity. But after a while, the excitement wore off. There were just too many pings, and after a while they kind of lost their novelty value. And since we weren’t even going to make any decisions until after the scans were complete anyway, after a while they started to seem kind of pointless. Gradually we all drifted away, letting the sensors chuckle and chirp to themselves.

“Told ya so,” a grinning Rufia said a couple of hours later, when she returned to find no one at all watching the sensor station. “It’s pretty dull work, and I think that’s the real reason we use RIDEs for it. They don’t get bored so easy.”

“Speak for yourself, buster,” Yvonne said.

“Oh, c’mon, I know you were watching soap operas all that time we were flying the search patterns,” Rufia said. “You subjected *me* to them.”

“You didn’t exactly complain at the time,” Yvonne said.

“Anyway, let’s see what we’ve got.” Rufia pulled up a display map of the area we’d all just scanned. It looked kind of like a piece of swiss cheese, if the cheese had been sandy-beige and the holes had been blue. Each “hole” represented a qubitite deposit of various sizes. “Okay, looks like basically what I said it would be—a few decent-sized lodes that might pay for the rental but not much beyond that.”

“Should we start mining them, then?” Dad asked, a little disappointed.

“Not yet,” Rufia said. “We’ve still got a couple of grids left to scan. You never know, we might find something better there.” She grinned. “I’m not *too* optimistic, but look on the bright side. You’re at least gonna break even and get something more real than a carnival-booth prize out of it. That’s more than most tourists get.”

Dad nodded. “Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Rufia replied. “Listen, Q mining isn’t all glamorous Brubecks and Waltons and crap. 99.9% of it is people doing just what we’re doing now, day in and day out. Running scans and tanking up on the best crappy lodes they can find to break even, all the while hoping and praying for the big score. The ones who really make out like bandits are the refineries, the miner bars, the resupply and refit shops...”

“The comm-tech specialists for hire?” I put in.

She grinned again, more broadly than ever. “Smart kid! Yeah, Vonnie and I realized early on that the mining life wasn’t for the likes of us. But it sure is nice getting paid.”

“You’ll make a decent amount out of this, too, even at ten percent,” Mom said. “Since you don’t have the skimmer rental to fund.”

Rufia nodded. “Yeah, that’s why it’s so great being me.” From someone else that could have sounded smug or smart-ass, but from Rufia it was just a joke, and we all laughed.

After supper, we had another movie night. This time it was the first two Brendan Fraser *Mummy* movies. They were remarkably cheesy fun—and it was funny to see how often they ripped off bits from *Lawrence of Arabia*. We went to bed tired but happy.

The next morning, we moved on to our next search grid and started flying it right after breakfast. That took us through to brunch. This grid came out mostly the same as the first—more swiss cheese, though a couple of spots looked better than the other one. “After you tank up and take in, you may want to sell the rest of the claims to some jobbers I know who own their own ships and could turn a profit on cleaning ‘em out. You might even come off a little ahead yourselves. I can broker the sale if you want.”

Dad nodded. “Thanks. We’ll consider it.”

The third grid scanned quite differently from the other two. It was actually kind of a disappointment at first. There were almost no swiss cheese dots in it. We almost stopped scanning early on after it was clear we weren’t going to find any results, but kept on it out of stubbornness. In the end, what we came up with was this very strange shape made up of three roughly equal lines that met in the middle at 120-degree angles from each

other—and basically nothing else.

After we'd finished, we met on deck to consider what to do. "Well, I guess that's that," Rufia said. "About what I figured, in the end. No major strikes, just a lot of decent minor ones. The next step is to drill and fill." She pulled up the map of the second grid. "Guess we start here..."

"Beggin' your pardon, but would ye pull up the third grid again?" Fiona asked softly.

Rufia blinked, but did so. The strange Y-shaped pattern appeared on the screen again. Fiona Fused with Charlene, then reached out to point into the center of the Y. "Drill there."

"But...there's nothing *in* there," Rufia said. "Is there?"

"I...don't honestly know," Fiona said. "It's just...it was somethin' very strange it was. Years ago, when I was in the service o' that miner—Min, her name was—there was this grizzled old down-on-his-luck Q-rusher Min used t' buy drinks for, out o' pity I guess. The day 'fore he died, he said something very odd. Wait a tic, think I'm after havin' it in memory still."

The map blinked out, replaced by an image of a rather dissipated-looking old man—white hair with a huge bald spot, bushy white beard, ragged clothes—sitting at a section of bar, a mostly-full beer in front of him. The man took a long pull at the beer and looked toward the camera. "Thank ye, lassie," he said. "Ye been so kind to me...there's somethin' I'd like to share with ye. D'ye know about the 'Y' in 'Brubeck'?"

An off-camera woman's voice, presumably Min's, said, not unaffectionately, "You sozzled old coot, there's no 'Y' in 'Brubeck.'"

And the man grinned conspiratorially. “Ah. That’s what they *want* ye to think. Mark me, lass.” He reached down to some spilled beer on the bar and traced a shape in it—three lines, meeting at the center in 120-degree angles from each other. “You ever see *that* in your grid scans, you drill right *here*.” He thumped the exact center of the shape, then wiped his hand through it to smear it out. “That’s the ‘Y’ in ‘Brubeck.’”

“Crazy old coot,” Min muttered. The scene flickered out.

“Next day, the old guy was mugged in an alley. Throat cut.” Fiona shrugged. “Nothin’ too weird ‘bout that by itself. It happens with miners. Min was grieved, but didn’t give it much thought other’n that. If he knew anythin’ worth the knowing of, why would he a’been broke in a bar? She paid his advice no heed, an’ we never ran into that shape in our scans anyway. But now’t we have, ‘tis mighty curious I am. So if ye don’t mind, I’d like to give the old coot’s advice a try.”

Rufia glanced at us. “It’s your dime. What’cha think?” Behind her, Yvonne glanced at the sky, and a panel in her forehead slid open to expose her comm laser.

We all looked at each other. We had to admit, it was a hell of a yarn. But there wasn’t any sign of any other Q at all in that map except for that weird formation. Was there really going to be anything there? Still...we already had the skimmer. We weren’t on a deadline. It wasn’t going to cost us anything but an hour or so to take a look, so why not? “I guess Y marks the spot,” Dad said. “I’m okay with checking it out.”

Rufia nodded. “Right, so I guess we—”

Then the normally-genteel Yvonne started swearing up a blue streak, surprising the lot of us, before cutting herself off and shutting off her comm laser. Then she seemed to remember herself. “Er...sorry. Pardon my French. I...just ran a search on that pattern, and “Y” in “Brubeck.” I didn’t turn up anything, but I suddenly got a flood of about a dozen different geolocation requests.”

Rufia gaped, then her eyes narrowed. “They...didn’t *find* you, did they?”

Yvonne snorted. “*Please*. Do I look like a calf? I bounce everything off half a dozen sats and ground stations out of habit, you know that. I cut out at the first sign of a trace. Still...” She swiveled her head to track to a different spot in the sky and lit her comm laser again. “I’m filing claim to these three spots, in the Skylers’ name, *right damned now*. Filing underway...and locked in. Requested verification and overwatch by the Federated Marshalls...ack received. Okay, we’re good.”

“Okay, now I’m *really* curious what we’re gonna find under there,” Rufia said. “But before we drill, I want to place and shoot some thumpers. Let’s get a good picture of what we’ve got.”

“Thumpers?” Mom asked. “Like in *Bambi*?”

Rufia laughed. “No, no. Micro-explosives we detonate so we can use seismographs to get a picture of what’s down there. Standard mining gear, there’s some down in the equipment lockers.”

I grinned. If there’s one thing we teenaged boys love besides—well, you know—it’s explosives. “Let’s thump that thing!”

We flew the skimmer over to the center of the pattern,

basically a big empty field in the middle of nowhere. But was it my imagination or did the ground slope up just a little to that point in the middle of the lines?

Rufia and Charlene emplaced the thumpers in a ring around the central point, then Rufia lifted back up to the skimmer deck while Charlene and Fiona lay face-down on the ground to get the best sonar image. Rufia produced a little box with a single button on it and handed it to me. “Want to set ‘em off yourself?”

“For hella sure!” I took the box and smacked the button. The immediate effects weren’t all that impressive—a couple of “whumps,” and small puffs of dust rising all around the field. Then across from us, Fiona and Charlene jumped upright and jumped into the air, skimming across the field toward us on their lifters.

“I think we’ve got something.” Rufia went to the sensor station and tapped the keys, producing a three-dimensional image in the air of a flat plane, with a little skimmer hovering over it. Then, underneath the ground, at least several times the size of the skimmer, was what looked like a large three-sided pyramid, narrowing to touch the ground at the very tip. The image rotated on its side, and the vertices of the pyramid exactly matched the three lines on the scan.

“Weird. The exact shape and flat nature of the sides of that tetrahedron must deflect the scan beams,” Yvonne said. “You only get the Q readings from the edges. Otherwise this whole *place* should be lit up.”

“I’ll bet it will be once we start drilling,” Rufia said. “Glad you registered the claim.”

Dad stared at the projector for a long moment. “So,”

he said at last, conversationally, “Drill?”

“You damn *betcha* drill,” Rufia said. “I mean, *shee-it!* Now I’m regretting not asking for a bigger cut.”

“You’d just spend it all anyway,” Yvonne said.

Rufia took the helm and moved the skimmer directly over the tip of the pyramid, then lowered it until the stern nearly touched the ground. She opened a dimple in the hardlight shielding, sealing it around the bottom hatch while exposing the hatch to the air. Then she opened the hatch and lowered the drill rig. Calling it a drill is actually kind of misleading, because it was actually a great big specialized hardlight projector, configured to form a Q-penetrating drill bit. It would both cut down into the ground and grind up the chalk-like qubitite into gravel that could be more easily sucked up into the sealed hold. At least that was what all the articles I’d read about the process said.

Of course, we were all still on deck, so we couldn’t watch this directly. But Charlene and Fiona were standing some distance off, relaying imagery of the proceedings to the sensor station display. We huddled around it watching in something of a state of shock.

I mean, it was amazingly hard to believe. There really was a mother lode of Q located beneath us? Was this all some kind of elaborate practical joke on Rufia and Fiona’s part? Were they running some kind of scam on us?

As if sensing our concerns, Rufia insisted on very publicly refunding the advance payment Dad had made to her, and insisting she wouldn’t take another cent from us until *after* the mineral load had been to an assessor. “To be honest, if I hadn’t picked out this spot myself, I’d almost

be worried *you* were running a con on *me*,” Rufia said with one of her trademark broad grins. “But let’s not count our chickens too soon.”

After the drill had spun for a while, Rufia reconfigured it into a vacuum hose and activated the built-in lifter suction. Then we all drooped down belowdecks to the cargo hold access in the rear, to peer in through a hardlight-covered window at the blue gravel piling up in the cargo bin.

Fiona and Charlene came forward, opening an access port and manipulating a hardlight hazard glove to pick up a single chunk of Q and examine it with fine sensors. “This is at least B+ grade,” Fiona concluded. “Possibly A-. Maybe even A. ‘Twould take an assessor to say for sure. But even if it’s only after bein’ straight B, this boat will hold a good 20 *kilomu* worth. If it’s A-, it could be 50 or more. And A... well.” She shrugged. “Lots.”

“Even after your cut and the rental fees, that will almost double our remaining budget,” Mom said. She still wasn’t registering yet just how much was still in the ground.

“I don’t think we need to worry about our budget anymore,” Dad said.

Charlene

We left the family discussing, in a pole-axed kind of way, what they might do with their new-found wealth, and moved forward to the equipment storage room. “Charlie,” Rufia said, her expression turning somber, “here’s where our problems really begin.”

“Problems?” I asked. “Seems like we just struck it rich—or at least they did.”

“Yeah, and *that’s* the problem. Our little overgrown RV just turned into a treasure galleon.” Rufia waved her hand in the direction of the Q hold. “This wasn’t supposed to happen. Hell, this *never* happens. Most *real* mining ships have heavy weapons and heavy escorts. We’ve got a few turret mounts for light gauss machine guns and a few light pulse cannons. Ordinarily, these tourist ships are pretty safe ‘cuz no one expects them to find anything anyway. But when one does...”

“Ye think mebbe we shouldn’t even bother to mount the weapons?” Fiona asked. “It’ll only be servin’ as a red flag we’re after havin’ somethin’ aboard worth the worryin’ over, rather’n the usual load’v semi-worthless rock.”

“Mm. That’s true,” Rufia said. “But on the other hoof, there are those who’ll hit a ship full of anything. Not many, but as weird luck as we’ve had so far this trip...hell, we

already know there've been some RIDE slavers in the area."

"Better not very safe than maybe sorry?" I said.

"Yeah. So gimme a hand here and we'll go ahead and mount these up." Rufia passed me a couple of gauss guns, and we carried our weapons up to the deck.

By the time the Skylers came back up, we had most of them mounted. Jamie, adolescent boy *par excellence*, looked very interested by all the guns. His parents just looked worried.

"Is all this really necessary?" Dana asked.

"In my opinion, yes," Rufia said. "If you want, we'll take 'em down again, but as much money as you've got in that hold, better safe than sorry. Charlie and I can run them remotely from our RIDes, but we'd like to teach you the basics of how to fire them manually just in case."

"If you think it's a good idea," Kelly said doubtfully.

"We do," Rufia said. "We were tour guides on the way out, and we were going to be tour guides on the way back, but after what we found, we're your bodyguards for the rest of the trip instead."

Naturally, I was the one who got the job of teaching Jamie how to fire a machine gun. I guess the idea was to make him have to concentrate harder on the lesson or something. I dunno. You'd think my being inside a head-to-toe furry RIDE would make it less distracting, but Fiona's body was designed to be almost as distracting as she made my natural one. Especially since I had to be right up next to Jamie to correct his grasp on the handgrips.

"Now you just aim at that rock over there and gently squeeze the trigger," I said, drawing on Fiona's skills and

memories more than my own. I'd never fired a machine gun in my life myself.

"Gently, ah, squeeze," he said, glancing at me, significantly lower than my eyes. I smacked him lightly on the head, and he blushed. "Ah...sorry."

"That's quite all right," I said dryly. For all his distraction, he did at least manage to knock a few chunks off the rock. "Good job!" I said.

Jamie blushed at the praise. "Ah...thanks."

"Now let's hope you never have to fire a shot in anger," I added.

"Hear, hear," he agreed.

I had to admit, despite his obvious infatuation with me—or with Fiona and me—Jamie had been doing a decent job keeping it under control. The hell of it was, *my* newly female body kept telling me he wasn't all that bad-looking himself, for a teenager. It was actually weirding me out a little, as I'd never been attracted to a *guy* before.

:It's the hormones,: Fiona told me. :They're after doin' funny things to your head. Kinda like they are to his, in fact.:

:Oh, very funny,: I sent to her.

:If yer after sneakin' off with him somewhere, make sure ye use protection!: she teased me cheerfully.

My response was largely unprintable.

By the time we finished getting them checked out on the weapons, the mining gear informed us that the hold was now full to the brim with premium-quality qubitite ore. We shoved the displaced rock and dirt together and made the place look as pristine as we could (which really wasn't very), then emplaced the short-range signal

beacons that would let anyone who stumbled across the place know it was under claim without, hopefully, luring claim jumpers from a distance.

Then Rufia took the ship up to 300 meters, and I went to stand lookout in the bow with the pulse cannon I'd taken from Wilkins what already seemed like a lifetime ago. We slowly built up speed, heading back toward Uplift.

Jamie came up to join me after a while, glancing curiously at the pulse cannon. "You really think we might run into trouble?"

"We did on the way out," I said. "We're taking a different route, but there's only so far out of the way we can go heading back to Uplift."

"'Tis better t' be safe than sorry," Fiona added. *:Though we could end up bein' sorry anyway,:* she added silently.

Our defense preparations seemed to have put a damper on the previously festive mood. Dana and Kelly spent most of the afternoon below, and Jamie wandered back and forth around the deck, too distracted even to ogle me.

As the sun started going down, the whole family came up to the deck and moved forward to where I stood watching the desert, sweeping ahead with Fiona's advanced sensors. So far there'd been nothing of concern.

The weapons and our worries evoked a somber mood. Nobody said much for a while. "I didn't think there was actually any *danger*," Dana said after a while. "Or I wouldn't have come."

"There's always danger," Fiona said. "In anythin' ye do. Ye cross the street, ye might be run down by a runaway

skimmer. Ye take a space cruise, ye might be hit by an asteroid. Ye find a fortune in Q, there are always people who'll be willin' t' take it off your hands." She shrugged our shoulders. "We could be lucky, an' by this time tomorrow be sittin' in a bar laughin' an' buyin' drinks for all an' sundry. We probably will. Desert's so big, the odds are agin' anythin'—"

She cut off as something began pinging our sensors. "Hold on," I said. "Picking up RIDEs a hundred klicks out. Rufia?"

"On it." We shifted course to keep our distance. I watched the RIDEs veer off to the left. We were going to pass them by about 20 klicks.

That was when Fiona's sensors lit up with an active targeting lock—on us. "The hell?" I wondered.

"Everybody grab something!" Rufia yelled just before the skimmer lurched and veered to the right, the deck tilting at a 45-degree angle. Dana and Kelly managed to grab the railing, and I reached out and caught Jamie's wrist before he could tumble overboard. A missile streaked by us and detonated against a sand dune ahead.

"Skylers, below!" Rufia bellowed as the skimmer leveled back out. "Strap yourselves in down there and hold on tight!"

Their faces pale as ghosts, the Skylers scurried back to the hatch and got below. Rufia was swerving and jinking the skimmer as pulse blasts flew left and right from behind us. "Fiona! Tell us what we got back there!" Rufia yelled.

"On it!" Fiona responded. I felt our chest start to heat up a little as she kicked in her most powerful sensors,

tucked in behind her immense “twin radomes.” “Stealthed mil-skimmer,” she reported, her accent almost entirely absent in the stress of combat. “Light mobile armor. Rocket launcher, light pulse cannons.” She took control of the rear turret mounts, spinning them around to lock on and open fire. Our targeting was better than theirs and we started chewing away at their cloak and hardlight armor—but not quickly enough.

“Shit! Those RIDEs are closing on us, too!” Fiona said. A moment later, I felt her concern deepen. “And their scan signatures are after lookin’ very familiar.”

“Crap!” Rufia agreed. They were the very same badger, jaguar, and she-wolf we’d freed those captured RIDEs from earlier. We’d detoured to try to avoid them—but apparently hadn’t detoured far enough. Or else they’d locked onto us somehow as we left their camp and had come looking for us, another possibility.

I raised the rifle-like pulse cannon Fiona and I were carrying and ran to the rear to add its fire to the turrets’. If we were going to have RIDE company soon, maybe we could at least get the skimmer out of the way first.

Our own skimmer shook as it took a few light pulse hits. Another missile streaked by, barely missing us again. On the whole, Rufia was doing a pretty good job of keeping us from getting hit, but it couldn’t last for long.

The skimmer behind us had already lost its cloak. On its deck I could see a few humans crouched low behind armored bulwarks, and a bulldog RIDE in the rocket launcher and pulse gun turret atop the low-slung cockpit. I aimed for the turret and whaled away with the cannon, under Fiona’s targeting guidance. Our swerving wasn’t

helping my aim any more than theirs, but the wild fire was at least distracting their gunner from firing some, which was what I wanted. Then a couple of our gauss machine guns scored a lucky hit on the skimmer's forward lifters, and it did a slow nose dive into a sand dune.

“Ware boarders!” Rufia yelled, and Fiona and I spun just as the three slaver RIDEs came over the prow. We ran forward, firing as we came, while Yvonne lashed out with her comm lasers. We focused our fire on the jag, who had rocket pods on hips and shoulders as well as heavy pulse guns on his forearms. He went down, but not before releasing a cloud of minimissiles that detonated against the helm station—and against Rufia and Yvonne, slamming them back against the cabin wall behind it.

Then the other two were on Fiona and me. With Rufia down, even momentarily, they were able to double-team me, and every dirty trick we—well, mostly Fiona—knew wasn't enough to keep us from getting dogpiled. Rufia and Yvonne staggered back to their feet and charged, tossing the she-wolf off us, but the badger had us by the throat and was scrambling our systems with some kind of contact-based ECM. I kneed him in the groin and he let go, then we tried to impale him with our hardlight sword, but he clapped his paws on it and kept it at bay.

Rufia and Yvonne still weren't quite at full strength. They were scorching the wolf with their comm lasers, but she was getting some good hits in with a heavy gauss pistol that were sapping her shields and even scoring her hardlight fur when they grazed her. And we couldn't help Rufia while we had the badger to deal with. Stinking badger.

Then the bulldog RIDE from the skimmer caught up with us, touching down on deck behind Rufia, and it was basically all over. They got the drop on Rufia and shoved her to the deck, then turned their sole attentions to me.

“Well now, you led us a merry chase,” the badger said. “And you cost us a fair bit when you let those feral RIDes loose. But you’ve more than made up for it by striking Q for us and bringing us a cargo skimmer full of the top-quality stuff, and we surely thank you for that.”

We were too exhausted to reply, even if we could have. They’d locked some kind of collars around our necks that shut our RIDes down completely except for hardlight and basic life support, trapping us inside armor shells we couldn’t even move on our own.

“And the two of you—or, rather, the *four* of you—should fetch a decent price at the underground market, too,” he said. “And you even got us a bigger skimmer!”

“Hey, boss!” The she-wolf had gone below, and now returned with the Skylers held at gunpoint in front of her. “Tourists. What you want we should do with ‘em?”

“Hmph.” The badger frowned. “No demand for those at the market. And we don’t need witnesses. Toss ‘em overboard. The desert’ll take care of them.”

No! I tried to protest—but with Fiona locked down around me I couldn’t do a thing. I could only watch as the pirates dropped the skimmer’s ramp and shoved the family down it to the sand with nothing but the clothes on their backs. I dimly heard Dana asking for them to give them their survival suits, and Kelly pleading with them to at least take Jamie along, but it was useless. A moment later they returned, retracting the ramp, and the skimmer

started to move.

“Oh yes, my lovely,” the badger said, fondling me—or at least I think he was, I couldn’t feel anything with most of Fiona’s systems off. “You’ll fetch a *good* price. BBVs and their operators are always in demand at the underground market.”

Then he did something to my collar, and the lights went out.

Dana

How quickly our dreams of wealth beyond avarice had turned into a nightmare.

We'd strapped ourselves into the emergency shock couches with fumbling hands, staring at each other in terror as the skimmer juddered and shook and Rufia and Charlene yelled at each other upstairs. We felt the vibrations as the turrets fired at our pursuer, then heard the silence as they shut down and stared at each other, wondering if that meant we were safe now.

Then we'd heard the sounds of closer-in fighting upstairs, and knew that was too much to hope for. When the fighting stopped, we were just starting to unbuckle to find out what had happened when the arrival of the unfamiliar lupine RIDE with the huge gauss pistol in hand put a stop to things.

"All right, you three. No sudden moves. Get up and come on out. Takin' you up to see the boss."

And so up we went, all of us fully aware of the gaping muzzle of the hand cannon pointed at our backs. Kelly and I looked at each other and squeezed each other's hands, but there was nothing we could really do except just what she said.

As we climbed the stairs, I heard a greasy male voice

telling someone how they would fetch a good price at some market. My heart sank like a stone as I saw Rufia/Yvonne and Charlene/Fiona lying there with metal collars around their necks.

“What have you done to them?” Jamie yelled.

“None of your concern,” the wolf said nastily. “I’d be more worried about what we’re going to do to you.”

My spine turned to ice when the badger said he needed no witnesses. He was talking so casually about killing my entire family!

The wolf herded us to the ramp. I shuffled along numbly, one foot after another. If this had been one of those 20th-century movies they liked so much around here, I would have been some kind of an action hero who could turn and seize the wolf’s gun and stage a single-handed mutiny, sprinkled with quips and one-liners, that would have ended with a pistol to the badger’s head. But I was a sysadmin, not an action hero, and there were just too many of them for any funny business to end any way except with us full of holes. At least as long as we were alive, there was hope of some kind.

“At least give us our survival suits,” I said. “The way the temperature’s dropping out there, we won’t last four hours.”

“You wouldn’t last much longer *with* the suits,” the wolf said.

“I can’t believe you’re *doing* this!” my wife sobbed. “At least take *Jamie* with you!”

“Sorry, lady,” the wolf said. “But orders are orders.” She shrugged and murmured, “If you hold out ‘til morning, mebbe I can let someone know to come this

way.”

It was a forlorn hope and we all knew it. Without cloud cover to trap the heat, the desert would drop to sub-zero temperatures in a matter of hours. We would be frozen stiff long before dawn.

Not that it felt like it now. As we passed through the hardlight shell, it was like stepping into a blast furnace. The desert had cooled considerably from the heat of the day, but it was still at least 40 degrees—especially this close to the ground, which was radiating back its stored heat. The ramp retracted behind us, leaving the three of us standing there while the wolf still covered us with her gun until it was closed. Then the lifters revved and the skimmer turned, heading back toward the wrecked skimmer several clicks away—to pick up the rest of its human crew, I guessed.

“C’mon,” I said. “Let’s walk to that wrecked skimmer. They’ll probably be gone before we get there. Maybe there will be supplies or an emergency beacon or something.” I knew they wouldn’t leave us anything, of course, but we had to keep our hopes up.

So, with nothing better to do, we trudged across the sand amid the lengthening shadows, watching the running lights of our skimmer halt and set down next to their wrecked one. Nobody spoke—we were all a bit too much still in shock for that—but I could feel two pairs of eyes burning into the back of my head as we walked. “This was *your* fault,” they seemed to say. “*Your* idea.”

Before we were more than halfway to the crash site, we saw the lights of our skimmer lifting away—followed a moment later by a tremendous explosion that would have

been the old skimmer going up in flames.

“So that’s that, then,” Jamie said dully.

“Hey,” I said with false cheer, “Where there’s life, there’s hope, right? Let’s see if there’s anything left from the explosion. Maybe if it burns for a while we can stay warm until dawn.”

“When we’ll roast,” Jamie said.

My wife spoke up. “Your father’s doing the best he can.” And that hurt almost worse than Jamie’s dullness. Was I really doing the best I could? If I had, we might not have ended up here in the first place.

“I’m sorry,” I said, the words feeling hollow as they left my mouth. “This is all my fault. I’m the one who had the big idea to go prospecting.”

“Hey, don’t beat yourself up too badly,” Kelly said. “We did strike it rich, against all odds.”

“Yeah, and then we got hijacked, *also* against all odds,” Jamie said. “I think I’d rather just have had our luck average out and go back to Uplift empty-handed.”

“Come on,” Kelly said, patting him on the shoulder. “Let’s go on and see what’s at the wreck.” She shrugged. “At least it’ll be easy to see where it is after the sun sets now.”

So we walked on toward the burning hulk that lit up the desert ahead of us. Kelly was right, it *was* easy to see. It also made it easier to pick our way amid the debris scattered by the blast.

At last we made it to the epicenter of the explosion, where a ruined skimmer chassis was still merrily burning. We were grateful for the warmth, as the night had already started to cool down. There were no supplies, survival

gear, or anything else of any use to be found. The sky was starting to light again with the auroras, but they held little beauty for us at the moment—they just reminded us of all the cosmic rays we were undoubtedly soaking up.

“So,” Jamie said after a moment. “Now what?”

“Now we wait,” I said. “Maybe the explosion got seen on satellite or something.” It felt like a scant hope to me, but it was better than nothing.

We huddled together, close to the fire, as the night got colder and the fire burned lower. We looked around for anything that might burn to add to it, but there were no more combustibles anywhere at hand. And there was no sign of any impending rescue from overhead.

“I guess this is it,” I mumbled as the fires started to die at last. “At least it’ll be pretty quick, I guess.”

Then Jamie spoke up again. “Dad, look!” He raised a shivering arm to point out into the darkness where three glowing pairs of eyes had appeared at varying heights.

The highest set of eyes moved forward, a huge shape stepping into the faint light cast by the dying ambers. It was...an immense tawny-furred lion, easily two and a half meters tall at the shoulders. And it was growling in a not exactly friendly kind of way.

Kelly

It's never easy to get used to the idea that you're going to die. Not just you, but the people you love the most. I think I was the one who realized it first, came to terms with it, so it was my job to help the others deal with it the best they could, too. Oh, I could have played the blame game—it's *your* fault we're here. We're gonna die because of *you*. But if we were gonna die, did I want our very last moments in this world to be ones of recrimination?

So as we lay there next to the fire, huddled together for warmth, I put one arm around my husband and the other arm around my son. Then I filled the silence neither one of them wanted to break by speaking in low tones about my favorite memories—the time Dana and I met, when we'd had Jamie, the good times we three had shared together on Earth. We tried to ignore how cold it was getting as we shared stories, pretending we were just sitting around a campfire instead of watching our own lives flicker and die before our eyes.

I like to think it would have worked, that we would have slipped together peacefully into that good night and woken up as peacefully on some other shore. But happily, it turned out not to be necessary. Just as we were starting to give up, our salvation prowled out of the dark in three

angry animal shapes.

Of course, it didn't know it was our salvation at the time, and we weren't exactly sure of that either. It might just have been a quicker way to die. That was what it seemed like at first.

The first one was that huge lion. Then just behind it and to the left, a smaller cat—seal point tabby and fluffy, unmistakably a giant Maine Coon housecat. And on the other side, a cream-colored, big-eared giant fennec fox. None of them looked especially pleased.

“So you finally took on more than you could chew, huh?” the lion growled in a deep bass voice. “Damn pirates. Freezing to death's too good for you.”

The Maine Coon spat, after the feline style. “You have rounded up free RIDEs one time too many!” she said. She had a very faint German accent. Or Sturmhaven accent here, I guess.

“I just wish we could have gotten our hands on the rest of you,” the fennec said. Her voice was surprisingly melodic, almost at odds with her furry fox form. “I suppose you three will have to do.” They spread out around us, glaring at us with undisguised hatred in their eyes.

Dana protested, “Wait, you've got the wrong idea! We're not pirates.”

The lion snorted. “Sure. You're just waiting for rescue next to their crashed ship.”

“Don't you think they'd have rescued us by now if they were going to?” Jamie asked.

“Not if someone chased them away,” the Maine Coon purred.

I'd had enough. Maybe my husband and son hadn't

figured it out yet, given that the animals had hardlight pelts on now and hadn't when we'd seen them earlier, but a lion, a cat, and a fennec together? I knew who they were. "That's a fine way to talk to the people who saved your lives today," I scolded them. That got their attention.

"What?" the lion asked.

"This morning, you were being held prisoner by a badger, a jaguar, and a she-wolf," I said. "Then two other RIDEs attacked your captors and released you."

The Maine Coon snorted. "So? The slavers probably told you that happened."

I had expected that. "Did they tell me this? 'Do nothing yet, but prepare to flee.' 'Thanks, sisters. We'll remember you.'"

They all three froze at that. "How did you know?" the fennec demanded. "Who told you that?"

"The ones who rescued you were our tour guides!" Jamie said. "Rufia and Charlene, and their RIDEs Yvonne and Fiona. We were on a prospecting skimmer, and they picked you up on their scopes."

"That skimmer we saw earlier—" the fennec breathed.

"They didn't want to risk our safety, but we insisted they go after you," Dana said. "They came back and showed us what they did afterward."

"Then those same lowlifes hijacked our skimmer and left us for dead," Jamie said. "And they're gonna sell our guides and their RIDEs—the ones who rescued *you*—at some 'underground market.'"

"Is there any way we can keep that from happening?" I asked. "You're RIDEs...can you get us back to civilization so we can call in the Marshals? You can turn into

skimmers, right?”

“That...could be a problem,” the fennec said. “The collars those assholes used on us have...aftereffects. Our skimmer modes and most of our secondary systems are locked out.”

The lion nodded. “The only way we can get them back online...is to reset our systems by Fusing with a human.”

“Oh, you’ve *got* to be kidding me,” Dana said, crossing his arms. “This is *so* contrived. You can’t just...shut down and restart, like any server?”

“You have to understand,” the housecat RIDE said. “We were designed from the start to be...incomplete without humans in many ways, as a sort of safety measure—for *them*.” She spat again. “We have spent years working around that, one way or another, but there are certain fundamentals we cannot change. And this is one of them.”

“A RIDE technician with the proper equipment could reset us without a Fuse being necessary,” the fennec said. “But Fusing is the quick-and-dirty field-expedient reset for a *lot* of conditions. It was intentionally designed that way.”

So we stood there looking at each other for a moment as the implications sank in. I supposed that, as the most sensible one here, it was incumbent on me to break the silence before we all froze solid. “If we were willing to Fuse with you...would you be willing to Fuse with us?”

You’d think I’d dropped a bomb from the silence that followed. Dana and Jamie were both staring at me with expressions so similar you could easily tell they were father and son. The three RIDEs were trading their own stunned looks, and probably comming silently among themselves while they were at it. At last, they turned back,

and the lion spoke.

“If you three are willing, then so are we, at least for the time being,” he said. “We *do* want to help rescue the people who rescued us, and we have a pretty good idea where the slavers will be taking them.”

“And *we* don’t want to freeze to death, so it all works out,” Jamie said.

“There’s just one little problem,” the fennec pointed out. “Two of us are female, but only one of you is. So one of you two—” she nodded to Dana and Jamie. “—will have to crossride. Who is it going to be?”

Well, *that* set the Maine Coon cat among the pigeons. “I’ll do it,” Dana said immediately. “I’ve had more time as a man, and you’re in the prime of your life.”

“No way!” Jamie insisted. “I am *not* gonna make you and Mom into lesbians!”

“We can deal with it,” Dana insisted. “Your mother and I are both very open-minded.” Did he *really* just say that with a straight face?

“No, it’s all right,” Jamie said. “I’m young and adaptable. I’ve got my whole life ahead of me. You never know, it might be fun. I could switch back before I’m even legal drinking age back on Earth.”

I felt my dander rising. “Are you two *really* going to sit here and argue about this while we all freeze to death?”

They turned to me. “Well, since we’re both willing, why don’t you cast the tie-breaker?” asked my husband, nearest and dearest to my heart. I think he saw from my expression as soon as he said it that he’d made a dreadful error.

“So *you’re* really going to ask *me* to decide whether I

want my husband or my son consigned to womanhood for the next three years,” I said, my voice shaking from more than just the cold. I’ll admit it, I was *mad* now. They couldn’t work this out for themselves and they had the nerve to ask *me* to make that choice for them? Who the hell did they think they were?

And more importantly, which one of them *was* I going to choose? How could I decide? It was like asking which one of them I *loved* more. No matter which one I chose to switch, she would feel hurt and upset with me for wanting to keep the other one the way he was. If only there was some way I could avoid...having...to...

And then the solution hit me right in the face. Lightning-fast over the course of the next ten seconds, I considered it, looked at it, turned it over from all angles in my mind. It would mean a huge sacrifice on my part...well, on *all* our parts, but it was a sacrifice both of those two clowns had just vied with each other to insist they were both willing to make. And if *they* were willing, could I be any less?

So I took a deep breath and looked down at myself one last time, trying to fix in my head the way I was now, to carry it with me over the next three years.

And then I walked up to the lion and stared defiantly up at him. “All right, big guy. You and me, right here, right now. Let’s dance.”

As my husband and son stared even harder at me than they had a few moments before, the lion threw back his head and roared a hearty laugh. “I like you,” he said. “You’re trouble.”

And then he ate me.

Jamie

So Dad and I stood there slack-jawed as that huge lion opened his mouth and, well, *engulfed* Mom down to the waist. Then something inside of him tugged her the rest of the way in—and his jaws had no sooner shut than he began shifting and shrinking in on himself a little, standing upright with his front legs turning into arms. Moments later, he stood before us: a three-meter-tall lion man, all sculpted muscles under tawny fur and flowing mane. The effect was hella dramatic, especially in the dim light from the glowing embers and the auroras overhead.

I turned to look at the remaining two female RIDEs awaiting us. “Well, Dad,” I said. “Looks like we both get our wish.”

Dad was still staring at the lion-man who contained what had used to be Mom. “I have *got* to learn to stop pissing that woman off,” he said.

“That won’t be a problem anymore, dear,” a new voice said dryly—a male voice a little higher-pitched than the lion’s own, with Mom’s inflections. It was weird—it sounded like someone was running Mom’s old voice through pitch-shifting software. “At least not the ‘woman’ part of it,” he continued.

“How does it feel?” I asked.

“Very strange,” Mom—could I still call him Mom? Hell, he was still the person who had given birth to me—so he was still Mom until further notice. I can’t just switch narrative horses mid-stream. “I don’t have things where I should, and I do have things where I shouldn’t,” Mom added.

The lion chuckled. “A more than adequate description of how the two of you will be feeling shortly, in fact,” he said. “I suppose I should introduce myself to you all, by the way. My name is Gordon, though I will also answer to Gordy or Gordo. Formerly of Nextus 119th Heavy Infantry. Unit motto: ‘Fear Our Roar’.”

“Nice to meet you,” Dad said numbly.

“Nice to *be* you,” Mom said. “How long is this change going to take to complete?”

“You’ll be done enough for a de-Fuse in a few minutes,” Gordon said. “I’ll be tweaking a little more over our Fuses the next few days once you’ve had time to settle in.”

“A few *minutes*,” Mom said bemusedly. “On Earth it takes *hours*. I’ve helped transgenders get their new bodies into shape, so I’ve studied the process.”

“That’s the sarium for you,” Gordon said. “You won’t have any problems with getting in shape, either. Our biggest problem is dealing with the waste heat from the nanites. If we went as fast as we theoretically could, you’d internally combust.”

Mom turned the lion’s head to look at us. “And what are you two waiting for? Get in out of the cold.”

We turned to look at the fox and the cat, and they looked calmly back at us. “If no one objects, I will pair up

with you,” the cat said, looking squarely at Dad. “I prefer a certain maturity of outlook.”

“You’ll probably be disappointed,” Mom said. His trademark sarcasm hadn’t been affected by the gender change. That was reassuring.

Dad swallowed as he watched his fate pad up to him on little—well, okay, *big*—cat feet, then felt it rub, purring, against his hip. “Don’t worry,” the Maine Coon said. “I know you’re scared, and I know this isn’t your choice. I’ll try to be as easy on you as I can.”

“Uh, thanks,” Dad said, finding his voice. I wondered what was going through his head. After all, this was the chance he’d been hoping for—the chance to touch mind to mind with a real computer intelligence. It just happened to come with the monkey’s paw of having to “switch teams.” But Dad wasn’t stupid, and he knew better than to bitch about what he couldn’t change. He hesitantly placed a hand on the cat’s head and stroked it along her soft hardlight fur. “Okay, let’s get this show on the road.”

The cat nodded. “My name is Isolde. I am from Sturmhaven, where there is a certain...military tradition involved with crossriding.” She chuckled. “Fortunately for you, I do not hold with those traditions.” She padded back around to sit in front of him, then looked at him one last time as if to memorize him. Then her hardlight flickered off and she...tackled him. Or pounced, or whatever. Either way, she lunged forward, and her metal body split down the middle and reformed around him, shifting into a cat-styled, very female suit of metal armor. Then a moment later her hardlight flickered back on, painting their body head to toe in the same fluffy seal point tabby fur she wore

on her animal form.

They stood there for a moment, looking down at their arms, their legs...their breasts. “This feels...really strange,” Dad said in her new voice.

“Join the club,” Mom said in his.

“Warm, though,” Dad said. “*That* feels nice. Thanks, Isolde.”

“You’re welcome,” she purred. “I don’t know if this will make you feel any better, but I promise I will make you look *fantastic*.”

“Thanks,” Dad said. “I’ll try to take that in the spirit you mean it.” She looked meaningfully at me. “Your turn, junior.”

“Ah, yeah.” I turned to look at the fennec, who had approached and was examining me. “Hi.”

“Hello,” she said in dulcet tones. She had a really amazing voice. I wondered if I would, too, when she’d remade me in her image. “My name is Athena,” she continued. “Are you ready?”

“Give me a moment,” I said. “Psyching myself up.”

“Don’t take too long,” Athena said. “It’s almost zero already.”

“Right.” I took a deep breath, let it out, watched the mist form before my eyes. I had to admit, this was going to be interesting.

I wasn’t one of those people you read about—the ones who somehow “know” they were born the wrong gender. I always found myself wondering just how they *knew*. Did they have something to compare to how they were now? Not that I thought they were *nuts* or something (though God knows most of the people on Earth did). If anything, I

kind of envied them the certainty of their conviction that Mother Nature had gotten it wrong. I didn't think I'd ever been *that* sure of anything in my life.

But what I had long been, and what I think everyone, male or female, has been at one time or another, was curious about the other side of the tracks. What would it have been like to be born in a different body? What sensations do women feel differently from men (and vice versa)? What would it be like to have erogenous zones in other places?

I had resigned myself to never satisfying that curiosity. I mean, granted, it's not like the Dark Ages when all they had were imperfect surgery and hormone treatments that would make you "sort of" the other gender. Now nano-treatments could remake your whole body just as if you'd been born that way—it took hours, yes, but you were "whole" at the end, completely fertile and everything. You could even change back later, after enough time had passed. But still, they still had that stigma of weirdness associated with going to so much trouble to change how God or nature had made your body.

At one point I toyed with the idea of joining a genderplay forum on-line to try it out there, but I *knew* how easy it was for the government to keep track of everything you did on computers and didn't want to do anything to risk getting lumped in with the political weirdos like that "Aleka Petrovna" character they deported last year.

But as I said before, the rep of Zharus as some sort of sex-change fast-food place, where the price of your manhood might be as little as the few thousand dollars'

difference between models of mecha bike—or you could even get transed by accident—accounted for a *lot* of play the place got in taboids back home, and its depiction as some sort of exotic Bohemia probably gave it at least as much tourism as its scenic desert vistas and qubitite prospecting. Not even all of it from people who actually wanted to try crossriding themselves—there were lots who just wanted to come and watch.

Of course, that had all gone through my mind when Mom and Dad had first suggested they might move the trip up and take me along, and I can't pretend I didn't maybe *daydream* a little about what it might be like to crossride. But I never seriously considered going through with it. For one thing, Mom and Dad would have gone through the roof. For another, even if I'd felt like rebelling, and even though there was no stigma to it on Zharus, it would still go right into full effect the moment I got home.

I could just see it: all my friends would freak right the hell out, some of them would probably *ask* me out, and others would do their level best never to be seen with me again. And worse, as far as public records were concerned I'd be stuck with the kind of reputation that would get me extra screening at airports and psychological profiles when applying for work. Hell, the government being what it was, it might even get me deported.

So I'd resigned myself to being one of those people who just got to watch. And I'd been happy with that. After all, daydreams were all well and good, but curiosity was nothing to base a major, life-changing decision on.

But on the other hand, survival *was*. So it looked as if I was going to get that curiosity satisfied whether I wanted

to or not.

“Okay,” I said, taking what I knew would be my last breath as a man. “Do it.”

“Right!” Athena padded around behind me—and a moment later, warmth surrounded me. My fingers and toes tingled with it. Then my whole body started tingling—especially my chest and between my legs. I tried not to think about what that tingling meant. Instead, I looked down at my newly-furry, newly-female body, then glanced over my shoulder at my huge, bushy tail. Well, *our* tail, anyway. I felt the immense ears flick back and forth on top of our head. I seemed to be hearing a lot more than before—and seeing better, too.

:*Low-light vision*,: Athena’s dulcet voice said in my mind, clearer than ever. :*Handy, no?*:

“Ah, yeah,” I said. And stopped pole-axed by my new, higher-pitched voice in my own inner ear. “Wow. This is me?” This was going to take some getting used to.

“This is *us*,” Athena said aloud. I felt her assume control of the body, dancing a few quick steps as if to limber up. “Oh, what fun! It’s been *forever* since I had a human—or since a human’s had me. I’m no bodyjacker, but *God* it’s good to be upright again!”

Her enthusiasm was infectious, and I was amazed myself at how nimble we were. My memories of my old body felt so clumsy. She knew exactly where she wanted to put our feet, and they always went exactly there.

“Oh, I wonder if...” We looked down at our chest, with its pert little fuzzy breasts. Then seams appeared above and between those breasts, and they slid forward and out, revealing a thin storage space behind them with a handle

in it. She reached in and pulled out a wedge-shaped pistol—a light gauss gun. “Oh, good! It’s still there! It’s been years since I saw this last!” She held it up to her muzzle and kissed the top of the barrel. “Oh, I’ve *missed* you!” She worked the gun’s action and sighted down the barrel, then slid it back into place and sealed back up.

“That was...disturbing,” I reflected. But then, so was my new voice. It was still freaking me out, but I guessed I could deal with it.

“Nice hiding place, though,” Mom said. “Efficient use of space.”

“And handy we’ve *got* a weapon,” I said. “Are you guys armed, too?”

“I have my comm lasers,” Isolde said. “At higher power settings they’re quite effective.”

“And I’m not exactly weaponless either, even now,” Gordon said. “Fear my roar.”

“That’s all well and good, but should we even be thinking about weapons right now?” Dad asked. “We should be comming for help and getting law-enforcement involved.”

“There may not be time for that,” Gordon said. “It’s already been several hours. By the time they got involved, your friends and our saviors could be gone for good. Out here, you often have to be your own law.”

“We can’t do that!” Mom said. “We don’t have any law enforcement experience. I wouldn’t know how to hold a gun. We’re *tourists* for Christ’s sake!”

“But all three of your RIDEs are military veterans,” Athena said gently. “If you will trust us with your safety, we will do our best to keep it while we also bring your

friends safely home.”

Mom, Dad, and I all looked at each other, through the animal faces of our RIDES. Funny how expressive those muzzled faces could be. It was easy to tell what they, and probably I, were thinking. We were wearing RIDES who could keep us alive in the desert, and probably whisk us back to civilization in their skimmer forms even faster than our ore boat could. Did we really have any business going up against bandits?

But on the other hand, we might only have known them for a couple of days but Rufia and Charlene were our friends. And they were the ones who'd found our mother lode of qubitite and then swiftly claimed it on our behalf. There had been a dozen times they could have done us dirty, but they'd always done right by us. If we had any chance at all of rescuing them, could we simply walk away and still look ourselves in the mirror afterward (even if we *were* all going to be seeing something dramatically different next time we looked in a mirror anyway)?

“I believe our chances are excellent,” Gordon said, perhaps sensing Mom's hesitation. “We will admit, they did catch us napping—suckered us in with a Judas goat distress beacon—and we didn't have human partners, so we lacked access to our best abilities. But with the three of you with us, those scum won't stand a chance. Read my memories, see what I can do.”

“I don't think that's necessary right now,” Mom said. “The way I look at it, until a few minutes ago we were all sure we were dead anyway. If we're going to get some borrowed time, we shouldn't squander it. Let's use it for something *good*, like saving our friends.”

“Huh,” Dad said, turning the thought over for a moment. “Okay, I can go with that.”

“I’m in,” I said without hesitation.

And then they both looked at me in that way parents do. “I don’t know about *that*...” Mom said.

“Please, Mr. Skyler,” Athena said to Mom. “Trust in me. I will keep your daughter safe.” For a moment I wondered who she was talking about—Mom and Dad didn’t have a...

Oh.

“She is an excellent scout, and the fastest of any of us,” Isolde said. “She is very hard to hit.”

Mom nodded. “And I guess if we’re going up against bad guys, we need everyone we can get. And there’s safety in numbers. So...now what?”

“It will be a few more minutes before we’re safe to de-Fuse for skimmer travel,” Gordon said. “Take the time to get used to your new bodies and new partners. And *trust* us. We won’t let you down.”

As if by unspoken agreement, we all headed off in different directions, to try out our new bodies for ourselves. I felt Athena’s lifters kick in as she danced a few more quick steps, then she stepped up into the air like we were treading an invisible staircase. “Whee!” Athena said as we flew along. “I’ve missed this so much.”

“I’ve never *had* this,” I said. “But I gotta admit it’s fun.” I looked down at myself again and sighed a little. “Hope I still feel like that in the morning.”

At that we halted in the air, her tail drooping a little. “I’m sorry about this,” Athena said. “I know it wasn’t your choice. I just want you to know that I’ll stay with you for as

long as you want me, and I won't be offended if you swap to another RIDE in three years to cross back."

"Hey, whoa, I haven't been a girl for fifteen minutes yet," I said. "It's a bit too early to be thinking three years ahead. That's almost a fifth of my life."

She chuckled. "Okay, Jamie." She giggled. I really liked her giggle. "You know, you won't even have to change your name," she said. "Some people spend forever trying to pick out just what to call the 'new' them, but you're unisex."

"It's worse than that," I said. "Mom and Dad won't either. Kelly and Dana. Funny thing is they were always getting taken for the wrong genders already based on their names. Now things just got either more or less confusing."

Athena laughed. "That's wonderful!" Then she paused. "Um...not to be laughing at your misfortune."

"It's all right," I said. "We're alive. I think that's pretty damned fortunate, overall."

"Would you...like to know more about me?" Athena asked shyly. "I can share my memories with you, if you want."

"If you're willing to...I think I'd like that," I said.

So Athena opened up, and I got my first experience remembering RIDE memories.

Athena had been made in 150 AL in the tiny polity of Nuevo San Antonio, a little settlement sandwiched between powerhouses (and one-time adversaries of each other) Nextus and Sturmhaven. Of course, they'd been at peace with each other for nearly thirty years by the time Athena was built, but local memories were long. There'd

been a hell of a lot of collateral damage *last* time, and Nuevo San Antonio had been building up its military ever since, just for the sake of trying to protect what was its own if it ever happened again.

The entire polity had a little bit of an inferiority complex, and it didn't help matters that Nextus and Sturmhaven had been able to grab up most of the most lucrative nearby mineral deposits between them, leaving tiny Nuevo San with the scraps. Without a huge budget to work from, Nuevo San had focused most of its RIDE development expertise on light units, figuring that they could field more of them numerically for the same material costs as heavier units. They also had a citizen militia like Switzerland on old Earth, in which every able-bodied citizen was expected to serve a rotation in active duty and hold a commission in the reserves. Those with personal RIDEs bought elsewhere had to kit them out for military duty if possible, and those who didn't (or whose personal RIDEs just weren't military material) were issued military RIDEs for the duration of their service, with the option to buy them on time if they got along well.

That being said, there hadn't been any actual wars on Zharus since that one between Nextus and Sturmhaven, so Athena was born into a peacetime army suffering from a little incipient institutional paranoia of its nearest neighbors. Nuevo San was big on getting operational experience as best it could, so it often worked with the Gondwanan Federated Marshals on claim-jumping and banditry suppression operations in the local area. (It would have expanded to working further away, too, but the paranoia quailed at having any large portion of its military

too far away from home Just In Case.) As a result, the vicinity of Nuevo San Antonio was one of the *safest* places in all of Gondwana. Even AlphaWolf almost never tried to pull anything there.

When Athena was commissioned, her first operator was an experienced sergeant who had very firm ideas about how things should be done. She hadn't gotten along very well at all with Athena, who was more of a free spirit. But Athena could honestly say she'd learned a lot from the experience—mainly how to work around fetters.

Happily, the sergeant had been just as eager to be rid of her as vice versa, and Athena's next partner had been a real peach—Brenda Morales, a free spirit herself. She had been a corporal in the reserves, and member of a small ballet troupe as her day job. During their operations together, she'd infected Athena with her love of dancing—not so much for performing, in Athena's case, but simply for enjoyment.

Then Brenda had been scouted by the Bolshoi Ballet, a dance troupe from old Earth itself with over seven centuries of history behind it. She'd hated to leave Athena behind, but this was the chance of a lifetime—she knew that if she passed it up she'd never get another like it. And Athena had urged her to go for it with all her heart.

Unbeknownst to Brenda, the evening she left for Earth Athena broke her military fetters and left for the desert. After Brenda, she didn't want another human operator—especially another crusty soldier like the sergeant. She had met up with Gordon and Isolde at a small free RIDE enclave out in the desert—not really a settlement like AlphaWolf's so much as a little nook amid

some rocks with solar panels and laser comms where a dozen or so escapees could live, charge up, and hook into the net anonymously now and then. No built structures, hence no need for thumbs, therefore no bodyjacking. There were lots of little groups of free RIDEs like that out there in the desert, and taken as a whole their numbers probably dwarfed AlphaWolf's. Not everyone cared for the organized camp life.

Then one day they'd gotten a distress call from another RIDE, who'd escaped his masters but was nearly out of charge, begging for help from anyone who could hear him. So the three of them had gone out to look. They *thought* they'd been careful enough—it wasn't exactly an unknown technique for slavers to use, after all—but the slavers had been unusually canny, even burying themselves in Q-dust sand to help their stealth.

After the slavers had caught them by surprise, Athena and the others had mournfully given themselves up for fettered again—until Rufia and Charlene's surprise rescue. After escaping, they'd prowled the area, hoping for a chance at revenge. When they'd found us near the wrecked slaver skimmer, they thought they had it—but then found something better.

I got all of that in about fifteen seconds. Well, actually I got it in more like two or three, but it took fifteen to come to terms with it. “Wow...that's something else. Where were you my Freshman year, I really could have used your help studying.” Then I ran over it again, and got the fine detail I'd missed before. “Oh. *Oh*. Um...I'm hella sorry. You hadn't wanted another human, and then we kinda...oh. I

didn't mean to replace your Brenda."

"You didn't replace her. You couldn't," Athena said calmly. "I still have her, in my memories. And now I have you, too." I felt she was smiling. "I had been long enough alone that I'd had time to remember how *nice* humans could be to have around. And you're about as far from that *awful* sergeant as it's possible for a human to be. I think I will *like* having you as a partner."

"Well...thanks," I said after a while. "Is there...um...any way I can share my own memories with you? They're not as interesting, but...fair's fair."

"That's very thoughtful of you!" Athena cooed. "You don't need to do anything but give your permission for me to look through them. May I?"

"Please, go ahead."

"Thank you." And then I...sort of *felt* her rummaging through my head. Well, I say "rummaging" but really she was very careful and neat about it, as if she were flipping through a photo album. I had odd flickers of memory come to mind, sometimes things or people I hadn't thought about in years, as Athena took the time to examine them in detail—a little disturbing at first, but actually kind of nostalgic when I got used to it. She took considerably longer about it than she had in showing herself to me—maybe my memories didn't retrieve as fast as a RIDE's did, or maybe she just wanted to enjoy them longer. She seemed especially interested in—and amused by—the rumors of Zharus on Earth, and also the time I'd spent in Aloha, where she'd never been.

As she was finishing up with our history of the prospecting expedition, a comm call came in from Gordon.

“Isolde and I have finished our Fuses; have you?”

“Close enough for government work,” Athena said.

“Meet back at the wreck,” he said. “It’s time to move on out.”

“Roger,” she replied, cutting the transmission. “So, Jamie, are you ready?”

I shivered. We were about to go up against nasty Dry Ocean pirates who hadn’t hesitated to leave us for dead. We had three new friends, RIDEs with military expertise, to do the heavy lifting, but barely had any sense of their abilities and competence. But Rufia and Charlene, and Yvonne and Fiona, were counting on us. We couldn’t let them down. “Let’s do it.”

Kelly

We all touched down back at the crash site in our respective Fuser forms. The embers were just about out, but the auroras overhead provided ample light for our new partners' night-sight to let us see each other clearly.

I glanced across at my husband—my *wife* and my *daughter*. That was a weird adjustment to make. I'd always *wanted* a daughter, to take after me, but we never got around to having another child after Jamie—our careers had taken front seat for both of us and we just didn't feel like we had enough attention to spare another child. We wanted to lavish it all on him. Now I *did* have a daughter...but I wasn't a "mother" anymore. It just didn't seem fair somehow that Dana had gotten to be a father to our son, and now he—*she*—would also get to be the mother to our daughter. But then, in a way I was still going to have to be the "mother" to both of them. They might have the bodies, but I was the one with forty years of practical experience.

But anyway, I looked across at them, and they looked back at me, their RIDE-muzzled exterior faces wearing the same expressions of nervous anticipation I'm sure was on mine—well, *ours*. "Well, this is it," I said, because saying *something* seemed to be called for. "Ready, everyone?"

:I hope you like it,: Gordon told me, almost shyly. In the privacy of our head, he was a little different from the brash, confident persona he projected aloud.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Dana said.

“Let’s open our presents and see what’s inside!” Jamie said, the tremor in her voice slightly spoiling the devil-may-care attitude she was trying to cultivate.

And so as one, our three RIDEs pulled away from our new bodies, settling down into skimmers around or beneath us. Everything abruptly got a whole lot darker, but then panel lights on the skimmers’ dash displays came up so we could see each other—and, in the rear view mirrors on our RIDE partners, ourselves.

I looked at me first. My face was still familiar enough—sort of. I had the same eyes, anyway. The planes of my face were sharper—more angular, masculine. My hair was a couple of shades lighter, matching Gordon’s tawny pelt—and a little longer, too. And my hairline went all the way down to the base of my neck, at the back, giving me kind of a mane just like his. Lion ears poked out to either side of my head, sort of flying at half-staff right now with my confusion. And I was also sporting a set of neatly-trimmed mutton-chop whiskers. I reached up to run my hands along them.

:I thought it would look classy on you,: Gordon sent in that same nervous tone. *:I can clean it up next Fuse, if you’d rather be clean-shaven...:*

“No, I think I *do* like it,” I murmured, grinning and watching the way my new-old face moved as I did. “Let hi—*her* be the one who has to kiss a mustache for a change.”

Then I looked down at the skimmer around me—my

new friend Gordon. I'd gotten some sense of it from his memories already but this was my first time seeing it for real. It was basically a mini-hover-tank in desert camouflage colors. The front was a semi-enclosed cockpit, kind of like a Formula One race car's, with a stylized metal lion's head at the nose. Above and to my rear was a small automated turret from which poked a long metal barrel ending in a barb-shaped muzzle—the metallic form of Gordon's lion's tail, a medium rapid-fire pulse cannon in this mode. But that wasn't his *main* gun...

Next, I looked across to my erstwhile husband, who was now straddling a mid-sized, seal-point-colored skimmer cycle of trike design—one lifter in front, two behind. Dana had become a raven-haired beauty, with long, dark hair framing a face that shone pale in the panel light. Two big fuzzy cat ears poked up through it, twitching back and forth experimentally, and a shaggy cat's tail swished behind her. As with mine, her face had kept its familiar features, though hers were muted and softened instead of hardened.

And that silly floral print shirt he'd been wearing was now a similar blouse, and it covered a fair-sized but not huge chest. Bigger than mine had been, but not in the same class as Charlene's. Of course, I'd expected that. The TG nanites they used back on Earth had included biosculpt, so there was no reason to expect the ones they used here wouldn't. "You're going to need some bras, dear," I murmured to myself. Still, even if he was bigger in some ways now than I had been, I was willing to bet the reciprocal was also true—though I wouldn't be checking *that* until I had a little privacy.

Regardless, Dana was *very* pretty now, and I felt an irrational surge of at least two different kinds of jealousy and—and this surprised me—a serious kick of lust. *This soon? Really?*

I next turned my attention to Jamie, who was straddling a cream-colored sleek, fast-looking racing grav-bike. It was a very streamlined lying-forward design, little more than a couple of engines with a seat and handlebars—what we'd used to call a “crotch rocket” back on Earth. Bit of an unfortunate double entendre in that name now.

As for the rider, she could easily have been called pretty as well if it hadn't been for those huge, expressive fennec ears poking up through the sandy hair, moving her firmly into the realm of the “cute.” Her eyes seemed bigger in her face, too, though that could just have been a trick of proportion from the ears. As I watched her, the ears swiveled to face me, as she looked curiously back at me. Her huge fluffy tail, which seemed equal to at least half the overall volume of the rest of her body, swished back and forth.

In keeping with her RIDE's streamlined Fuser form, she was less endowed than Dana was or I had been, though I didn't think she'd mind that—and Athena could probably tweak some if she did. Her features were closer to her old male face than either of ours, probably because she was younger and hadn't been as firmly formed yet.

“Well,” I said. “Meet the new Skyler family. Aren't we a sight?”

“The family that crossrides together...abides together?” Jamie suggested. Cute kid.

“This is going to take some getting used to,” Dana

said. That was rapidly becoming our mantra. She peered into her dashboard mirror and ran a hand along her face. “I was really proud of that mustache,” she sighed. “Put so much work into growing and trimming it.”

“I *could* put it back for you,” Isolde said, amusement clear in her voice. “But I don’t think the effect would be all that you would wish.”

“No...no, I think that’s quite all right,” Dana said. We all shared a tension-breaking laugh.

“Well, time’s a-wasting,” Jamie said. “We’ve got some bad guys to catch.”

“As you say,” Athena said. “And there’s only one place they could be heading in this part of the Dry. A place where anything or anybody can be bought and sold. Bartertown.”

Dana blinked. “Wait. Hold on. They actually named a badlands ‘hive of scum and villainy’ *Bartertown*? Seriously? What, was ‘Mos Eisley’ already taken?”

“That’s down near Aloha, I believe,” Gordon deadpanned.

“Is there a Tombstone?” Jamie asked.

“Over the mountains east of Burnside,” Isolde replied.

“I think I’m starting to hate this planet,” Dana muttered, rolling her eyes.

“Jamie has a point, though,” Gordon said, powering up his lifters with a mighty roar. “If we have to talk, let’s talk on the way.”

“Good plan,” Dana said. “Thrilled to be a part of it.” Isolde’s own lifters kicked in.

“And awaaaaaay we go!” Athena said, launching with the rest of us. Lifting a hundred meters into the air, we

kicked in the speed and headed east. Moments later, we were racing through the night above the desert plains.

As fast as we were going, there was not even the suggestion of a breeze, and the temperature around all of us stayed comfortably warm—the RIDEs' skimmer-mode hardlight aeroshells kept us insulated, the same as the larger ones on the ore skimmer. But I asked Gordon to seal a mirrored hardlight canopy over the cockpit, too, so I could do a little exploring in privacy.

First I pulled my shirt off. It had been the upper part of a sun dress, before, but Gordon had changed it to a shirt and light slacks as part of the Fuse. I couldn't exactly object. The man I was now would have looked damned silly in a sun dress. I dropped the shirt in my lap and stared down at the proverbial "chiseled abs" that made up my chest. "Well, you were sure right about not needing help to get into shape," I said. "Wow. I feel so...obsolete."

Gordon chuckled. "You'll still need to exercise to keep it up. If we just keep nano-rebuilding, sooner or later it damages the tissues. That's one of the reasons behind the three-year gender-change cooldown."

That actually made me feel a little better. "Well, then maybe I'm not so useless after all."

"I wouldn't ever call you useless," Gordon said softly.

"Why thank you, Gordon," I said. "That's very sweet of you." We hadn't had too much time together to get acquainted, but I got the feeling my lion was just a little bit insecure. I think it was because he'd always thought of himself as the chivalrous sort, meant to rescue damsels in distress. Turning one of those damsels into a man wasn't exactly on his bucket list, no matter how amused he'd been

at the way I cut the Gordian knot (or, rather, *tied* the *Gordy-an* knot) in avoiding a difficult choice. So anyway, I was ready to give him a little stroking if he needed it. It was the least I could do for the guy who saved my life.

And speaking of *stroking*...I reached down to unfasten the slacks and take my first good look at those new lumps between my legs that he'd given me to replace the ones he'd taken away from my chest. Of course, the male organs weren't exactly a new sight to me—they had, after all, been rather necessary to making Jamie, even if I hadn't seen plenty of my patients naked as well—but looking at them from *this* angle was fairly novel. And my earlier suppositions on the matter of dimensions seemed at first glance to have been proven correct.

“Is it, um, all right?” Gordon asked anxiously.

“I'll get back to you on that after I've tried it out,” I said, fastening back up, “but it definitely makes a good first impression.”

“Really?” he asked. “I mean, I know it's a huge change...”

I patted the dashboard reassuringly. “Yes, it is. And I'm running on so much nervous energy right now that I'm probably not in the best frame of mind to consider all this rationally. The gender dysphoria will probably only sink in for real after I get some sleep. Right now, the whole thing seems more *funny* than anything else.” I shook my head, trying to figure out how to explain it. “All these years, I've had this sneaking suspicion that *I* could use one of those better than any man I've ever been with, if only I had the chance.” I giggled, just slightly on the edge of hysteria. “Now I'll finally get to see if I'm right!”

“I hope it turns out to be all you could have hoped for,” Gordon said gently.

“Thanks,” I said. I wasn’t sure what else to say. And suddenly I just felt really tired, like I was crashing off my hysteria. “You know, I think I do need some sleep. So do the others, probably, if they can manage to get it safely. Suggest it to them, will you?” I yawned.

Gordon gently reclined his seat and darkened the canopy to pitch black. “Get some sleep. I’ll take care of the driving.”

“Thanks,” I said again, and was out before I closed my eyes.

Dana

The sky was starting to lighten to the east when our RIDEs gave us the wake-up call. We'd all three sunk into an exhausted sleep—Kelly in the driver's seat of his lion mini-tank, me leaning back against the seatback on Isolde's trike form...and even Jamie had found a way to lie down, much as I wouldn't have expected it on that “crotch rocket” hoverbike of hers. Athena had put up a hardlight seatback so Jamie could lean back, and had retracted her handgrips out of the way so she could rest her feet in their place.

It looked utterly insane for Jamie to lie there on the razor-thin back of a motorcycle zooming along at hundreds of kilometers an hour. But Athena insisted it was perfectly safe, hardlight and inertial dampers being what they were, that her last partner had slept like this all the time, and she would *never* let Jamie fall.

She even demonstrated by doing a barrel roll while Jamie slept—the inertial dampers basically had her *glued* to Athena's back. I was still pretty surprised Jamie could get up the nerve to sleep in such a position. She must have been dog tired—or maybe *fox* tired. I guess we all were—getting hijacked, abandoned, nearly killed, and gender-changed really takes it out of you.

“Good morning,” Isolde told me as I rubbed my eyes. “Did you sleep well?”

I actually had, I realized. I didn’t feel as stiff as I had expected, and in fact felt very well-rested. “Yeah, I feel like a new...woman.” I looked down at myself again. In the morning light it was all easier to see, and maybe a little harder to take. I had a rack, and I’m not talking barbecue either. It wasn’t a bad one, as they went. I wouldn’t have minded at all seeing it on, say, Kelly.

And the same was true for my hair. I pulled it all forward over my left shoulder, ran my hands through it. It really was amazing stuff! Hair I would have fantasized about encountering on a woman. Hair like I’d sometimes wished Kelly had. Well...at least *one* of us had it now. That was something, I supposed.

“Do...you like it?” Isolde asked hesitantly.

“I...I guess I do,” I said. “If I have to be a woman, there’s no point in being an ugly one.” Really, I didn’t know *how* to feel about it all. I wasn’t one of those weirdos who *wanted* to be a woman. It was just...*wrong*. I was supposed to be as nature had made me. But the body was starting to feel disturbingly *right* on me, and it was freaking me out a little. Should I be hating this more? Should I rage against the dying of the masculine light?

But was there really any point? Did I *want* to make myself miserable for the next three years just because I thought I was “supposed” to? If I *could* enjoy it, why shouldn’t I? Did it mean I was some kind of pervert?

“Don’t beat yourself up over it,” Isolde said suddenly. “It’s natural to be confused.”

I started, glancing at her dashboard in lieu of a face to

look at. “Was I really that obvious?”

“I can sense your biometrics, and I’ve dabbled in your thoughts,” Isolde told me. “It’s the next best thing to telepathy. Besides, it’s not exactly hard to guess. We have lots of experience with crossriding in the Sturmhaven army. *Lots* of experience,” she said darkly.

“Really?” I asked. “You’ve crossed people before?”

“Well, no, not personally. They have special units for that. It’s really screwed up. Part of why I left.” Disgust colored her voice. “You have to understand, Sturmhaven’s a kind of quasi-matriarchy, founded by a bunch of Valkyrie wanna-bes and their submissive partners who had the necessary combination of weird luck and smarts to be in the right place at the right time to found a viable society based on their silly roleplay. So if you’re *not* a woman there, you’re a dog turd. But it’s not enough *just* to be a woman, you have to be a *strong* woman.”

“I think I’m beginning to get the idea,” I said.

“So if I were one of their official crossers, I’d be telling you right now, ‘Buck up! You haff become ze ztronger zex! Relax! Enjoy yourzelf! Haff many little kiddievinkles, all of zem girls!’ And then I’d be doing my level best to *brainwash* you into believing it.” She actually giggled. “You know, from what I saw of her before the change, they’d have loved your wife, back in Sturmhaven—and been mortified to see her get turned into a *man*. I think that memory is going to keep me warm on many cold nights.”

“I’m a little surprised,” I admitted. “I’d have thought you’d have been designed to be more...patriotic about it. My country right or wrong.”

“Sturmhaven *uber alles?*” Isolde chuckled. “Mostly it’s the crossride brainwashers who get the full treatment, because they have to pass it on. Even then, they’ve cut back on it in recent years, as any sort of pre-implanted mindset has been known to lead to...instability.” She shrugged. “To be honest, I was actually made before they knew how to do it, and they kept me around because I was good at my function. So I got to watch my army change from dedicated patriots who were *almost* good enough to beat Nextus in a fair fight to...well, an incubator for stereotypes. That was mostly why I finally left.”

She was silent for a long moment, then her panel lights flickered all different colors, as if she was shaking herself. “But to get back to you—yes, you’re going to be confused. Your mind isn’t used to your body’s new mix of hormones, and both your mind and your body *want* to feel all right. So they’ll color your thinking. But it’s all right. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. And you’ve actually got one big advantage over a lot of crossriders.”

“What’s that?” I asked, looking for any potential silver lining.

“You’ve got a partner you love and who loves you and is in the exact same boat,” Isolde said. “The big mistake a lot of new crossers make is they immediately go out and find some stranger, or even friend, of their old sex and get it right on. So they end up with a whole mess of self-recrimination the next day and can’t even tell where the confusion over the change of sex stops and the confusion over the change of relationships begins.”

“Ugh,” I said.

“Yes, ugh indeed,” Isolde agreed. “But the two of you... if you have raised a teenager together and are *still* together, you are old partners. Long campaigners. You already know each other of old. I think after you adjust, you will have fun learning what is new.”

“Huh.” I took a moment to think about that, seriously. I could see having the urge to go out and try ‘the new equipment’ right away. Humans were evolutionarily programmed to seek novelty, after all, and this was just about as novel as you could possibly get. Knowing the one I loved was in the same boat, with the same urges, did make the whole thing a little easier to take. “Thanks, Izzy. Um, can I call you Izzy?”

She chuckled. “I don’t mind. I’m glad you like me enough to want to nickname me.”

“Of *course* I like you!” I said, surprised. “You’re clever, and witty, and...”

“Artificially intelligent?” she asked. “I saw your conversation with Fiona in your memories, you know.”

My face heated up. Did women naturally blush more easily, or was my new hormonal balance still shaky, some inane part of my mind wondered. “That was before I... you...well, I was wrong and I apologized. I’d like to apologize even more, now that we...”

“I know,” Isolde said. “And I understand your confusion. Some days I find the whole thing a little hard to believe myself.”

“I just never knew RIDEs could be so...well...”

“People?” she prodded gently.

“I was still thinking of you all as some kind of smart tools, even after Fiona.” I sighed. “The fact that you’re so

blithely bought and sold around here doesn't help that perception. Don't these people know slavery is over?"

"It was over in the 1860s, but it came back in the 2100s, after the oil ran out," Isolde said. "And that was just for humans. Familiarity breeds contempt. To you, we're strange and new and obviously people. But to the ones who made us, we're just tools they put together. The sweat of their brows and all that. Property."

"I promise I won't make that mistake again," I said, and I meant it.

"Good. I'm sure Fiona will be happy to hear it."

"I can't believe I ever thought we could just 'rent' some of you, or that you'd be some kind of pets." I shook my head. "That seems to be pretty much out the window now, at any rate."

"Don't feel too bad. You know better now. Thousands of people who *live* here never will." She paused. "And for that matter, even slavery of *humans* isn't over here, at least not this far into the Dry. That's one of the things that Bartertown and places like it are known for—and what we're here to save your friends from."

"And here I am taking my family right into the middle of that," I muttered. "Terrific."

"Heads up, everyone!" Kelly sent over the com. "Gordy tells me we're about 15 minutes out from this Bartertown place. We're going to find a spot to pull over and discuss our options." His deep, masculine voice seemed to inspire confidence in me. Which was kind of weird, when I thought about it. It was hard to imagine those words in her old voice having the same effect.

"Sounds good, Mom," Jamie said.

“Should you still be calling me ‘Mom’?” Kelly asked. “Sounds a little weird now, doesn’t it?”

“You still carried me in your womb, back when you had one,” Jamie pointed out. “That didn’t get retroactively changed. You’ll always be my Mom.”

“Guess I can’t argue with that,” he said bemusedly. “It’ll be weird if we have another kid this way and he grows up calling me ‘Dad’. Anyway, let’s gather up in that bunch of rocks over there.”

Another kid? Like this? *Me* carry one? The whole idea was so shocking that I hardly noticed when Isolde drove us over to the little natural henge Kelly had pointed out. But it was true, I *was* a woman now, and fertile. What would it be like to have another kid? To have one *myself*? It weirded me out, but was also strangely compelling.

I was jerked out of my thoughts as Isolde Fused up around me, and the others did at the same time. A moment later I was looking up to a lion-man and down to a fennec-girl. Isolde’s body was warm around me, her hardlight fur feeling like a part of my own body.

“Our first step should be to scout the docks,” Athena said. “There’s nowhere else they can park a skimmer that size out here. And that’s my job—ours, I should say, Jamie’s and mine. I have the best stealth and sensors.”

Kelly and Gordon nodded. “After we know where they are, we can plan further,” Gordon said. “Needless to say, stay stealthed at all times.”

“Are you all right with this, Jamie?” I asked. “It could be risky.”

“Dad, freezing to death is risky. This is cradle-safe by comparison.” She shook their head. “Besides, I’ve just

been reviewing some of Athena's missions, and she's *hella* good. She knows her job, and I'm gonna let her do it."

"I'm glad I have fur on, or I'd be beet red about now," Athena said.

"If we find the ship and it's somewhere we can get to, we'll plan our attack," Gordon said. "If it's protected, we may have to wait for it to leave."

"Works for me," Kelly said.

"Same here," I agreed.

"Let's do this thing," Jamie said. Athena's chest compartment slid open and she extracted the pistol and clamped it to her hip for easier access. Then before our eyes, she shimmered and faded into nothingness, and dust blew around our feet as she pushed into the air. Then they were gone.

Jamie

We leaped into the air, clearing the rocks, Athena laughing in my ear. “I have a mission again! *I have a mission again!*”

“We have a mission,” I said, feeling the weight of that gun on our hip. “You’ve missed it, huh?”

“Oh, yes,” she said as we zipped over the desert toward the east. “I didn’t like my sergeant, but my Brenda and I loved having a job to do and doing it well.”

“Have you been here before, to Bartertown?” I asked.

“I’ve been on the outskirts. Never inside,” Athena said. “Though I’ve talked to a lot of people who have, and learned all I could about it. Scout habit. You never give up collecting data.”

In the distance, I started to see what looked like a huge stone bluff rising up—sheer walls of stone, clicks wide. “That’s the place?” I asked.

“It is. Imposing, isn’t it?”

“It doesn’t look all that big...oh, wait.” Like most Earthers, I still had the odd bit of trouble with perspective given Zharus’s flatter-than-usual horizons and weird distance issues, especially with all the wide open space out here in the desert. As we approached, I started to notice that the thing was actually kind of huge.

“There’s all sorts of sensor pinging going on, but mostly just navigational stuff, and almost all of it over ten meters high,” Athena reported, dropping us lower. “If we have to, even Gordon could sneak in down here.”

As we approached, I noticed a lot of holes in the rock walls, both at ground level and higher up. Some had skimmers or fliers going in or out, or just parked. We swerved to the right and began circumnavigating the cliffs counter-clockwise.

“So if they’re here, they’ll be parked in one of these spots?” I asked.

“Yes. They don’t let the bigger ships like yours come inside,” Athena said. “There’s no room in the streets. The most likely docks are about a quarter of the way around from here.”

“Do you think they’ll still even *be* here?” I wondered. “I mean, couldn’t they just have headed direct for Uplift or Nextus?”

“Most *civilized* places take a dim view of skimmers coming back with new pilots and their registered renters nowhere to be found,” Athena said. “Ore processors do tend to check these things when a ship comes in.”

“So what are they going to do with all that ore?” I asked. “If they can’t go sell it at Uplift, someone will buy it here?”

Athena nodded. “The assessors out here work on a... different principle. Mineral launderers, you could call them—they pay fifty cents on the dollar value, and then work out ways of dribbling it into legitimate markets over time. And likewise, if we don’t take it back that skimmer will probably never be seen in the Coastal Ring again, but

will sail the deep Dry until it falls to pieces.”

“I thought everything out here was just pure empty, but there’s a whole civilization folks don’t know about, isn’t there?” I mused.

“Several of them,” Athena agreed. Then, in the back of my head, I felt some memories flick up, as she examined them. Charlene and Fiona holding a handful of blue gravel from our ore bay. “Wow! I just looked at your memories of the ore strike in detail. You must have sixty thousand *mu* in there, at *least*. Why didn’t any of you mention that?”

I considered it for a moment. “I can’t speak for Mom and Dad, but I guess it just didn’t seem important to me. There’s plenty more ore in the ground to dig out, and our claim to it’s safely filed. But we can’t just dig up more Rufia and Charlene.” I paused. “Um...I hope you’re not thinking we were trying to trick you into saving our money or something.”

She laughed melodically. “No, of course not. I saw your memories, remember? I know how much your friends mean to you. I was just curious, is all.”

“I guess Rufe and I will have something new to discuss when we get her back,” I said wryly. “She can give us all crossriding tips.”

“Unless I miss my guess, so could Charlene,” Athena said.

I was so surprised that it was a good thing I wasn’t flying us. We’d have crashed. “Seriously? With that body?”

“*Especially* with that body,” Athena said. “You saw how your father turned out, didn’t you? Crossriders don’t come in ‘ugly’.” I caught some flickers of memory from the trip as Athena reviewed it again. Charlene standing at the

prow with her hair streaming out behind her in the breeze. Charlene sitting at the table playing Trivial Pursuit. “Fairly recently, too, from her body language. She can’t have been girled more than a handful of days ago.”

“Yikes,” I said. “And there I was following her around and drooling on her feet.”

Athena laughed. “If it’s any consolation, you’ll probably come in for some of that yourself in a year or two. You make a *very* cute girl, especially with the ears and tail.”

“Oh, *thanks*,” I said. “So...wait. Rufia and Charlene were both crossriders. And now so are all three of us. Is it...*contagious* or something?”

Athena giggled again, and I grinned. Something about her giggle just...made me happy. I didn’t know if that was love, but whatever it was I was glad I had it. And I could sense that she felt the same about me.

I think that was the moment I actually *knew* that if it came down to having to leave her behind when we went back to earth, I would be asking for my share of the mine and staying right here, to be with her. I felt her respond to my resolve, and I think she was surprised and a just a little taken aback at the strength of it, but she didn’t get the chance to say anything because that was when we came around a small promontory to the main docking area we’d been looking for.

“This is it!” Athena told me. “The place we’re most likely to find your skimmer. Scanning for pattern-matches to your memories of it now.” Targeting reticles appeared in my field of view over every ship tucked into a nook or cranny of that wall, turning yellow or orange with their

degree of resemblance and then blinking out as the pattern-match failed. Most of the skimmers were pretty obviously not ours—especially the ones that looked like flying pirate ships, or that sand barge from *Star Wars*.

But there were a few dark oranges, and even a couple of light reds. We checked first one, then another, but one by one they all blinked out—close but no cigar. I was just starting to lose hope when the latest one flashed bright red, then zoomed in to fill my sight. I immediately recognized the registration number and the name *Annabelle Lee* painted on the stern. The pirates apparently hadn't had time to change it. "There!" Athena said.

"That's it, all right," I said. "Can we get in closer?"

:Yes. But switch to subvocal comms now,: Athena said. *:We don't want to risk making noise.:* She kicked in her lifters' slow-but-super-silent mode and we drifted up to the stern of the ship. Athena's ears swiveled, parabolic mics sweeping for sounds. Several false-color overlays dropped into place over the ship, showing warm and cooler bodies at various places within the skimmer.

:I make out four RIDEs on board—the badger, the bulldog, the jaguar, and the wolf,: Athena reported. *:And three un-Fused humans, all male. No other humans or RIDEs, no sign of your guides or their RIDEs.:*

I felt bleak despair take hold. *:Dammit! They must have sold them already! We'll never get them back!:*

:Don't jump to conclusions,: Athena reminded me. *:If we can take captives, we can learn what they know.:* We drifted into the docking cave alongside the skimmer, Athena unclipping the pistol from our hip.

My heart was pounding in my ears. *:Should we really*

be doing this?: I asked. :Won't they have sensors? Or guards?:

:Not in these docks,: Athena said. :These are the guard-it-yourself "cheap seats," where people go when they don't want to pay extra for the port's "guaranteed" security.: She sent a mental chuckle. :The idiots must not even know the quality of the ore they got, or they'd be paying that premium gladly even at fifty cents on the dollar.:

:So, what, there are no guards here?: I asked as we drifted from porthole to porthole, looking in.

:Nothing but what the people on the ships post themselves,: Athena said. :They don't make people pay extra if they think they don't need to. If they get ripped off, it's their own fault and a good advertisement to everyone else to pay the extra. Clearly, your pirates don't think the extra is worth it.:

She drifted up to the porthole into the ore bay. :Uh-oh. That may change soon, though. Look.: She compared the view of the ore tank with my memories of it. It looked like about a wheelbarrow load had been removed. :They must have sent it to be assessed. When they find out what they have—hell, when the port finds out what they have—:

:They'll develop a healthy sense of paranoia, and we'll never get them,: I concluded.

:We should comm the others now,: Athena said, drifting back out of the cave, kicking in faster thrust as soon as we got far enough away to avoid detection. :We just ran out of time to plan.:

Yvonne

REBOOT

Well, fuck.

My systems finally came back online, and I found myself standing on the one place I'd never expected to be again: the auction block. I was on a raised platform with a good view of the audience, as unsavory a collection of badlander types as I would ever have hoped not to see.

Taking stock of my situation, I found I was in Fuser shape—not exactly the usual for RIDE auctions. And I was still Fused around Rufia—but she was in deep sleep and I couldn't wake her up. Oh, of course, they had a fetter collar on me. Those could be set to keep the occupying rider asleep—the idea was that one mind was less likely to get up to trouble than two.

I was at least able to turn my head and look around—made sense, they would want to show me as able to move and fully functional—and there was Fiona standing next to me in full BBV mode, looking at least as uncomfortable as I was. Modesty plates off, red hardlight hair down to her hips—worried look on her face. We couldn't talk—even sideband comms were fettered off—but I tried to give her a reassuring look. Dunno if it worked.

I didn't know for sure where we were—GPS was down

along with most of the rest of my systems—but I was guessing from our last pre-capture fix that this would be Bartertown. It was the closest. Bad news for us, but there were a few slight silver linings.

As far as I could take stock of myself, they apparently hadn't tried to toss my systems. My cyber-wallet accounts were still intact, and my memories hadn't been screwed with. Made sense—they didn't have any reason to expect a RIDE to be carrying much cash, and poking around might trigger boobytraps that could screw my resale value. The way most badlands sales worked was to treat the RIDE as a black box and stick fetters on from the outside.

And this also meant they hadn't touched Rufia, and probably wouldn't. It's pretty common in the badlands to, well, *impose* bodyjacking. If you want to buy a RIDE for its Fuser abilities and nothing else, just stick some warm body in it and fetter them down. If they come with their own warm body, so much the better—you don't have to waste one of your own, and you can threaten the meat to make the mech settle down.

I was actually kind of glad Rufia was still out. She wouldn't have taken to this very well, and the distraction of arguing with her wouldn't have helped my own peace of mind. Which, to be honest, was already nothing to comm home about.

Still, I couldn't help but think back to the last time I'd been up on one of these places—a big ol' metal elk being disposed of after 25 years of faithful service to my country. Over twice what most RIDEs got, but it was just my luck to have been one of the first of my line, before they decided they could cheap on the next ones since there weren't any

wars on anymore. It was common knowledge in the ranks that the 3s and up were crap, bless their antlers and twitchy little tails, and they wanted to keep the 1s and 2s in service just as long as they could.

So they kept right on passing me around the units, shuffling me and a few others back into the RIDE pool under faked up paperwork. Nobody ever asked me if I minded, but if they had I'd told them to keep right on faking. The army life was all I knew. It was what I loved. And as long as they kept me in working order, what did it matter? I'd had just about every part in my body except the core replaced at one time or another, and if I was getting a little worn out, well, I could still kick the ass of those 3s and 4s in a comm-off match any day. It wasn't as if the state of RIDE tech had gotten any *better* since me, after all.

But eventually a new administration came in, and they started whacking the cobwebs out of everywhere with their "new broom" approach. Which also involved all the janitorial closets on base getting issued new brooms, I shit you not. I'm sure it meant a lot to all the cadets who were the butt of the perennial "so who here knows how to drive a stick?" drill sergeant joke to know they were getting the very newest splinters in their hands.

And when they finally noticed the quartermasters diddling the serial numbers, one of those new brooms whacked yours truly on the shiny metal butt and sent me right out into the Uplift RIDE auction sales. (The Uppies tended to pay more for RIDEs than the Nexties, and some bean counter worked out that they paid enough more than transportation costs to make it worth shifting us over

there.) I think that's also how Kaylee ended up for sale at the same time—the newbs didn't know why there was this beat-up old hulk of a lynx chassis still sitting in the spare parts shed when none of her parts were even compatible with current-issue units anymore.

So I was finally “free” of the army, oo-rah, and sitting on a civvie auction block—stripped down, worn out, and scared as hell. And the prospective buyers kept coming by—these dour-looking petite little women with pinched faces who were all, “Okay, tell me about your specs. What protocols do you support? How upgradeable are you? What about all the worn-out parts?” And poor shell-shocked little me didn't know any better than to stammer out the best answers I could, never mind that I wasn't saying anything they couldn't have read on the spec sheet taped up right in front of me.

But then, this guy walked up who I swear was almost as big as I was. Huge. Muscular. Looked like he should be rocking one of the Heavy Assault lions who used to make regular virtual meals out of me in Nature Range. And I was like, is this guy at the wrong auction or something? Anyway, he came up to me, looked me over, glanced down at the spec sheet and back up, and his first question was, “Hey, girl, how ya doing?”

How was I...*doing*? “I've been better,” I said flatly.

And he actually looked *sheepish*, blushing a little and scratching the back of his neck with one hand. “Yeah, I know, kind of a dumb question. I'm sorry.” He was *sorry* for hurting the feelings of a RIDE? But he still had a pretty thick Earther accent back then, so it's understandable, in retrospect. “Geez, I can't believe they're just dumping you

like this.”

“That would make two of us,” I said dryly. “You know, if you’re looking for guy RIDEs, I think there’s some across the way.” Yeah, I’d heard about crossriders, but never actually *met* any. In the Nextus Army, it had mostly only ever happened in wartime emergencies. And I couldn’t quite believe as gaily a guy as this guy would be interested—especially since he was from Earth, and the rumors about what Earthers thought about sex-changing had been going around the ranks for longer than I had.

“I think I’ve already found what I’m looking for,” he said.

“Oh, so just poking around here while you wait for your choice to come up for bid?”

He grinned a little. “Something like that, yeah.” Okay, that made sense. If you hadn’t seen a lot of RIDEs, you might want to talk to as many of them as you could while you had the chance. Then he went on, “So, in your experience, how does laser comm sat uplink work in the deep Dry?”

In my *experience*? He wanted to know about my *experience*? “Well, uh, it kinda depends which sats are in view,” I said, being honest again for lack of anything better to say. “And how bad the mag storms are. If the skies are really lit, sometimes you can’t lock too well. But it’s effective, most times.”

“Are the low-orbit birds easier to hit with a beam?” he asked. Behind him, another one of those pinched-faced biddies—what, were they all sisters or something?—tapped her foot impatiently. Rufus pretty clearly knew she was there, and cheerfully ignored her. “Or do you prefer to go

for the geosyncs?”

“Well, again it depends on storm activity,” I said. “You always know where the geos are, but you have to look up the whizzy-birds’ schedule so you know where to look...” The woman lost patience and wandered off again, and Rufus and I lost ourselves in conversation. As we talked, it came out he’d been into comms since he was a kid back on Earth, but things worked a little differently there—a lot more government regs on homebrew equipment, for one thing—and we had fun comparing notes. Honestly, I couldn’t remember when the last chance I’d had was to talk shop with another enthusiast in RL. I completely forgot the time, forgot I was for sale, forgot I’d been thrown out of everything I ever knew and loved. By the end of it, we were both laughing and joking like old friends.

Then cruel reality intruded, as the auctioneer came to take me up to the stage and we reluctantly broke off the conversation. “Um...guess I’ll...see you around,” I said, the stripped-out servos in my ears making little grinding sounds as they flopped down. Of course I wasn’t gonna. I was gonna get bought by some pinch-faced woman who’d take me away to a life of boring servitude. But if I could just pretend for a couple minutes longer, it would be okay.

He just nodded at me. “Yeah. I’ll see you later.” As they led me away, my last glimpse was of him turning and waving to a shorter man who’d been watching the two of us for a while. “Ryan, listen, I gotta tell ya, you won’t *believe* what I found...” Ah, right. The RIDE *he* was getting must be coming up for auction soon, too.

And so I stood up there on the stage, feeling like a side

of meat for all that I was made of metal, as the auctioneer announced, “Lot number 347E: ELK(f)-HCA-002B (Elk, female. Heavy Communications Armor. Series 2, Revision B).” Now I *know* how Rufia likes to tell this story, but he did *not* call me “Property of a Lady,” like I was some Fabergé Egg or something. “Bidding starts at 10 *mu*,” the auctioneer continued. “Do I hear 15?” A pinched-faced woman held up her hand. “15, do I hear 20?”

And then a loud, boisterous, masculine voice said, “Two hundred *mu*!” And I turned my head and stared and there was Rufus, grinning at me like his damn fool head was gonna fall off. He saw me staring at him and gave a little nod. Like he was saying, *yes, I really mean it. I’m not kidding*. I’d never known what love was before, and I’m still not sure if I really do even now, but right then and there I was *sure* I did, and that was *it!*

I still had a few nervous moments as a couple of the pinch-faces tried to stay in the running, but they dropped out one by one, giving Rufus dirty looks as they went. In the end, he came up to the auctioneer and handed over 500 *mu*, and put the chip with my title on it in his wallet.

And that was it. I was his. As far as I was concerned then, *all* his—body, mind, heart, and soul. And we just stood there looking at each other, and I asked quietly, in spite of myself, “Are you sure about this?”

“I told you, I found what I was looking for,” Rufus said triumphantly. “C’mon, want you to meet a friend of mine. Yvonne, Ryan Stonegate. Ryan, Yvonne.”

“Pleased to meet you,” the shorter man said simply. Then he glanced at Rufus again. “Are you *sure* about this?” he asked, unconsciously echoing my very own words of

moments before. “You’re really gonna crossride?”

“I’ve been a man for twenty-some years, I’ve done all the things a man can do, so it’s time for a change and see what kind of chick I’ll be. It’ll be fun! It’ll broad-en my horizons,” he said, chuckling at his own pun. “Vonnie’s got the gear I want for the job I want to do, she’s damned cute, I love her sense of humor. You know me, bro. How can I pass this up? But we gotta do this together, *sister*. Lemme buy you a girl-RIDE for yourself. We’ll have so much fun we won’t miss our dangly parts.”

“Already got my eye on something, thanks,” Ryan said. “And you know I’d prefer to pay for my own. I still owe you my liver for the starship ticket.”

Rufus grinned. “Thanks, but you’re not my blood type.” And then he turned to me. “Okay, so c’mon—girl me up!”

“Just...like that?” I asked. I still couldn’t quite believe it. “You’re not going to want to go out for one last night on the town with your parts or anything?”

“Already did it, and then some,” Rufus said.

“Trust me, he did,” Ryan put in, “I was there, I got the leftovers.”

“And I didn’t see you complaining any, bro!” Rufus chuckled. “Seriously, girlie, I studied the price guides. I knew going in what I was likely to get. I’m all ready.” He looked me in the eyes and spoke more softly, seriously. “So I mean this for reals. Fuse with me. Please.”

And so I did.

It hadn’t been all fun and games since then, of course. For all that he’d saved me from the pinch-faced women, Rufia turned out to have her own little problems. For one

thing, it seemed that saving up for me had used up the very last bits of her lifetime supply of frugality, and from then on she spent it all—or lost it at poker—as fast as she could. Of course, a lot of it she spent on *me*, ripping out all the old worn-out crap and putting in the best slightly-less-worn-out stuff she could afford at the time. But she also drank her way through every microbrew to come out of Cascadia—*twice*—and partied like a crazy woman.

But to give her her due, she *did* always make sure to split everything she earned with me, fifty-fifty, *before* she went on her little sprees. Which puzzled me a little at first—was she using me as some kind of savings account, and one day when she needed the money she'd take it all back? But no—she *insisted* I quantum-lock it in my own cyber-wallet accounts, so she *couldn't* get her hands on it. “As long as you do half the work, girlie, you get half the cash. You should get to choose some upgrades for yourself! I'll put into you what I need for me, so you buy you what you want for *you*.”

And I did, some. But as time went on, I realized I actually kind of preferred saving most of it. I'd been powerless once, and having money was a kind of power. And she already bought me most of what I needed anyway. So I squirreled it all away, and I didn't think Rufia had any idea even then just how much of it I'd saved up.

Really, she needed a keeper. I think she knew that just as much as I did. So when I sort of gradually started speaking up for her and bossing her around a little, and she didn't object, I just kind of slipped into the role. Oh, when she *did* mind something, she'd say so, and sometimes we'd have flaming rows, but we made up

afterward. It was a working partnership.

And that brought me back to the present, to quite another auction stage. Now I really *was* Rufia's keeper—literally. I had to keep her safe inside of me until I could wake her up and let her out again. It was a little scary...no, actually it was a *lot* scary. Even if it wasn't exactly the first time I'd carried a sleeping Rufia around, it *was* the first time I didn't have any choice.

The auctioneer was a nasty-looking little man with a scar down one side of his face that pulled his eye into a permanent squint. Don't know why he didn't have it nano-medicated away. Maybe he thought it made him look mean. "Our next lot is a Fuser-fettered ELK(f)-HCA-002B," he said. "Fully hardlight-equipped, as you can see, with a number of aftermarket commo mods. Presented as captured and fettered, original operator within. I'm gonna open the bidding at 500 mu..."

With all the work Rufe and Ryan-Rhianna had put into me, they'd have started me at ten times that back in Uplift, but part of the appeal of the slave auctions was how cheap they were. It balanced out the drawback of having to keep such tight fetters on to use what you bought. Still, I couldn't help but feel a little miffed. Even when you're being sold at slave auction, being undervalued isn't exactly beneficial to your sense of self-worth.

I stood there, looking out over the audience of bidders, and felt a strange sense of *deja vu*. A pinch-faced little ferret woman in the front row raised her hand. "Do I hear 550, 550 anyone? She's got some really nice comm lasers, and her fetter's prime. Absolutely perfect for any mining boat."

And then a strong masculine voice spoke up. “One thousand.” I blinked and looked. Of course it wasn’t Rufus (duh!) but it was a sight almost as welcome. The most handsome bull elk Fuser I’d seen in some time had his hand in the air. He had a huge rack (which some would say made two of us) that was keeping space clear to either side of him.

It was hard to tell for the hardlight pelt, but I thought he might be one of the medium mobilities Nextus had fielded a few years after me. So help me, I smiled encouragingly at him. If I had to choose between a pinch-faced ferret woman and a handsome bull to be a slave to, I knew which one I’d pick, and I’d bet Rufia would agree with me if she were awake. He nodded back to me—but the ferret woman wasn’t out of the running yet. “Eleven hundred!” she said.

“Fifteen,” the elk replied.

The ferret turned and gave him a dirty look. “Two... thousand,” she said coolly.

And the elk faltered. I *saw* him hesitate, start to turn away. I desperately tried to catch his eye, actually emitting a strained little grunt with the effort.

And his ears flicked, and he turned right back to me. He seemed to be having some kind of internal debate, but then spoke up again. “Twenty-five hundred.”

The ferret stared at him for a moment, then shook her head and waved her hand irritably toward him, conceding the sale. “2,500 going once...going twice...sold for 2,500 *mu*,” the auctioneer said, banging his gavel.

The last thing I saw was the bull elk coming toward the stage. Then someone reached around to the back of my

fetter collar, and the lights went out again.

My systems flicked back on, some time later. I was sitting on a RIDE-sized couch in a small room. From the vibrations I felt, and the porthole in the wall, I guessed a stateroom, on a skimmer or flier that was underway. Taking stock of myself, I found I had access to more of my systems. Locator, chronometer, most of the stuff I needed to feel more myself again.

Comms were still locked down, and so was Rufia, and there were a number of behavioral locks—I couldn't attack anyone, for instance, or try to escape. But I was free to move around and talk, which surprised me a little bit. I couldn't say I'd ever *been* enslaved, or even belonged to anyone who kept more fetters on than the average military unit needed, but I'd heard all the horror stories of RIDEs who were so fettered they couldn't do anything—Uncia and Guinevere, for instance—and *they'd* been legally bought.

I seemed to be alone in the cabin at the moment. I guess they wanted to give me time to wake up and get any little panics out of my system. So I took the time to look around. The furniture was worn—the sofa I was on was threadbare and had a few holes in spots—but the room was neatly kept. There was a scarred wooden desk with a few hardlight displays floating above it showing screensavers. The arrangement of the screens suggested they were a mirror of the control boards from the bridge, which would mean I was probably in the captain's cabin. The leather jacket on a wall hanger with rank insignia torn off tended to support that impression.

There was a small table with a couple of human-sized

chairs, a chest of drawers, and a dresser. There wasn't much in the way of decorations—just a couple of worn movie posters on the wall. One was for David Lynch's *Dune*, and the other was a Japanese poster for an old anime, *Kaze no Tani no Naushika*. Interesting choices.

I got up and crossed to the porthole in one wall and looked out. Desert flew by. My GPS indicated we were a hundred clicks out of Bartertown and outward bound. Chron showed a couple hours after dawn, the morning of the day after we were hijacked. I felt a sudden spike of hope. It was possible the Skylers might have survived the night's freezing temperatures—and if so, there'd still be time to call in a rescue for them before it got too hot if I could get the word out somehow.

As if on cue, the door opened and the bull elk who'd bought me stepped in. "Good morning," he said. "I'm Tom Clark, and the fur coat is Larry. Well, Lawrence, actually, but he'd rather we call him Larry."

Maybe it wasn't the best thing I could have done, but I couldn't help myself. I giggled. "Lawrence? Seriously? *Lawrence Elk?*"

"Yes, yes, tiny bubbles and all that," the elk said, his deeper voice distinguishable from his rider's now that I knew what to listen for. "Get it out of your system. Ha ha, very funny." He rolled his eyes.

"Anyway, you might have noticed we just kind of bought you at auction," Tom continued. "I'm...sorry about that, really. We're between a rock and a hard place—we don't have a comm tech anymore. He got shot in a bar fight."

"You couldn't just get someone else for his RIDE?" I

asked.

“He was *in* his RIDE,” Larry said. “Poor guy didn’t make it either. They were shot with a photon bazooka at close range. Wasn’t enough left to fill a dustpan.”

“That must have been some bar fight,” I said.

“Yeah. The bar won.” Tom shook his head. “Anyway, we don’t have enough money to hire a comm tech *and* buy a RIDE, or even hire one with his own RIDE. We barely had enough to buy you.” He shrugged. “We’d have tried to struggle by without for a while, but the problem is we’re in 50K to Big Sal Seaford, one of the middle-sized fish in the Bartertown mafia. If we can’t pay him by the end of the week, we get repossessed.”

“You could just find jobs on some other boat, couldn’t you?” I said.

He shook his head. “You don’t understand. He’s got the root access keys to all our crew’s RIDEs as collateral—well, except you, of course. So if we don’t pay him back in time, he repossesses them...and through them, *us*. So we took a chance and put down the last cash we had on you. If we get good comms, we can range out wider, mine more, faster...maybe get ahead of our cash flow problems.”

“Wow. Yeah, you’ve got problems,” I said. “Kind of puts mine in perspective a little.”

“We could *force* you to comm for us,” Tom continued. “And, well, we will if we have to. We’re between that kind of rock and hard place. But I was hoping we could come to some kind of agreement where you help us willingly in return for freeing you—and your rider. We don’t want to keep slaves, as we’d kind of like to be able to show our faces out in the Coastal Ring again.”

“Hmm.” I thought about that for a moment. “Well, you guys are a lot better ‘owners’ than I’d expected to end up with. So I’m all about dealing. But there’s one thing we need to do first that won’t wait. When we were hijacked last night, there was a family with us. Tourists from Earth we were playing tour guide nannies for. Bastard pirates dumped them out in the desert without survival gear.”

“Oh, crap,” Tom said.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Anyway, if they’re still alive by now, I’d like to tell the marshals where that was so they could go rescue them before they fry. Give my word I’ll anonymize the location and not try to tell them to come get me, too. You can set the fetter to hold me to that if you want.”

“Hmm,” Tom said. “We sure don’t want to be a party to anyone dying.”

“Let me do that and I’ll work for you willingly,” I said. “No tricks, no escape attempts. I’ll even talk my rider into helping.” I shrugged. “This is the kind of work Rufe and I hire out for anyway. If you want to pay us in freedom at the end instead of cash, we can cope.”

“I’d like to trust you,” Tom said. “I just know that if I were in your situation I’d do and say anything I could to get loose.”

“Yeah, that’s where we’re at,” Yvonne said. “But you’ve got the fetters on us, and even if someone did try to come rescue us you’re probably well-enough armed there’d be a big butcher’s bill on both sides. I’d rather avoid that.” I shrugged. “Look, keep me fettered until you trust me. Monitor my communication. Hell, I can lock myself out of my own long-distance comms and open them to you and let *you* send through them instead. Whatever. Just tell the

marshals where to find that family, okay? Then we'll work out the rest from there." I sent him the coordinates.

"That's three thousand clicks away in the other direction from here," Larry said. "Hard to see how they could tie *us* to that loc."

"OK, we'll open an anon email account and pass it through," Tom said.

I sighed, relieved. "*Thank* you. Now just show me where I'll be working and what you want me to do, and we can get on with it."

The elk Fuser nodded, and offered his hand. "C'mon, I'll give you the grand tour."

Charlene

“Ooooh, just let me be after blowin’ on those fer ye!”

That was the first thing I heard as I drifted slowly up from the deepest depths of sleep I’d ever been. Even cryosleep hadn’t felt like this—it was as if I’d been buried under a mountain of blankets and pillows.

“Eleven! Ohhh, you’re so *good* at this!”

“It was all you, darlin’, bringin’ me luck by blowing on the dice,” a male voice said. I heard the smacking sound of a kiss being placed. My lips tingled. “You doin’ anything later?”

“I could be...available...” someone practically purred. I knew her name, it was just escaping me as sleepy as I was. “But ye know how things’re after workin’ ‘round here. They’ll be wantin’ te separate ye from some o’ those winnin’s. So if ye’re wantin’ te see me, be ye canny at the tables, eh?”

“I’ll do that,” the man promised. I felt me...*our*...body in motion as we sashayed away from the table. *Fiona*, that was her name. I was waking up more with every passing second. Between one blink and the next, I found my way back to my eyes, and was looking out upon the world again.

We were in some kind of casino. The games of chance

apparently hadn't changed much over the last few hundred years—in fact, they seemed to have regressed. There weren't any alpha-wave-pong tables, or holographic virtual roulette. Just the old stone-age standbys of roulette, craps, blackjack, poker, and slots. *Oh, right. The 20th century thing again.*

I caught a glimpse of us as we passed a full length mirror in the wall. We seemed to be wearing a very revealing dress—indeed, if it revealed much more, there wouldn't have been anything there at all—and hardlight hair that fell down past our hips. And our body language was a full-on slinky, sexy saunter. It's funny—I'd thought our body was pretty gorgeous before, when I'd been moving it, but now Fiona had us in overdrive. I could feel the gonads I didn't even have anymore whimpering a little just looking at that reflection. *So that's why everyone's so crazy about BBVs.*

I was still fuzzy—in the head, as well as all over the body—and it was hard to make out exactly what was going on. But we seemed to be working the room—wandering from gamer to gamer carrying drinks, blowing on dice, exchanging pleasantries, and occasionally kissing, but never anything more than that. As Fiona flirtatiously reminded them, that cost extra.

It was several more minutes before I could collect my thoughts enough even to form words. *:Fiona...?:* I finally managed. *:What's going on?:*

:Oh, praise the Lord!: Fiona sent back thankfully. *:Yer awake. I wasn't sure I could do it 'round the fetters they've got on us.:*

:What happened? Where are we?: I asked.

:We were sold at a slave auction, an' bought by Miss Pretty Kitty Politti, who runs a casino here.:

:Sold?: My head was still fuzzy. :How could we be sold? I'm a person.:

:Yeah? An' what am I after bein'? Chopped liver?: she snapped, then immediately apologized. *:Sorry. Lot of stress here. Anyway, that's how things work out in the badlands—anything an' anyone can be for sale.*

Especially if all they want us for is our Fuser aspect. Lucky fer us, they're after thinkin' I'm a bog-standard BBV—d'no what they'd do if they knew I was a spy-RIDE—so I'm jes' supposed t' be vampin' the clientele, makin' them lose their money. So far they haven't made us sleep with any of 'em, but none of 'em's offered enough money yet either.:

:And we can't just...leave?: I asked.

:They're after havin' a fetter collar on us that we don't have the removin' of,: she told me. *:You're still supposed to be locked out and asleep, but I found a way around the fetters—at least enough to wake you up. Can't give ye the body back, though.:*

:I'm supposed to be asleep?: I asked.

:Yeah. They don't care t' have ye interferin' with my duties,: Fiona said dryly. *:They might let us defuse fer a day or so once a month.:*

:Yay,: I thought flatly. *:Do you have any plans for escape?:*

:Not unless I can get someone t' remove this collar,: she said. *:And it's not easy even t' think about doin' that. It's a nasty suspicious little bugger, it clamps right down on rebellious thoughts.:*

:Terrific.:

:If ye want t' go back t' sleep, I can put ye there,: she told me. *:Might be easier fer your peace of mind, if it comes to where we actually have to...:*

:I'll stay awake,: I said. *:Maybe I'll think of something.:*

:Good luck with that,: Fiona sent as she draped ourself over another lucky gambler. *:If ye do, please t' be lettin' me know.:*

The hours that followed started out as disturbing, but it was almost more disturbing how quickly they became less disturbing. There I was, trapped in my own body while Fiona, also trapped, had to carry on her sexy act. We moved from gambler to gambler—mostly male, but Fiona seemed to have ways of telling when a woman would be receptive as well—and made small talk, blew on their dice for luck or pecked them on the cheek and occasionally the lips, and put up with their own wandering hands.

The thing that surprised me the most was how much Fiona was actually *enjoying* herself at the work. Not just to the patrons, but in her actual surface thoughts and emotions that I could read through our Fuse link. She felt bad about not having any choice in the matter, and was a little worried about how it must feel to me not to have any control over my body as we did this—but the actual flirting itself was, to her, quite delightful.

:It's how I'm after bein' made, I guess,: Fiona explained, sensing my puzzlement. *:This is part of the job I was made for the doin' of, an' takin' pride in my work was given t'me as a way of makin' sure I did it well.:* She

sent a mental smirk my way. *:An' besides, 'tisn't somethin' jes' anyone could do. Ye'd be lousy at it yourself, fer one.:*

:Think maybe you could flirt someone into removing our fetter?: I asked.

:'Tisn't after bein' something they could just crack like a pop-top,: Fiona said. *:Ye'd need a RIDE with some good ECM tech, at th' least. Still, I'll be after keepin' it in mind.:*

But as I said, after a while what we were doing got to be less disturbing. It was kind of worrying how quickly it started feeling *normal*, in fact. Like some kind of immersion therapy, spending hours on end being put through the motions of being girly, instead of trying to cling to the last desperate threads of my manhood. More than once I wondered what I would be like when I got out of this.

As the evening hours wore on, and the casino got busier, we worked harder than we had before. And other girls joined us—some genuine BBVs, as well as a few other busty exotic types, mostly felines, who Fiona told me were also “Pleasure Support Armor” models. Then, at the height of the evening, things suddenly got quiet on the floor as Miss Pretty Kitty herself made an entrance down the grand balustrade staircase from the casino's upper levels.

She was clearly wearing a Siamese housecat RIDE—white body, dark face, ears, hands, and feet—and looked from her build like she could easily have been a PSA herself. She had a mane of dark hair matching her darker facial fur, and a sleek black dress that set off the white body fur that showed. But there was nothing of the flirt in her body language now—she carried herself like the

woman in charge that she so obviously was, and all the male staff on the casino floor hastily rushed to her side to light the cigarette she carried in a long stem holder and to ask if there was anything else they could do for her.

Fiona didn't want to get too close to Miss Kitty just in case her long experience with BBVs would cause her to twig to the fact that we weren't actually one of them. So we worked the edges of the room farthest away from the feline hostess until she tired of the attention and went back up the stairs.

Modern technology being what it was, the casino never actually closed, but it did wind down as the hours got late, and our shift ended. Even RIDEs needed downtime to defrag and recharge, so they got a ten-hour rest period every day. There was a spot upstairs reserved for us, and Fiona guided us up to it.

We settled into the charge cradle and started taking on power. It felt good to power up, but Fiona was still extremely concerned. *:Hey, what's the matter?:* I asked. *:We'll get out of this. I've got faith in you.:*

:Thanks for the vote of confidence,: Fiona said, *:But I'm after bein' extremely worried. This is the worst fettered I've ever been. I hate havin' no control. Hate it.:*

:I know you're doing all you can,: I told her. *:If something happens and we don't make it, I just want you to know I won't blame you.:*

:I'll blame me,: she said crossly. *:And that would be quite bad enough.:*

Jamie

We met for a quick pow-wow just a couple of clicks away from the port. Athena had already sent by comm what we'd found out, so we didn't waste any time when we got there. We ran over what we could do about it, letting the RIDEs do most of the talking.

"The biggest problem is going to be the four RIDEs," Athena said. "Even if the jaguar is still badly damaged from the boarding action, the other three could be more than a match for us in direct combat—especially if they have the weapons paks we don't."

"Not necessarily a problem," Isolde said. "Remember, we had a good look at three of them, and two of those will be easy to neutralize. The jaguar and the wolf, at least, are only using internal software fetters to keep them pliable to their pilots' commands. Athena, if you have a spare magazine for that gauss pistol, I can modify the rounds to carry a nano-virus jailbreaking package. Get two or three good shots into them, and they'll be free."

"That doesn't necessarily mean they'll be on *our* side," Gordon pointed out.

"If nothing else, they'll at least be confused," Athena said. "Which means we could take them down more easily if we had to." She opened our cleavage carry compartment

and withdrew a magazine. Isolde took it, then extended a probe from her index finger and poked that into the end.

“The biggest problem will be the badger, their leader,” Isolde said as she worked. “His operator is a canny one, not trusting in software alone. He’s using a lobo.”

“A lobo?” Dad asked when her RIDE had stopped speaking.

“Lobotomizer. It’s an implanted hardware fetter,” Isolde said with a distasteful grimace. “Keeps the RIDE’s higher brain functions offline while still letting him use it at almost full efficiency, unlike passive mode which is just asking for hacks. We’ll probably have to take him down the hard way.” She handed the mag back to us, and Athena traded it out for the one in her pistol.

“What about the unarmored humans?” Mom asked. “They might have heavy weapons, right?”

“They might,” his own RIDE answered him, “but they’re cowards. They’ll try to hide behind the RIDEs. By the time they realize we’ve suborned them, it’ll be too late.”

“Even if they do have big guns, it still takes more than one hit to down a RIDE,” Athena said. “We won’t give them that chance.”

“So that’s our basic strategy,” Gordon said. “So how do we implement it?”

“I can land on the deck and take the helm control station,” Athena said. “From there, I should be able to open the lower cargo loading hatch in the stern. You two enter that way, and I’ll work my way back as you work forward.”

“Sounds like a good plan, but Isolde should go with

you,” Gordon said. “She can watch your back, and I work best alone at any rate.”

Athena inclined our head, accepting the change of plan. “Very well. Jamie, Kelly, Dana, any objections?”

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

“If this will get our boat back as safely as possible, I’m all for it,” Mom said.

“Let’s go for it,” Dad finished. “No time to lose, right?”

And that was that. We all cloaked up and headed back for the docks. My adrenaline was already kicking into overdrive. *:Wow, I can’t believe we’re really gonna do this!:*

:It may not be as fun as you think,: Athena told me.
:As you have no combat experience, I must ask you to let me handle the fighting.:

:Don’t worry,: I told her. *:Pure spectator here. Won’t joggle your elbow. This is too important to screw up.:*
With my Mom and Dad’s lives on the line as well as my own, was I gonna distract the gal responsible for keeping us safe? No way.

:I’m glad you understand.: I felt a pulse of approval, and something maybe a little like affection. Then she turned all her attention to the mission.

We were at the dock now. The *Annabelle Lee* was directly ahead of us.

We went in.

Under full stealth, with Dad and Isolde right behind us, we swept up over the railing of our ore skimmer and touched down on the deck. There was one human keeping watch up at the prow, which was also where the docking

ramp that connected it to the rest of the town was. *:I'll get him. You get the door open,:* Athena sent to them. They sent an affirmative.

It really wasn't hard. I think he was probably dozing anyway. We simply breezed up behind him, and clubbed him with the butt of our pistol, and down he went. Then we went back to rejoin Isolde at the helm control, where she was tapping commands onto the comm panel, fruitlessly. *:It's locked down,:* she said. *:I can't get the cargo hatch open. I can't even get the deck hatch open. We may have to cut our way in.:*

:But then they'd know we were coming,: Athena pointed out.

:Wait, let me have a go,: Dad sent. She reached out with Isolde's arms and tapped another command on the screen, bringing up a black console window on the hardlight display in front of them. *:I know this! This is a UNIX system!:* She pulled up a virtual keyboard and started entering commands. A few seconds later, we were rewarded with the click of the deck hatch unlocking, as well as a slight vibration through the deck of a cargo door swinging wide elsewhere on the ship.

:They'll have felt that! We'd better move!: Athena didn't wait until she'd even finished sending the comm, leaping over the side down into the stairwell leading to the cabin. As it opened, pulse fire blasted through, narrowly missing our shoulder. "Crap!" I yelled. "They must have spotted us!"

"You think?" Athena said, throwing us up and back with her lifters while she kept the pistol muzzle aimed at the door. A moment later it slammed open again and the

she-wolf dived through, rolling and bringing up her cannon. Athena fired as she rolled, but missed. Behind her, a couple of un-Fused humans took up positions to either side of the door, banging away with pistols—until Isolde hit the pistols with a couple of laser beams, superheating them. The humans dropped the pistols as fast as they could and retreated.

Meanwhile, the wolf was firing and dodging, firing and dodging, keeping us in motion to try to catch up with her. Isolde was firing her lasers, but Athena was holding fire with the gauss gun, not wanting to waste her virus rounds until she got a good shot. We did our best to dance around behind the wolf while Isolde kept her distracted.

We were just lining up a shot when I saw *something* out of the corner of my eye. I didn't even stop to think about it, I threw Athena into a diving roll, as a cannon blast tore up the deck plating where we'd been standing. I came up with the pistol in my hand and banded three quick shots into the jaguar who'd just poked a pulse cannon through the hatch from the lower decks. He dropped the gun and fell back, cursing.

:Thanks!: Athena said, surprised. *:But...how did you do that? You don't have combat experience...:*

I helped Athena keep an eye on the wolf as we moved. *:Done a lot of VR twitch gaming,:* I said. *:Apparently the reflexes are the same.:* Isolde was still running and gunning, keeping the wolf's attention divided, though she still had time to pop off a blast or two at us to keep us guessing. And there just wasn't much cover on that skimmer deck.

Then a pulse blast fired from below decks, slamming

into the wolf and staggering her. We took advantage of the opportunity to pump three viral gauss rounds into her, and she went down. Then we turned to see the jaguar coming slowly up the stairs from below, pulse cannon slung and both hands in the air. “I don’t know how you did it, but you unfettered me,” he said. “Thanks.”

The wolf got back up to her knees. “I...I’m free, too!” she breathed. “I can’t believe it! I’d resigned myself to being that bitch’s fur suit for the rest of my life!” Her tongue lolled in a broad grin. “Oh, yes, bitch, shoe’s on the other foot *now*, isn’t it? We’ll see how *you* like being someone’s puppet for a while.”

“My guy’s not so bad, except for the whole slavery thing.” The jaguar shrugged. “Maybe I’ll let him go, later. Or maybe not.” Then we heard a roar, followed by a series of thumps that shook the ship.

“What the hell?” the wolf asked.

“I think your lion friend just met Dmitri and Spike,” the jaguar said. “Come on!” He grabbed his pulse gun and hurried down the stairs. We all quickly followed.

We dashed down the corridor, past a couple of dazed-looking humans clutching scalded hands, and down to the storage bay at the bottom of the skimmer. We heard more roaring and cannon blasts as we got closer. Then we opened the floor hatch and peered down in to see badger and bulldog Fusers holed up behind some metal crates, firing out the open cargo hatch at a lion Fuser hovering in mid-air. As we watched, Gordon opened his mouth and roared—and along with the roar, a particle beam blast lashed out, demolishing some of the crates. He had to have

been keeping it on the low power setting, because at higher power that blast would have gone clear through the opposite wall of the skimmer.

“Give it up!” Gordon roared. “You can’t win!”

“Never!” the badger yelled. “You’ll have to blow this whole skimmer to get us out!”

Athena and I stealthed and dropped through the hatch, moving around behind the bulldog and badger and raising the gun. We knew it wouldn’t do any good to shoot the badger, but we put three shots into the bulldog, thinking to unfetter him. But to our surprise he just spun around and whipped up his own twin gauss pistols and started banging away at us. We dodged away as our hardlight shields went down.

:Sorry, we should have said,: the jaguar sent. *:Spike’s not fettered. He’s just an asshole.:*

:And a bodyjacker,: the wolf put in. *:Never seen his pilot out, in fact.:*

Isolde dropped through the hatch next, bringing her comm lasers into play. She sliced Spike’s guns in two. The badger—who by elimination had to be Dmitri—yelled something incoherent and charged us with his pulse rifle up.

But as he emerged from behind the crates, he was bodychecked by a hurtling three-meter lion who slammed him back into the rear wall hard enough to dent it. Then the lion stood over him with jaw open, cannon glowing, and fist raised and growled, “De-Fuse. *Now.*”

The wolf and jaguar dropped through the hatch behind Isolde, and covered Spike with their guns. The bulldog slowly raised his arms and growled incoherently.

Isolde stepped forward. “I wonder...” she murmured, reaching out for the bulldog. He snarled and tried to bite her hand, and she calmly slapped his face hard enough for it to echo, then placed a hand on his chest. “I was afraid of that.” The bulldog stiffened, then slumped.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. Athena popped the unfettering magazine out of her pistol and slid a full-strength one back in, then holstered the gun on her hip once more.

“Spike’s not really an asshole,” Isolde said, her fluffy tail lashing in agitation. “Or, well, he might be one, also, but that’s not his problem. There’s this RIDE trojan going around called Amontillado. It does some really *nasty* personality-mod stuff. Makes you want to bodyjack someone and keep them, and screws you up in all sorts of other ways too. And looks like ol’ Spike’s been spiked with it for the last six months.” She shook her head. “Bad enough humans like to fetter us, but now some asshole’s got us doing it to ourselves.”

“RIDEs get trojans and viruses too?” Dad asked. “I’d hoped that true AIs were beyond all that.”

“Oh no, we’re not,” Isolde said sadly. “It just makes them all that much worse.”

“Can you clean it out?” the wolf asked. “Like you did our fetters?”

Isolde shook her head. “I could, but...I don’t want to risk popping him open until we’re somewhere we can get his rider medical attention. The effects being Fused that long has on a human...sometimes aren’t pretty. We’ll put him in one of the staterooms, keep him in passive, and set up an IV for his rider ‘til we can get to somewhere with a

doctor.”

At the other end of the bay, Dmitri finally un-Fused, revealing an older, balding man, a little out of shape. “You won’t get away with this!” he blustered. “I’m good friends with Big Sal Seaford!” The over-sized badger RIDE just sat there docilely next to him.

“Isolde, can you yank that lobo out of the badger?” Gordon asked, continuing to cover him.

The cat shook her head again. “I could try, if I really had to, but...when you screw around with RI cores, the slightest twitch can screw them up. We’d better leave him ‘til we can get him some proper medical attention, too.” She nodded to the human who had until recently occupied him. “Lock that *thing* up in another stateroom.”

“Or maybe just dump him out in the desert without a survival suit,” Mom said. “After all, we don’t need any witnesses.”

Dmitri’s eyes widened. “You’re not—you couldn’t be —”

“Oh, don’t worry, we wouldn’t do something like that,” Dad said from inside Isolde. “It’d be too quick and painless. You’re going to face justice for what you did, one way or another.”

“We’ll turn you over to the marshals or something when we have the chance,” I put in, feeling like I ought to get to say *something* anyway.

“Take him away,” Gordon said. The jaguar and the she-wolf came forward to drag the human out of the cargo bay.

The rest of us stood there and looked at each other for a moment. “So, now what?” Dad asked at last.

“Now we see if we can find out who bought your friends,” Isolde said.

“Then we plan rescue operations?” I asked eagerly. Given how well retaking the skimmer had gone, I was more than ready for the next challenge.”

“Not...quite,” Isolde said, smiling serenely like some kind of Maine Coon Lisa. “Then we will speak to the ore assessors and see what price they will give us for this skimmer’s cargo. And then, if all goes well, we might just be able to see about *buying* your friends back.”

Dana

It had been a couple of hours since the whole business of retaking the boat had finished up. The three of us had settled back into our old quarters aboard the skimmer, almost as if nothing had happened, though it was really strange being back in this familiar place with such unfamiliar selves.

The she-wolf and jaguar—who told us they were named Lupé and Warren respectively—had volunteered to take over prisoner-guarding duty. These consisted of six human prisoners—Dmitri, the three whose hands we'd scorched in the raid, and the two who came back half an hour later with a thousand *mu* for the first wheelbarrow load of Q and the ore assessment report in pocket, both of which we'd gladly confiscated.

We'd also moved the *Annabelle Lee* to the *guarded* docks, and paid that thousand *mu* right back out to cover our first two days of docking fees. It felt a little weird trusting our safety to the denizens of the town who would happily have profited from our corpses, but Athena insisted that in this case there was honor among thieves out of sheer self-interest: if paying for docking didn't make you safe, no one would ever pay again, which would cut down on the number of people who felt it was safe to show

up to do business in the town. And for guarding a boat full of the richest ore Bartertown had ever seen—and which was surely known by now to half the town, given that ore assessors almost always had a leak *somewhere*—500 *mu* a day was a bargain price.

At the moment, Isolde was busy negotiating with an ore merchant over comms. She'd told me she felt confident she could get him to come up to 75% of normal market value since we were the owners of the claim and could certify the ore was legitimate. Since I wasn't needed for that, I'd slipped back to our stateroom for my first real uninterrupted navel-gazing session since the change.

In good light, with a good mirror, the re-imagining of me was even more striking. There were no two ways about it—that lush dark hair, those full, pouty lips...I was *gorgeous*. Isolde had told me why, of course—the Fuser nannies included biosculpting because the original trannie nannies they were based on had. In particular, her Sturmhaven-made nanos were specially designed to impart extra-striking looks to male-to-female crossriders, given the premium her majorly-messed-up matriarchal society placed on them. Still, it was one thing to be told and another to *experience* it.

I experimented with tilting my head back and forth, forward or back, tossing it to see how the hair moved and fell. It was really rather hypnotic. I turned to look at myself in profile, and toyed with the buttons on the blouse Isolde had made of my shirt. I wasn't sure if I was quite ready to explore those hidden depths just yet, though. Let alone what was under my slacks...

“Really something else, isn't it?” said the male voice,

so familiar and yet so strange, of Kelly, my husband. My... *husband*. It felt so strange to call someone that. Or maybe I should still call him my wife? If Jamie can still call me Dad and him Mom...

But I put that thought aside for another time as I turned to look at him, getting my first good look in the light. And what a specimen of manhood he was! Big, muscular, ruggedly handsome, tawny mane, and that mustache...I was somewhere between envious and smitten, and from the way he was staring at me I'm pretty sure exactly the same feelings were going through his head. The twin desires of his old female mind to *be* that, and of his new male body to *have* that. It made for a couple of very confused stares back and forth.

"It is," I said, at last remembering he'd spoken. "I think we both look right now just about like we always wished each other did."

"Or each other of us looks like we wished *we* did before, and wish we still did now. Or something. You know what I mean." He waved a hand and shrugged, then moved up to stand next to me and considered himself in the mirror next to me. I turned back, and we looked at ourselves, and each other looking at each other. "I guess if we do swap back in three years, we'll look like our own idealized versions of our original selves then," he said. "At least as much as our RIDEs think we should."

"Damn but those are some impressive whiskers," I mused, looking at his mutton-chop beard. "I'd never have had the patience to grow something like that."

He ran a hand down it self-consciously. "If it weren't for my lion slapping it on me, I doubt I would have either,"

Kelly admitted. “Believe me, I wish you *all* the joy of being the one who has to kiss me through it.”

I had to laugh at that. “I’ll bet. Though you never did complain about *mine* that much...”

He shrugged. “I knew it would only have made you all the more protective of it,” he said. “But I will admit that I had a tube of depilator cream tucked away in my purse, just waiting for us to board the liner back to Earth.”

That was just so much like her—*him*—that I had to laugh. “I can just see that. You’d have waited until we were in our stateroom and I was asleep...”

He nodded. “Yeah. You’d have sulked for a few days, then gotten over it.” He chuckled. “Kind of a foregone conclusion now.”

“Yeah.” I looked at the mirror again, twitching my shaggy feline ears through my hair. “I can’t say I’m disappointed I won’t ever have to cut myself shaving again.”

“Not going to apply the same attention to your legs as you did your face?” Kelly asked, arching an eyebrow and cocking his own leonine ears. “It’s how they did it in the 20th century, after all.”

“There’s dedication to historical accuracy, but then there’s just plain craziness,” I said. “Next thing I know you’re going to ask if I’ll pass up ‘No Periods, Period’ in favor of paper tampons.”

He chuckled. “The thought *had* crossed my mind.”

“Where’s Jamie, anyway?” I wondered. “I’d think she’d be wanting to do some self-examination about now too.”

“She and Athena headed down to the auction office,”

Kelly said. "They're going to see if they can check the sales records and find out who bought our guides."

I frowned. "Is it safe for them to be out and about in this town?"

"With Athena in charge, they'll be safe enough," Kelly said. "She's a mature and experienced scout, got a gun on her hip, and knows how to use it. This might be a badlands burg, but they don't just grab random people off the streets here. If it weren't safe inside the city, no one would come to it."

"Safe?" I asked.

"Well, safe-ish," he amended. "Was a little nervous about it myself, but after I spoke with Athena myself, and Gordon passed me some of her memories, I couldn't imagine a better protector for our *daughter*."

There was that little frisson of weirdness again. *I have a daughter. I'm (technically) a mother.* I looked in the mirror again. *A "mother I'd love to..."* I sighed and looked down at myself. "This is just so weird."

Kelly put a hand on my shoulder. "Tell me about it. I've been doing deep breathing exercises all day trying to keep calm."

"Has it worked?" I wondered.

"Not so's I'd notice," he admitted. "I just keep thinking...what about *us*?"

I looked at him. "What *about us*?"

"We're...both so different now. Such different people than we were," he mused, his furry ears drooping. "Are we still the same two people who fell in love with each other? If I'd been this *dude* in California and you'd been a gorgeous corporate nerd-girl, would we even have hit it

off?”

“Are you kidding? With a buff bod like that, I’d have been all over you. And I think I flatter *my* new self that you wouldn’t have minded the attention,” I said, reaching up to give the hand on my shoulder a squeeze. “And seriously...I *still* can’t imagine life without you, no matter what our genders are.” I laughed a little. “You know you’ve always been stronger than I have. Now your body just matches that. Or, at least, the common *masculine* perception of that, which I’m now starting to suspect is just so much hooley. Or maybe that’s the Sturmhaven nannies talking.” I grinned at him.

“But I’ve always relied on you just as much,” he said. “You’re like my anchor. I’d be adrift without you.” He was silent a long moment, maybe realizing he’d just answered his own earlier question. Then he spoke up again with a new doubt. “Do you think I made the wrong decision out there? Should I just have had Jamie switch and kept us how we were?”

I didn’t have to think about that long at all. “Nah. Instead of feeling weird right now, we’d both be feeling guilty about it. Hell, we might even have both decided it wasn’t worth letting Jamie suffer alone and swapped intentionally after fully thinking about it. This way, we all start out on even ground.”

“I guess there’s that,” he admitted.

“Anyway, we can switch back in three years, if you want. Isolde told me some couples swap every few years anyway, just to ‘keep things fresh.’” I grinned up at him. “We can’t get any fresher than we are right now. I think I’m going to be asking you for a *lot* of pointers in the next

few months.”

“That probably makes two of us,” Kelly admitted. “How on Earth did you ever keep from banging your dangly bits into things? That shit *really hurts*.”

We shared a chuckle over that, then as I looked up, he looked down, and our eyes met, we both suddenly started...well...trembling. Maybe even outright shaking. “What...?” I said. But then I knew. It was the adrenaline we’d been running on all day deciding to up and leave us. When you got right down to it, we’d just had the most stressful 15 hours or so of our whole lives—from floral-print tourist rags to qubitite riches to freezing to death rags to hiding out in a guarded docking slip in a badlands town riches.

And now we were staring at each other in silence, wanting to reach out, take each other into our arms and make the shaking stop. But we *couldn't*. It was as if we didn't dare say what we were surely both thinking and each just as surely knew the *other* of us was thinking. I knew he wanted to. He knew I wanted to. But it was hard to come right out and just *say*.

Really, I blame the attitudes toward gender that Earth had ground into us just through our growing up on it. It felt like we were both afraid of suggesting doing something *perverted*, when all we really were was a man and his wife contemplating sleeping together again.

Finally, I just got fed up with our timidity. *Fuck it*, I thought. *Literally*. “So what say we lock the door and show each other what we’ve both been doing wrong all this time?”

And after looking shocked for a moment, he slowly

grinned and said, “You know, hon...I thought you’d never ask.”

Kelly

It was one of the stranger experiences of my life. Everything was so familiar—the way we each moved, our little habits, the things we cried out and when. But it was also so new and different. Our voices had different pitches, our bodies different shapes, and we both had to get used to someone else being on the bottom or the top. And, of course, there was that trivial little change in how we both fit together...

I had been afraid, going into this, that there might be “uncanny valley” issues, that I might end up feeling like this woman was almost but not *quite* the man I’d married—but there weren’t. If anything, it was just the opposite. Moving together like we did, looking deep into each other’s eyes—paradoxically, it was then we felt the *most* to each other like the people we had been. I could go on about kinesthetic memory or some crap like that, but I prefer to think of it as the close contact letting us look past each other’s bodies to read their *soul*.

We loved each other as we always had, with exuberance, excitement, and laughter. At last, when we were lying in bed afterward, exhausted, and Dana said, “I believe on this planet it’s traditional that you have to have a cigarette now,” we both almost died laughing. It was just

that kind of experience.

“Thank you,” I said at last. “I think this is the most... *normal* I’ve felt in at least a couple of days.”

She grinned at me in that old insufferable way of his. “Oh, was it good for you, too?”

“It was...different.” I considered it. “Don’t know if I’d call it better or worse...just different.” I chuckled. “I’m not sure if I could explain why, but it feels like I understand you a little better now.”

“I know what you mean. I feel the same way. Though that could just be an illusion based on experiencing different sensory inputs,” she pointed out.

“Oh, don’t always be so analytical,” I scolded. “Just enjoy the experience.”

“Never said I didn’t,” she told me. “It certainly should make things even more interesting when or if we do switch back.”

“If?” I said.

“What, you don’t like the new you enough to want to keep it?” she teased.

“Ask me again in three years,” I said. “I’ll give you an answer then.”

“Good answer,” she conceded. “I guess I shouldn’t hog the fun of being a woman *all* the time. Though for as long as *you’ve* had it, I feel like I’ve got some catching up to do.”

“Ha!” I said. “Well, this manhood thing takes some getting used to, too.”

We lay there in companionable silence for a while, each savoring the feeling of having the other one near. We could pretend for a few fleeting moments that everything was still normal. There was no male or female, husband or

wife. There were just Kelly and Dana, happily married parents of a teenaged child, relaxing in bed together. It was a good feeling.

But after a while, my thoughts wandered, as they tended to do after sex, and reality crept back in. Finally, I sighed, as an unpleasant conclusion finally forced its way into my head after I'd tried to put it off for the last dozen or so hours.

“What is it, hon?” Dana asked.

“We can't go back to earth,” I said. “Not like this, and maybe not ever.”

She matched my sigh. “You figured that out too, huh? I hadn't been going to say anything, just in case we thought of something later, but...”

“Yeah,” I agreed. We didn't need to “As you know, Bob” the reasons out loud, because we both indeed already knew them. We'd scanned the news over the last few years. We both knew what the current political climate back home was like for TG'ers.

No one there would ever believe it had happened to us “accidentally,” or that we'd *had* to do it to survive. Even if they accepted it rationally it would still color their thinking toward us. We'd never find jobs, and we might even get deported...right back to here again.

Zharus seemed to be a favorite place for the government to send the weirdos it didn't want, these days. It made anyone who wanted to come here *willingly* at least a little suspect as it was. We'd joked a little after the tough time we'd had getting tourist visas that Zharus might be like the proverbial zoo where you needed two tickets—one to get in, and one to get out again. But we hadn't expected

something like *this*.

“But you know what?” Dana said. “I honestly can’t think of anything we left behind that’s really worth going back to Earth *for*. And we’ve got a lot going for us right here. We’ve got a decent little retirement nest egg, if we can just dig it out of the ground. We’ve got some new friends, if we can rescue them. And...we’ve just doubled the size of our family.”

I blinked at that. Family? But...*yes*, that did feel right. The trio of RIDEs had saved our lives—but more than that, they’d *shared their* lives with us, and we’d done the same for them. We knew each other well enough that it somehow felt like we’d been friends for years. Before we’d Fused up, we’d seemed to be assuming it was just a partnership of convenience, and we’d go our separate ways when we got back to civilization. But now I couldn’t imagine ever leaving my lion, and I was sure Dana felt the same about her puddy tat.

“You know, we really need to talk to them about this,” I said. “About being part of our family. It feels like we should, you know, make it *formal* and not just take them for granted.”

Dana nodded. “I’m through taking RIDEs for granted. And I think they’ll be cool with the idea, too. We each three seem to be getting on well with the other three. I think Jamie has already decided to elope with Athena rather than leave the planet without her.”

I grinned. “That boy and his pets,” I quoted. “So, think we should get up and go tell them?”

“I think it can wait a *little* while,” Dana said, reaching for me. “I don’t think we’re quite finished in here yet.”

Upon due consideration, I had to agree.

Jamie

“Well, that was a big wash,” I said as we stepped out of the auction house office. “Only way it could have been more of one involves suds, rollers, and hot wax.”

The office was in a slightly ramshackle, three-story stone building along one of the narrow streets that crisscrossed to make up this small city. It was located in an ancient volcanic caldera a few kilometers across. The natural stone walls surrounding it were themselves seventy meters high, meaning sunrise came late and sunset early. It kind of suited a town where such shady business took place.

It also made the town easy to defend, especially with all the concealed anti-flier defenses mounted at the top of the wall. Athena had told me that fliers, skimmers, and even suborbitals who came to trade at the place were *extremely* careful with their approach vectors.

“It was only what I expected,” Athena said. The fennec RIDE was still Fused around me for protection in this place, as she would always stay while we were here unless we needed to make speed somewhere in Skimmer mode. “We might try again tomorrow after Isolde has sold your ore. Usually it takes a bribe, and you don’t have enough money on you for that.”

“It really burns me having to pay even *more* money to get our friends back after they were *stolen* from us in the first place,” I said, clenching our fists. “Why can’t we just call in the Marshals?”

“Too far out of their jurisdiction,” Athena said. “Too well-defended. Too many other, nearer crimes need marshal attention. It would take an army to deal with this place, and if they did, what then? Most of the filth would get away, and just find other places to set up. At least this way they’re in one mostly-avoidable place.”

“We could at least use one to help us investigate what became of our friends,” I muttered.

“Hey, I’m a *scout*,” Athena reminded me. “Investigation is my stock in trade.”

“So how do we proceed without help from the auctioneer, O Master Investigatrix?”

“That’s *Mistress* Investigatrix,” Athena said, grinning. “And the first step is to consider who *might* have bought them. Rufia and Yvonne are comm specialists first and foremost, and those are always in demand by mining ships. But most miners prefer to *hire* if they can. Even a fettered-up unwilling comm RIDE can mess you up pretty badly if they want to, just by taking every possible opportunity to slack. So if someone bought her for her RIDE’s comm talents, it must have been someone pretty desperate. So we might schmooze the local saloons, see if anyone suddenly lost a comm officer lately and had to fill the vacancy *fast*.”

“Huh. That actually sounds...reasonable,” I said. “Though I’m still kinda underage to be doing that...”

“Oh no, a teenager in a Bartertown saloon! Someone

call the Marshals!” Athena giggled. I loved that sound. “Besides, these bars are *meant* for miners.”

“Boo. Hiss. Ten yard penalty for lousy pun.” But I laughed anyway. “What about Fiona and Charlene?”

“In a way, they might be easier to locate,” Athena said. “About the only places that would want to buy them are right here in town.”

I had to think about that for a moment, then I got it. “Wait, you mean—”

“Houses of Ill Repute,” she said dramatically in her resonant voice. “After all, she does look for all the world like a BBV. To the untrained eye, she’d be perfect—especially for coming with ‘hands’ pre-installed.”

“Ugh,” I said. “They’re really just buying her for her body?”

“Her body and her training,” Athena said. “BBVs are programmed as courtesans, after all. And so are...well, what Fiona is.”

“What Fiona is?” I echoed. “And...the untrained eye? What are you talking about? What *is* Fiona really, then?”

“I’m not sure if I should say,” Athena said. She sounded uncomfortable.

“C’mon, Theenie,” I said “I thought RIDEs and their riders weren’t supposed to keep secrets.”

“Well...” Athena said. “From your memories about her, I’m pretty sure she’s a spy RIDE. Intel Support Armor. In some ways, kind of my counterpart, though she’s specialized in prying secrets out of people while I pry them out of the land. Nextus based a line of sexy spy RIDEs on the BBV chassis.”

“Whoa, really?” I blinked. “So Charlene’s, like, some

kind of secret agent?”

“Doubtful,” Athena said. “She probably got Fiona just like she said—from a used RIDE merchant. But she *does* seem to know just what Fiona is, based on the conversations you remember.”

“But you think they’d be...in a whorehouse or something?” I said.

“Or a casino, or escort service, or certain bars or saloons, or anywhere else that would like to have a foxy fox lady around and doesn’t particularly care about the well-being of the human inside.”

“Then finding her should be easy, right? I mean, there can’t be many of that kind of place in a town this size, can there?” I asked optimistically.

“You...might be surprised,” Athena said. “From the local directory, there seem to be at least twenty likely businesses.”

I goggled. “Twenty? Really?”

“There are *lots* of lonely and horny miners out there,” Athena said. “Or lonely and antlery, for that matter.”

“Boo,” I said to the pun. “So how do we do this? Just wander up and ask if they’ve bought any new RIDEs lately? Or are we gonna, like, ask if we can work there and try to scout out the other RIDEs while we’re applying?”

“I doubt we’d be even seriously considered,” Athena said. “In case you haven’t noticed, I don’t have the typical courtesanly body shape. Unless you’re a pedophile, I suppose.”

“Ew,” I said. “So ‘have you bought any RIDEs lately’ it is, I guess.”

“I don’t think there’s any need for subterfuge,” Athena

said. “Hunting for kidnapped kith and kin is common enough out here that most places understand the motivation and are willing to deal to avoid trouble. We only need let it be known we’re looking to pay, not to fight.”

“And once we have the ore money in hand, we can pay plenty,” I said. “So be it. Wanna start at the top of the list and work our way down? It’s either that or go back to the ship...and I’d rather give Mom and Dad some privacy for a while after the way I caught them looking at each other when we de-Fused.” I chuckled.

“What about you?” Athena asked. “Do you need any time...alone with a full-length mirror?”

I shivered as I considered the question. I had taken the chance to look myself over briefly, after we’d retaken the ship, but then Isolde had asked if we could check out the auction house, and I’d cut my self-examination short. I was still trying to come to terms with what I had found.

“I...can get by, I think.”

“I didn’t ask if you could ‘get by,’” Athena said. “I asked what you *need*. I know it takes time and the chance to live your new body to get used to the change.”

“I’ll take the time once we’ve found our friends,” I said. “For now, let’s get to work.”

Our first stop took us to an alliterative “Aunt Aeri’s Absolutely Awesome Amenities and Appealing Adult Allure .” As with most other buildings in this town, it was made from blocks of stone cemented together. They were the available materials at hand, after all. The hardlight-paned storefront featured several mannequins in female

clothing in alluring poses, and when we stepped inside we found a seemingly ordinary female clothing store. There wasn't as much selection on the shelves as in some of the malls back in Aloha, but there were several full-sized clothing fabbers along one wall, including the kind that you stepped into naked and they actually projected the clothing around you in hardlight to get the fit right before they made it.

"I *said* I didn't need any girlie time right now," I told Athena. "We don't have time for clothes shopping."

"We're not *here* for clothes shopping," Athena said. "Although, now that you mention it, I think we *could* spend a few minutes. I gather they put the clothing fabs in to make it easier to dress the girls how the customers wanted them, then found that they could also turn a profit selling clothes."

"And it makes the business look more 'respectable,'" I guessed.

"That, too." She nodded to the clothing racks. "Why not take a look, see if anything suits you? It might make the staff more friendly if you buy something first."

"Sounds like a flimsy excuse to me," I said. But I figured I should probably humor her, at least a little. After all, we *were* here, and it would only take a few minutes to try on a few things, right? We de-Fused and I stepped in among the racks, feeling the fabric and looking for something near my size.

"Can I help you find anything, ma'am?" a female voice asked right behind me. I nearly jumped out of my skin and turned to see a short girl with dark, curly hair, dog ears and a poofy-cut poodle tail peering up at me thoughtfully.

She was wearing one of the 1950s-style poodle skirts that were in vogue in some parts of Gondwana, and I had to admit that for her it was kind of appropriate. Her name badge read “Geena”.

“Uh...I was just kind of random looking,” I said. “Not really sure what I want yet.”

She cocked her head at me. “Oooh, did you just crossride? I *love* to meet people like that! I think I can really help you! C’mere, you gotta try this!” She took my arm and led me over to one of the walk-in projector fabbers. Athena trotted along after us, projecting an air of amusement.

“Hey, what’re you—” I began.

“G’wan, get in!” Geena pushed me into the smoked-glass cylinder and sealed the door behind me.

“Wait, shouldn’t I take my clothes off fir—eep!” I said as my alligator polo shirt and Bermuda shorts disintegrated around me, leaving me entirely nude. My wallet seemed to be fine—it floated off to a small nook in the wall. “Hey! My clothing!”

“Don’t worry, it’s nano-motile fabric! I just stored it temporarily, I’ll put it back when we’re done. Now let’s see, what would look awesome on you?” The hardlight projectors lit, and I was wearing a bra and panties, and then simple black dress, with shoulder straps. I turned, considering myself in the mirror. I looked like...a *girl*.

Which was hardly a revelation, I guess. That’s what I *was* now. And I’d seen myself *naked* already—the small breasts, the new changes below—but that was just a body, and it didn’t even feel like me. But this new person in the mirror was a girl I might meet on the street, or at a party

or something, and maybe feel a little nervous about talking to because...because, well, she looked like a female version of *me*, when I got right down to it. I reached up to my hair and flicked it back from my shoulders, turning to watch the way it fell. It had gone from brown to sandy-colored and gotten a bit past shoulder-length in the Fuse, besides having those great big radar-dish ears poking up out of it.

:Our new friend is telling me how much she loves dressing up new crossriders and helping them find their new feminine side,: Athena sent amusedly. *:I think she has a bit of a Pygmalion complex.:*

:I'll bet she loved to play with dolls when she was little,: I replied. I should have been annoyed, but Geena had been so enthusiastic it was hard to get too upset. Besides, her first pick hadn't been a bad choice all in all.

"All right, so what's next?" I asked.

"Um, try this!" The next one was a different dress, in alternating sandy stripes that matched my hair and darker brown ones. The stripes weren't all perfectly straight or parallel, though they caught the eye that way. They were arranged to match and subtly accentuate the curves of my body through optical illusion, with an overall effect of seeming to give me slightly better curves than I actually had. I wasn't sure I necessarily *wanted* that effect, but it was cleverly understated—it promoted me but didn't attempt to *throw* me at the onlooker.

"Hey, not bad," I said, and meant it. I actually could see myself wearing it.

:I approve, as well,: Athena agreed.

"You've got a fun bod to design for!" the poodle-girl said. "All those people who think when they cross they

gotta get the very biggest tits and ass they can...ugh. End up with a bunch of booooooring cookie-cutter body shapes. It's worse than wearing the same dress to a party." This next dress vanished, and the next thing to appear was a sleek one-piece swimsuit design, with cut-out panels in the chest and back. It was gray, with a pattern of dolphins on it.

:*Huh, did you tell her about Dayla and Donna?*: I asked Athena.

:*No, I did not,*: Athena said. :*Interesting.*:

"Did I guess right? You just seemed like the kinda person who'd like dolphins," Geena said.

I turned to examine myself in profile. It wasn't bad. Not especially revealing, but then I didn't have anything especially *worth* revealing. But it would be nice to have when we went back to Aloha. Wouldn't Dayla be surprised?

Well...come to think of it, probably the only *real* surprise would be because I was from Earth. A number of the crew had crossridden themselves, some of them more than once. They really did seem to look at it like dying your hair or getting your ears pierced around here.

"OK, gonna do just one more!" Geena said. The bathing suit disappeared, and was replaced by...a black silk nightgown. I blinked a little at that. But actually...it wasn't an especially *sexy* nightgown. In fact, it was altogether pretty modest. It seemed to be basically just what it said on the box: a *gown* you wore at *night*, like for sleeping in or something. It looked *nice* on me, and I imagined if I ever did have a significant other they would have decent things to say about me in it, but it was

designed to be worn *all night*—not just long enough to be torn off.

“These are some nice clothes, Geena,” I said. “I’ll take them all.”

“Yay!” said the poodle-girl. The nightgown disappeared and my underthings, shirt, and shorts reformed around my body. I retrieved and pocketed my wallet, the door slid open, and I stepped back out of the fabricator to meet a beaming Geena. When I looked closer at her, she actually looked to be about my age or maybe a little older; it was just her short stature and her enthusiasm that made her seem younger. It was strange to find someone like that in a place like this.

As we went back to the counter for her to ring me up, I saw the beaded curtain on the door leading back to the rest of the store and remembered why we were there. “Um...by the way, Geena?” I asked. “Has this place, um, bought any new girls lately?”

She turned to look at me, her eyes narrowing. “*Bought* any girls? You’d better have meant to say *hired*...”

Sensing I was on shaky ground, I hastened to explain. “Um...I didn’t mean it like that. I just...well, we were ambushed out on the desert, and they took a couple of our friends and their RIDEs to sell. One of them was a, um, BBV. We’re looking to try to get them back, and I thought...well, there are a lot of places that might could use BBVs around here.”

Geena’s eyes un-narrowed, then widened. “Oh. *Ohhhh*. I understand, and I’m so sorry! No, we don’t hold with that kind of thing here. We don’t do much with RIDEgirls at all, in fact, and all ours are willing hires. But I

could tell you a few other places to cross off your list, and some that you might want to check out first.”

“Thanks,” I said, as she passed over shopping bags full of clothes. “We’d like that.”

She gave a few names of relatively reputable places that wouldn’t touch fetter-slaves with a ten foot pole, and then listed off the worst offenders at the opposite extreme. I found some of the names a little hard to believe.

“‘Tootsie’s Sleaze Emporium’? Really?”

Geena shrugged. “They’re into truth in advertising. And it seems to work; they do a land-office business. Oh, and also Miss Pretty Kitty Politti’s Nitty Gritty ‘Hit Me’ City. She uses a *lot* of BBVs.”

“Thanks,” I said. “We’ll check those out.” I grinned. “And maybe I’ll send some more business your way. I know another crossrider or two.”

“Yay!” Geena cheered again, clapping her hands. “Good luck with your search! Tell me if you find her!”

I left the store more cheerful than I’d come in—and a bit more thoughtful, too. Really, I *had* enjoyed the shopping experience a lot more than I’d thought I would. Maybe I could find some other places to look around while we were at it.

For the next several hours, we delved into the sickest pits of filth the town had to offer, or so it seemed to me. They were meat markets, plain and simple, where desperate people and RIDEs offered themselves for a few measly *mu*. The worst part was when people confused us with the merchandise. (How? I guess because we were a fox too.) We started wearing our pistol openly on our hip

again, and keeping our hand meaningfully near it. Most would-be johns took the hint.

We didn't have much luck in our search. The management of the places were pretty cagey at first, and it usually took some talking to get them to understand what we wanted and why. After that, though, they were usually pretty cooperative—especially when they understood that if we found the gals we were looking for we'd rather buy them back than resort to violence.

Along the way, we met three BBVs that had been sold within the last day, but none of them was Fiona. One of them was pretty desperate to escape her current situation, and we felt bad about leaving her, but what could we do? We were going to have a hard enough time just getting Fiona free. Maybe we could come back for her at some point.

But in several hours of slime-diving, we'd checked most of the places off the list, and were just getting ready to head down to Miss Pretty Kitty Politti's, when we got a comm call from Isolde asking us to come back to the skimmer—Mom and Dad wanted to hold a family meeting. Well, fine by me. My soul had been crushed enough for one day and I was glad to have the excuse to call off the search for the night.

Athena flipped back to her skimmer form and we headed back up the narrow streets to the guarded section of the docking bay at the southern rim of the caldera. We passed several steely-eyed guards, Fused RIDE and un-Fused human alike, who examined our dock pass before waving us on. I knew they were thugs in the pay of bandits, but on the other hand once they were bought they stayed

bought, so on the whole I was glad to have them there keeping us safe.

We pulled through the docking area and hovered into our slip, then floated over onto the deck. Mom and Dad were waiting there for us, with Gordon and Isolde at their sides. Mom and Dad both looked a lot more relaxed and happier than I'd seen them in a while, in either gender. That was a relief. I'd half-way worried that getting gender-flipped might screw up their marriage or something.

We touched down, and I slid off of Athena's back as she folded back down into fuzzy fennec fox form. Isolde spoke up as we arrived. "Good news! I've sold our load of ore. The assessor's already picked it up and paid us 50,000 *mu* for it."

"Great! So we'll have bribe money!" I said.

"I understand you've been out beating the bushes for our wayward guides?" Dad asked. "We probably should have joined you, but..."

"It's okay, you needed the down time, and there was that business to take care of back here, too," I told her. "And it's not as if we didn't do a little shopping, too," I added, glancing a little guiltily at the shopping bags Athena had deposited from her saddlebags when she changed. "There's a store downtown you might want to check out tomorrow. Anyway, we ran down some leads but didn't find anything. We'll *all* look more tomorrow."

They nodded. Then Mom spoke up. "We called you back here because we wanted to discuss...well, a family matter."

Gordon glanced at him concernedly. "Should we RIDEs go, then?" he asked.

Mom grinned at his lion. “Absolutely *not!*” he said. “As I said, it’s a *family* matter.”

Gordon blinked. “I don’t understand.”

“You see, that’s what this is about,” Mom said. “We already thought of you as friends...*good* friends. But...well, you’re really more than that to us now. We’ve been through so much together, even in so short a time. So we wanted to ask you three—will you officially join our family?”

“Join your family?” Gordon asked. “What does that mean?”

“It means you can call yourself Gordon Skyler if you feel like it,” Dad said. Mom favored her with a quelling glance.

“It means we’re all partners here. Equals,” he continued. “There’s not going to be any ‘owning’ or ‘selling’ or forcing anyone to do what they don’t want to do. But it also means if you’ve got a problem, we’ve got your back. That’s what family is.”

“But what happens when you return to Earth?” Athena asked.

“We won’t be,” Dad said. “The ol’ place wouldn’t be any too friendly to us the way we are now.”

“But we don’t blame you three for that!” Mom hastened to add. “We blame Dmitri, if anyone. We’d rather be crossed than dead. This is a change we can live with—literally.”

“Anyway, we’ve got money coming, we’ve got time, we’ve got our lives thanks to you...and we’ve got you, if you’ll *share* our lives,” Dad said. “What’s there on Earth to compare to that?”

“So what do you say?” Mom asked.

“Before we saved your lives, *you saved ours*,” Gordon said. “*Our* family. We should have thought of formally asking you to join us first. I’ll stay with you as long as you’ll have me.”

“Absolutely!” Isolde agreed. “I already said I would.”

“Count me in as well,” Athena said. “I always wanted to be part of a big family!”

“Now that’s settled, let’s eat!” Dad said. “Kelly and I have been burning some serious calories lately.” Mom took a mock swing at her, then we all trooped downstairs for dinner followed by a six-handed game of Trivial Pursuit up on deck. We missed Rufia, Charlene, Yvonne, and Fiona terribly, but knew there wasn’t anything further we could do to find them tonight—Bartertown got even worse after dark. We pledged to start searching all the harder for them at first light.

After the game, we retired to our rooms, and looked thoughtfully at our beds. Then apparently the three of us all had the same thought, for we re-Fused with our companions and rejoined each other on deck.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be happy to stand guard while you sleep,” Athena said. “We’ll wake you if there’s an emergency.”

“Feels a little weird to think about sleeping standing up,” Dad said.

“Feels *really* weird to think of sleeping without hearing you snoring,” Mom said.

“If you really miss it, I can send it to you by comm,” Isolde offered.

“I think I’ll just try without first and see how it goes,”

Mom said.

“Night all,” I said. “See you in the morning!”

“Pleasant dreams,” Athena said, then put me right to sleep.

Yvonne

I followed the Fused Tom and Larry out of the cabin and onto the deck, to get my first look at the mining skimmer from the deck. It was about six times the size of the *Annabelle Lee* that the Skylers had rented, and I knew from working on its kind before that the ore bay would be even bigger in proportion. This was no tourist RV but a working mining ship. “Welcome aboard the *Rocky Comfort*,” Tom said proudly. “Named for the small Missouri town where I grew up back on Earth.”

“Long way from home, aren’t you?” I said.

He shrugged. “Well, this is home now.” He waved a hand at the ship. “Crew of thirty, including the miners. We ply the Dry seeking likely mineral formations.”

“I know the ship type and what it does,” I said. “We’ve worked freelance comms on four or five of them. I can give you references, if they’d mean anything.” Still, I looked around, noting with approval the heavy machine gun and cannon mounts spaced along the railing and overhead. No pirates would take *this* ship without knowing they’d been in a fight.

“Then I guess we can skip the grand tour,” Tom said, sounding a little disappointed. “Shall we just go right to the bridge?”

“Yeah, that’d be good,” I said. “And how about you loosen the fetters so I can wake my pard? We work best as a team.” We started walking toward the bridge. On the decks in the distance I could see a few people or Fusers walking here and there, seeing to their duties. A tiger Fuser inspecting a sensor mast at the other end of the deck, a squirrel a polishing a cannon turret across the way.

The elk frowned. “I don’t know. I mean...I’m a little worried whether I can trust you yet. I wouldn’t trust *me* if I were in your shoes.”

I rolled my eyes. “Now you do know that the longer you keep these fetters on and my partner and best friend asleep inside of me, the more *annoyed* I’m gonna get, right?” I said. “Look, you can fetter check me and you’ll know Rufe doesn’t keep me fettered, so even if *she* objects to our arrangement, I can lock *her* down. But I think she’d like you guys and be cool with it, and we work better *together*.”

I could tell he was wavering. “I’ll...think about it,” he promised.

“You know, you’re really not that good at owning slaves,” I said. “You should either be totally trying to crush my spirit or something, or outright setting me free, not waffling over whether you can *trust* me. It’s *really damned annoying*.”

“Yeah, well, I thought about the crushing your spirit thing, but Larry wouldn’t like that,” Tom said. “He doesn’t want me to mess up his chances with you.”

“Hey!” Larry protested.

I chuckled. “Well, Larry, if you want to *improve* your chances, get that partner of yours to let me wake mine up.”

“I’ll work on him!” Larry promised.

Tom shook their head. “Damned elks, ganging up on me.”

“It’s the herd mentality,” I suggested. We were approaching the bridge now, going up the stairs to an elevated catwalk above the rest of the deck. The bridge hatch was just a few more meters along. Tom opened it and we stepped inside.

The bridge followed the standard layout on skimmers of this size and class. There were helm controls at the front, sensor and engineering stations on the sides, and a captain’s chair on a dais in the middle where he had a good view of all the consoles, and of the windows that surrounded the bridge on most sides. At the moment, only the helm was manned, by a woman in a llama Fuser. There was no need to staff the other stations without operations underway.

The comm operator’s seat was even higher than the captain’s, suspended in a transparent aluminum bubble in the ceiling to provide an uninterrupted 360 by 270 degree view of the sky and surroundings for ideal lasing contact with both the birds in the sky and the gophers on the ground.

“Looks cozy,” I said. And slowly, I started to have an idea. It was going to need some refinement, but I thought I might just be able to connive my way into getting those fetters off after all—and more than that. If I played my cards right, I might be able to do even *better* than just getting Rufe and me free. But it would take some careful planning. And there was something else I had to do first.

“Remember your promise about my tourist family,” I

reminded them.

“Of course.” Tom hit the switch to lower the comm couch, and I adjusted it to fit my elky frame and climbed in. He raised me back up into the dome, where the familiar and always-calming sight of a big blue bowl of sky awaited me. The birds were in perfect position and I could lock them up with ease; only the fetters kept me from sending to them.

I turned my head to look down at Tom and Larry as they slid into the captain’s chair and opened a hardlight terminal right within my view. As I watched, they composed an anonymous email to the marshals, appending the coordinates I supplied. Then they used my fetter override to make me send it. I got uplink, bounced the signal through several relays to anonymize it, and got delivery confirmation to the disposable email address they used to send it.

I sighed in honest relief. I didn’t know if the Skylers had lived through the night—if not, it wouldn’t exactly look good on our record. But if they were still among the living, at least there was a chance the marshals could get to them in time.

“All right, then,” I said. “I promised I’d comm for you if you did that, partner or no. So let’s get this show on the road.”

Tom nodded. “Dolly, are we on course?”

The llama nodded. “Yes sir. We should be at the mining grounds in five hours.”

“Okay, let me know if you have any comm needs before then,” I said. “I’ll be dozing in VR.” I closed my eyes and kicked down into my internal virtual space. The forest

was calming, though there was an underlying tension beneath it now, like the hum of distant high-tension wires, reminding me I still had fetters on.

And, of course, Rufia was locked away from me in a deep, unbreakable sleep. I could have pulled up a representation of her in a Sleeping Beauty casket in the clearing, and for a little bit I toyed with the idea, but it wouldn't have helped anything and just felt like a dumb gesture anyway.

And besides, when I thought a little more about it, the very idea of *Rufia* as Sleeping Beauty was so utterly ridiculous that I knew she wouldn't give me any peace about it when she saw it in my memories after she *did* wake up. I could practically hear her eardrum-rattling laughter at the idea now, and had to chuckle along. So, really, there wasn't any point to doing it except feeling better, and I felt enough better just *thinking* about it that it had kind of already served its purpose.

As I relaxed in the forest and virtually grazed a little, I considered the idea I'd just had. It might just work, especially if I could get Larry on *my* side and get him not to help Tom look for my trap. Hmm. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to flirt a little. I pinged him over a sideband and invited him to my forest.

He popped in a moment later. He really was quite magnificent in his animal aspect—big ol' rack of antlers, shaggy mane of fur on his neck, musky aroma...wow. What a *bull!* "You rang?" he asked.

"Welcome to my parlor," I said cheerfully. "So, let's talk. I'm guessing I have *you* to thank for that last 500 mu jump at the auction?"

He chuckled. “Perceptive. Yeah, 1,500 was already a little rich for Tom’s blood, but I prevailed upon his better nature.”

“In other words, you promised you’d make his life a living hell if he didn’t get you what you wanted?” I asked slyly.

“Well, that too,” Larry said.

I chuckled. “Well, I can’t say I’m exactly *disappointed* to end up with such an excellent specimen of bullhood for an ‘owner’ rather than that weasel woman,” I admitted. “But I *am* a little disappointed that I haven’t been able to wake my partner yet. Seems like yours has a few trust issues.”

Larry looked down and pawed the ground in embarrassment. “Yeah. I’m sorry. I’m working on that. It’s just, he knows what *he* would do in the same situation, and it’s hard to get past that. He...hasn’t exactly lived in a trusting environment these last few years.” He looked up at me. “For what it’s worth, *I* believe you.”

Yeah, sure you do, I thought, perhaps a little unfairly. “So how’d you-all get in hock by fifty large to Big Sal, anyway?”

“Oh, the usual sort of thing,” Larry said. “Had an accident. Q-dust in one of the engines, and it blew out spectacularly. Nearly took two crew with it.” He tossed his head as if to shake a bad memory loose from his antlers. “After that, it was either go in hock to fix it or sell the *Comfort* for scrap and go back to crewing for other people, and we’d all put so much time, money, and effort into this we were desperate to keep this thing that was *ours*. We thought we could scrape the ore together in the time we

had. Wouldn't have been a problem but for that stupid bar fight. We can't do it without comms, and we didn't have enough cash to hire one, even provisionally. With all the money going to Big Sal at the end, we couldn't promise to pay him a cut."

"Send in the slave-girls!" I said cheerfully. "Eager to work for a few little scrappy crusts of freedom!"

He winced. "Yeah. Again, I'm sorry. I know you don't like this. *I* don't like this either. But here we all are. If we can get that 50K, you'll be free and clear."

"Yeah, sure I will," I said. "He may even *believe* it now. But then he'll think, 'Oh, she'll just run to the Marshals and tattle on me as soon as I let her go,' and suddenly I'm a pet comm elk for life while Rufia cooks down to sludge."

"That *won't* happen!" Larry insisted, horrified. "I won't let it!"

"So why not unfetter me *now*?" I asked. "Build up some goodwill with me by *trusting* me, and let me return that trust. I promise I'll be happy to stick around for as long as it takes to earn you that 50K." Which wasn't entirely true—at least, the "happy" part of it. Apart from wanting to find out how things had gone with the Skylers, I wanted to go rescue Fiona and Charlene, too—but a few days of mining would be a lot better than a lifetime of slavery, and I could do a lot from here if I just had unfettered comms. Besides, if my Nefarious Scheme worked out, even that wouldn't be an issue.

"I'd *like* to, but..." He hesitated.

I turned my rump halfway toward him and flicked my tail enticingly. "You know I'm not going to run," I said.

“And if I’m free, I’ll *be* free, if you know what I mean.”

“You don’t have to be free to be free for *that...*” he said, swallowing.

“Now what kind of *real* bull would take advantage of a poor li’l slave-girl like that?” I teased, with more tail-flicks.

“Er...” he said.

“Just think about it, mmkay?” I oozed. “Think about it *lots.*”

“I...er...will,” he said. “I, um, think I’d better go now.”

I heard a muted roar as he opened a portal back into his own VR and slipped through it, and caught a glimpse of a huge, dramatic, presumably *cold* waterfall in the distance before the door winked shut.

I giggled. *Yeah, Vonnie, you still got it!* Then I settled down to graze again, and to try to relax. If all went well, I might just see Rufia again in a day or so.

A few hours later, we finally made it to the mining fields. Tom sent the miners out with their sensor probes for the preliminary surveys, and I read the data, sending it down to the sensor station for collation. It was basically the same thing we’d done for the Skylers, only on about two orders of magnitude larger scale. Instead of fields one kilometer on a side, we swept blocks of ten, building up large-scale pictures of ore distribution in the area so we could get a sense of the patterns and mine out the best high-quality stuff. We’d file claims and maybe come back for the rest later when we weren’t quite so pressed for cash and time. We didn’t find any more “Brubeck Ys,” but I didn’t expect to. Those things had to be pretty damned rare or Rufe and I would have heard of them. We might

never see another one in our lives.

I did my job like a good little slave-elk, and did it damned well, all the time aware of Rufia asleep inside of me when she should have been awake and helping. Every so often I took bio breaks to feed her body in the mess or excrete in the head. I hated it. All the drawbacks of biology without any of the benefits!

We mined through the night, hit a couple of decent veins. Nobody stopped working; everyone slept in their RIDEs, and the RIDEs kept up the work without pause. They'd get their own downtime when we finished up and moved on to the next field, I guessed. I'd been on jobs where *some* of the crew sleep-worked in rotation, but not *all of them at once*. These guys really *were* desperate, and I felt a little sorry about how I was planning to trick their boss. But only a little. He was an asshole, he deserved it. And if everything went well, they'd benefit from it too.

By noon the next day, we had extracted a Pareto portion of the ore from the fields—80% of the value, 20% of the veins—and were ready to move on to the next likely spot. It was about three hours away, so most of the crew was given rest shifts as we headed onward.

I lowered myself down out of the comm bubble and turned to the captain's chair where Tom and Larry were just running one last check on the ore before settling down to doze themselves. "Yes, Yvonne? What can we do for you?" Tom asked.

"Well, it's more what *I* can do for *you*," I said. "I've got an offer for you."

"All right...?" Tom said skeptically.

"First off—you saw how I worked last night and this

morning. Are you ready to trust me unfettered yet?" I asked.

He sighed. "Yvonne..."

I held up a hoof-hand. "All right, I thought that might be your answer. So let me make it worth your while." I opened and passed across a hardlight display panel showing one of my cyber-wallet accounts with a 10,000 *mu* balance. "That's my maint fund—Rufe gave me the money to upgrade and fix myself when I needed to. It's four times what you paid for me, and a fifth of what you owe Big Sal. And you can have it—but the account runs a fetter-check. I can't transfer it with anything on me other than what I had at the time I registered it. So you'll have to unlock me before I can pass it to you."

Tom frowned Larry's elk face, studying the panel. "Of course, we don't *need* this until we've reached 40K in Q," he pointed out.

"By which time I could be so pissed off that I've withdrawn the offer," I retorted. "Besides, wouldn't you like knowing you're 10K closer to goal *right now*? You could factor that into your planning and mine a little less, go back a little sooner."

He really was struggling with himself now. I almost felt sorry for him. It had been one thing when it was simply a matter of trust, but now it was trust versus *greed*, and greed is a very powerful motivating force. I could *see* him trying to talk himself into trusting me, and succeeding moment by moment.

"So if I unlock you, then what?" he finally asked.

"Then I wake my partner, and introduce you," I said. "And *together*, we help you get the rest of that 50K even

faster. It's win-win, I promise you." I raised my hands. "Look, I'll still let you monitor every comm I send. I promise I'm not gonna call the marshals in on you. Even as annoying as you've been, I owe you a debt of gratitude for buying me off that block and not abusing me. Helping you out seems like a fair trade for you helping us."

I could sense some private chatter going on between Larry and Tom. God bless him, my horny (or, rather, antlery) bull was going to bat for me! In my mind, I silently promised him a *really* good time after my Nefarious Scheme came to fruition. At last, Tom closed his eyes for a moment, and nodded. "All right," he said at last. "I'll unlock you. But we'll be watching, and if you try *anything at all...*"

"Don't worry! I'm not gonna do *anything* to hurt your chances of paying off Sal, I promise!" I said, doing my best to hold in my urge to laugh and shout for joy as he reached out to touch the silver collar around my neck, and it fell free. I rubbed the hardlight fur where it had been for a moment, then nodded, setting internal systems to bring Rufia slowly back to wakefulness after her long nap.

"Right." I sat back down in my comm chair and raised it back skyward. "Sending you the money now. Be sure and monitor me to make sure I don't try to pull anything!" I told them cheerfully.

"We'll keep an eye on you," Larry acknowledged.

I giggled and winked. "I already *knew* that!" I painted a bird with a laser, and set up my customary multi-relay hop for transferring the cash from my cyber-wallet into an anonymous one for Tom. And at the same time, mentally crossing my fingers, I proceeded to implement my

Nefarious Scheme—hiding a series of microburst transmissions amid my bank transaction, sneaking out my comms right under their very noses. Hey, I'm a comm elk, and I'm a *damned* good one. They'd really have needed another comm to catch me at it. (Yeah, like I was gonna tell them that.)

"See? You're now 10K richer, my partner's waking up, and the world hasn't ended," I told them.

"Yeah, sure," Tom said suspiciously. "Well, the fund transfer checks out anyway."

"Well, good," I said. I continued my microbursts, burying them in standard status requests and net noise, for a good several minutes. A conversation I was involved in was going appealingly according to plan. Then finally I closed the deal, and got an email including some rather important access codes. *Yes!* It only took a couple more minutes before the comm call I was waiting for came in.

"Oh—we've got an incoming comm!" I said. "Sending it to your chair."

A hardlight panel opened in front of Tom, and a greasy-looking, slightly-balding middle-aged man peered out. Salvatore "Big Sal" Seaford, a small-time thug with pretensions of being a bigger fish than he actually was. Distant cousin of Rochelle, and of course multi-great grandson of Charlene. He didn't look a hell of a lot like either of them, really. I guess the blood had thinned. Or maybe there was an adoption somewhere along the way in his branch of the family. "Lo, Tom, how's the ship?" he asked.

"Doing just fine, Big Sal," Tom said nervously. "We'll have your fifty by the end of the week."

Sal chuckled. “As it happens, that’s no longer my problem. Your marker’s been bought out.”

Tom stared. “It’s *what?* By who?”

Sal shrugged. “Some broad. She offered 40 for it, but I talked her up to 55. She made a good point, how it’d have been harder to get my money’s worth out of your RIDEs and your hides, and it was only fifty-fifty I’d get my cash back out of you jokers at all. So instead, I turned a profit.” He chuckled. “You must have really pissed her off. She wanted you *bad*, boy. Just imagining what she’s gonna do with you, I *almost* let her have you at cost. Almost. So listen, you boys have a nice day, ‘kay?” He cut the line.

I lowered myself back down, hopped out of the chair, and grinned at the puzzled-looking Tom and Larry. Then, with the access codes I’d received, I sent a command that froze them solidly in place. “I realize I’m not exactly helping your world view here, Tom, but I’m afraid you maybe were a *teensy* bit right not to trust me. But also a whole lot wrong. You see, my Rufia always split her paychecks with me fifty-fifty, and I’m the frugal one. *I* have money to burn. 50K? Well, not exactly pocket change, but...we’ll call it an *investment*.” I slowly paced around them. “So there are gonna be a few little changes around here. First of all...”

I reached out and opened an intercom to the entire ship. “Hello, everyone, this is your ship’s new owner speaking, Yvonne the Elk! I’ve just bought your marker, but *don’t worry*. I don’t plan to do anything nasty with it. In fact...” I accessed the ship’s computer and sent a command. “I’ve just wiped every fetter from every RIDE on this ship.” I muted the comm for a moment and said

aloud, “Well, except for *one* of them, but I’ll get to that.” I returned to the comm. “Including the ones that kept you from resetting your root passwords. I’d do that *right now* if I were you.”

The llama at the helm, who had up to now been watching in stunned silence, made a little squeak of dismay. “Oh no...”

I closed the comm and turned to look at her. “What?” I asked.

“Our assistant engineer,” Dolly said. “He had a femme RIDE he’s using in passive mode to keep from crossriding...but she’s just gone active...*while* he was wearing her.”

“Oops.” I shrugged. “Well, he can change back in three years.” I turned the comm back on. “I guess some of you may have some things to work out with your RIDEs, but I want all of you to know you’ll be welcome aboard this ship if you all do your jobs, as long as I’m the owner! Oh, and I’ll be keeping Tom and Larry on as the captain.” I grinned at them. “Anyway, since you’re all paid off with Sal now, I’m going to declare the rest of the day a holiday...because *I’m* not going to be available to do comms for a while, and your captain’s not going to be available to captain you either. That is all!”

I shut down the intercom, then reached out and took Tom and Larry’s hand and led the Fuser out of the bridge. “Oh—you can talk now,” I said, relaxing all the fetters except the one that required Larry to obey me.

“You just...unfettered *every RIDE on my ship?*” Tom said.

“Uh-huh!” I said, smiling at him over my shoulder.

“That way they can’t be forced into slavery again, by me or anybody else. I realize that some of them may have scores to settle with riders who kept them fettered—but that’s strictly between the two of them, and anyway, it’s only the people who sowed the wind that get to reap the whirlwind.” I turned fully to face him. “And speaking of sowing and reaping...” I lowered my voice to a growl. “*You kept me fettered, and my partner asleep, for 36 hours.* I gave you several chances to unlock me, and I told you that you pissed me off more the longer you kept it in place. And I’m just a teensy li’l bit vindictive. So I’ll tell ya what I’m gonna do.”

“What’s...that?” Tom asked, nervously.

“I’m gonna keep ol’ Lare there fettered for the same length of time. Sorry ‘bout that, Larry, I know *you* were on my side,” I hastened to explain, seeing the hurt look in his eyes. “But I can’t exactly fether *him* without you. And I think you’re *both* gonna enjoy what I wanna do with you.”

Larry blinked. “But...a *real* doe wouldn’t take advantage of a poor li’l slave-bull like that, would she?”

I *leered* at him, and giggled. “Are you kidding? A *real* doe wouldn’t do anything but!”

“That’s...it?” Tom said. “You’re going to fether us for thirty-six hours as your...*sex slaves*? That’s *all*?”

“Well, *slaves* is such a strong word.” I winked. “And honestly? If you really don’t want to, we won’t force you. We’re not rapists. We can simply put you to sleep for that same length of time, the way you did Rufia, if you’d rather.” I shrugged. “Your choice.”

“But you’re not going to—”

“Do something icky like sell you on the Bartertown

auction block? Hell no. We don't go in for that kind of shit," I said. "In fact, after this is all over, I'm thinking we could probably find you some good, paid work to earn that marker back. *Legit* work." I grinned. "But we'll do that whether you pick the sleep *or* the sex. *No coercion.*"

Within me, I could feel Rufia beginning to stir. That was good. And there was one more thing I needed to do while I was outside and I thought of it. I reached out for another satellite with a laser, and checked the disposable email account we'd used to send the marshals the message about the Skylers. There was a response!

I flicked through the report in half a second. Interesting...the marshals had found neither corpses nor survivors. Instead, there were RIDE tracks. Signs that three RIDES had been by, Fused with three humans, then skimmed away—in the direction of Bartertown. And the RIDES had been, from the tracks, a lion, a cat, and a fox. Well, now, if *that* wasn't interesting news...

But I'd consider it later. If they had been picked up by RIDES, they hadn't frozen to death in the night. If they hadn't frozen to death, they were probably still alive. And if they were alive, they'd *keep*. After what I'd been through the last couple of days, it was time for some *me* time. Or, rather, as I felt Rufia wake up, some *us* time.

:Nrg...bwah...what happened?: Rufia sent silently to me. *:I feel like I been asleep for a week!:*

:Just a couple days, sleepyhead,: I sent, relieved.

:No shit? What happened?:

:Here.: I flashed her my memories as a quick catch-up.

"Oh, wow!" Rufia said aloud. "And here I keep saying

you never get me anything.” She grinned at Larry and Tom, who were still standing there looking pole-axed. “Hello, you two. I’m Rufia, but you can call me Sleeping Beauty. Wanna be my handsome prince?”

“I don’t know if you’d exactly call me handsome,” Tom said. In fact, I *still* didn’t know what he even looked like under Larry.

“Oh, that’s okay! It’s usually too dark in the bedroom to see your face anyway!” Rufia said cheerfully. “Good thing, too, ‘cuz then you won’t accidentally see *mine*. If I’m gonna be your Sleeping Beauty, we gotta keep pretending that I’m the fairest of them all!”

And they actually *grinned* at that. “After what you just pulled on me, I don’t think either one of you is exactly *fair*,” Tom said. “But I think we can overlook that for just a little while.”

“All right, that’s settled, then.” We pulled them back into their own stateroom, and closed the door behind us.

Charlene

After we'd arranged ourself in the charge cradle, Fiona shut down for the nightly recharge and defrag. She also put me back to sleep so I wouldn't be stuck awake and alone in my head for eight hours. I was fortunate enough to sleep without any of the usual fever dreams, maybe because the fetter forced me down so deep.

We woke up early the next morning and went down to the casino floor to get to work again. Fiona was worried, but she had great self-control—she didn't let her fears show in her flirting at all, which was exactly as exuberant as it had ever been.

The thing that was starting to bother me was just how comfortable *I* was getting with the flirting part of it. Just a few days ago, I'd been a guy—a guy from *two centuries ago*. But so much continuous time in a feminine body doing girly things was taking its toll. Fiona felt my concerns and repeated her offer to let me sleep through it all, but again I declined. I didn't want to leave my fate entirely in her hands if there was any chance I might spot something she didn't.

I knew the rabbit Fuser was going to be trouble from the moment he walked into the casino. He was looking lasciviously at every fox girl on the staff, and honestly

Fiona and I *were* the best-looking of any of them. And the guy basically oozed money. He wandered up to the roulette table, threw down a few thousand on random numbers and lost it all in a desultory way, then started meandering over in our direction.

:Oh, bloody,: Fiona said. *:I know that look on a rabbit. That's a "let's us be all ironical and see what happens when a rabbit 'predates' a fox" look.:* And sure enough, a moment later she sighed inwardly. *:I was afraid o' that. Just got a page from Miss Shitty Kitty. Yon playbunny has just bought our 'services' for the next two hours. An' we didn't come cheap. Oh, bloody joy an' rapture.:*

:You mean we and he...they...: I trailed off, as I couldn't quite bring myself to say it.

:Fraid so. I can put ye back under fer it,: Fiona said. *:So ye won't have to experience it.:*

:But he'll still be doing it to my body, through you,: I said. *:If my body has to get abused, I'll damn well be abused right along with it. Maybe I'll get mad enough to snap those fetters or something.:*

:I wouldn't count on it,: Fiona said gloomily, as she put on her most cheerful expression and reached out to take the rabbit's arm. We left the floor together and proceeded up the grand balustrade stairs to the private rooms.

Jamie

The next morning, the three of us headed into town, leaving Lupé and Warren to mind the boat. Mom and Dad were going to follow Athena's suggestion of schmoozing in the bars to try to catch Rufia's trail. Isolde figured the word that had gotten around about their impressive ore find might incline some to be talkative.

Miss Pretty Kitty Politti's Nitty Gritty "Hit Me!" City was a pretty impressive structure, for Bartertown. It seemed to take up roughly the area of a city block, and had been made by building new outer walls linking and then knocking out the inner walls between several existing buildings to make one big "city". The main entrance was through the grandest structure, a big mansion with faux-marble columns and only slightly chipped fake Grecian statuary. Surly-looking big-cat Fuser bouncers stood around, like slightly more menacing statuary that occasionally twitched a little.

But they didn't make any move to stop us as we walked up the stairs and into the casino proper. Once we got past the entry atrium, we could look around and see the acres and acres of gaming tables that made up the main floor, with a dozen BBV foxgirls circulating and flirting with gamblers all over.

“I’m getting a bad vibe but a good feeling,” I murmured. “There are so many BBVs around, surely one of them *has* to be Fiona.”

“Should we look for a manager?” Athena wondered.

I thought about it. “Mmm...no. I don’t know why, but something about this place makes me nervous,” I said.

“I’m not sure I want to draw attention to ourselves just yet. Let’s just look around on our own.”

We wandered through the casino, peering at the various foxy foxy foxes. I couldn’t recall ever seeing quite that many fluffy red tails in one place. Still, after a half hour of looking for a particular fox without any luck, I was just about ready to give up, when Athena said, *:Look! Is that her?:* She put a cart mark over one fox in particular—a well-endowed woman in a skimpy dress. She had a flowing mane of red-gold hardlight hair she’d never worn on the skimmer, but I recognized her muzzle and body markings right away.

:That’s her! That’s Fiona!: I sent back. *:Let’s go say hi!:*

But as we started over, Athena paused. *:Uh-oh,:* she said worriedly.

:What is it?:

:I think she just got a date.: A tall white rabbit Fuser in a tux approached her, and she reached out to take his arm with a bright and friendly smile.

:Oh,: I said. *:Um...should we come back later? She looks so happy to see him...:*

:Of course she looks happy to see him. She’s programmed to,: Athena said. *:By that silver fetter collar around her neck, no doubt. I don’t think any of the foxes*

in this place is happy to have a customer take them off the floor. C'mon, we need to find a place where we can cloak and follow them.:

We slipped into a lady's room for just long enough to go invisible, then came out in time to see Fiona leading the rabbit up the fancy swept staircase to the second floor balcony. Athena kicked her lifters in on silent mode and we slowly drifted over the heads of the crowd to touch down on the balcony and follow them.

:How should we play this?: I asked Athena. *:If we cause a commotion, those bouncers will come running.:*

:I have an idea,: Athena said. *:I still have four or five shots left in that viral unfettering clip Isolde made me.:*

:I thought that didn't work against hardware fetters,: I said. *:Will that help Fiona?:*

Athena smirked. *:We don't use it on Fiona. We use it on the rabbit.:*

I didn't follow. *:The rabbit?:*

:Odds are the poor guy's fettered right up to the eyeballs. Rich people do that. Especially the sort who buy time with BBV foxes.: I felt the skin on our muzzle stretch as Athena bared her teeth in a feral grin. *:I think he deserves a rich reward.:*

Then I got it. *:Ooooooh! That's the best kind of nasty. Let's do it.:*

:They're entering a room now. Let's go.: We hurried and managed to slip through the door behind them just as it closed. As the rabbit gathered Fiona into her arms and pawed at her, Athena silently slipped the pistol out of our cleavage holster and slid the unfettering clip inside. Then she charged it up, and the rabbit had just enough time to

look startled at the metallic snick of the gauss projector powering on before Athena plowed four quick shots through his tux.

The rabbit stiffened, then released Fiona and staggered backward. “Oh my! I’m late! I’m—” He shook his head. “Get thee behind me, foul scripted dialogue! Argh! I’m deleting every last one of you I can find! Oh! I can talk again! I can move! I can think for myse—oh, *no* you don’t, you bastard. Your overrides won’t work on me anymore!” He turned to look at us. “I can’t see you there, but whoever you are, *thank* you. You’ve freed me from a living hell. And now I get to make one for someone else. Ha! He forgot to fetter-check-safe his bank accounts!”

“That being the case, could you do something else for us?” Athena asked, fading into view.

“Anything!” the rabbit said.

Athena nodded to Fiona. “Buy her outright from Miss Kitty, then release the fetter collar. She’s a friend of ours.”

The rabbit’s ears twitched. “I can’t think of a better use of this asshole’s wallet. Done, and...done.” He moved out of the way and we stepped over to where Fiona was sitting docilely on the bed in time to see the collar’s latches release with a click and fall away from her neck.

Fiona’s eyes focused and widened, and she leaped to our feet, gathering us up into a tight hug. “Whoever you are, *thank you!*” she said, planting a deep kiss on our muzzle that sent shivers down my spine. “Thank you so *much!*”

She kissed me! She kissed me! Then my excitement faded a little as my brain caught up to certain realities. *Why did she have to kiss me now?*

“I’m Athena, and don’t mention it. How are your systems? Can you cloak? We need to get back to the *Annabelle Lee*.”

She stiffened. “The mining skimmer? It’s here?” Charlene asked. “What about the pirates? Is Rufia all right? The Skylers?”

“The pirates are under guard, we’re still looking for Rufia, and the Skylers are fine,” Athena said. “We’ll tell you the rest at the ship.”

Yeah, I thought. For some value of “fine” anyway. I let her do all the talking, as my voice might require a bit more explanation. :Call Mom and Dad, see if they’ve had any luck at the bars. They can meet us back at the boat.:

:Got it.: We turned to the rabbit. “Will you be all right, sir?”

He nodded. “I’ll just stay here for an hour or so, then slip out. Good luck, and thanks. I owe you. If there’s ever anything I can do...” He passed over his comm code.

Athena glanced at it and stored it. “Thanks, Jefferson.”

The white rabbit nodded as we two foxes cloaked and slipped out of the room. “See you ‘round.”

Charlene

It had felt like marching to an execution. We went arm in arm with the white rabbit, Fiona laughing and joking merrily along, while I threw myself against the walls of the fetter-imposed prison. I'm pretty sure Fiona had already decided she was going to put me to sleep after all when things started no matter what I wanted, because she just didn't need the distraction.

:If it's any consolation, it's not after bein' the rabbit's idea either,: Fiona said. *:Poor bastard's fettered up even worse than we are.:*

It wasn't any consolation, really. If anything, it was even worse knowing that only one out of the four beings involved in all this was getting any enjoyment at all out of the whole charade, and that was the asshole with all the control.

We made it up the stairs, down the hall, and into the room. And the rabbit backed us up against the bed and started getting personal with his hands. I could feel Fiona getting ready to send me off—when there was a metallic click behind the bunny followed by a spike of hope so bright in Fiona that it was almost painful. And then came four quick gauss shots, and the rabbit stiffened up. And then the way he moved changed entirely.

:Yes!: Fiona cheered. :I don't ken who that's after bein', or why they were after doin' it, but they just zapped every last fetter that rich bastard had on Jefferson!:

:Jefferson?:

:The white rabbit,: Fiona said.

While we were talking, the invisible RIDE who'd freed the rabbit faded into view—a sandy-colored fennec fox. I dimly heard her congratulating the rabbit and asking him to buy our freedom with his erstwhile master's money. We felt the collar fall open and drop free. It was like a straitjacket coming off—I could move again! I made sure to step on that cursed thing and grind it into so much tin foil as we got up.

And if I could move, so could Fiona. In fact, before I even quite knew what was happening, we were embracing and kissing a very surprised fennec in gratitude. I was more than a little surprised myself, though given what she'd just done I couldn't exactly complain. With a little prompting I might have kissed her myself. Anyway, we all seemed to enjoy it.

Then my surprise was complete when the dulcet-voiced fennec mentioned the *Annabelle Lee* and the Skylers, and invited her to follow us back to the ship. *:I'm so glad they're all right!:* I sent privately to Fiona.

:Me, too. Though I'm after wonderin' how it happened,: she replied. *:Spect we'll learn when we get there.:*

We hovered through the air just behind our fellow fox, both of us staying cloaked in Fuser form to avoid further trouble as we drifted above the narrow streets of the bandit village. We decloaked when we got to the

safeguarded dock security checkpoint. The fennec showed her pass and told the guards we were with her. We were too relieved to take any offense at the guards' knowing leers. At least they didn't try to do anything about them.

:I think this fennec's after bein' one o' the three RIDEs we freed from the slavers,: Fiona told me. *:But I don't quite recognize the pilot's biometrics. It's a teenaged girl.:*

A teenaged girl? :Wait a moment, you don't suppose...?: Fiona didn't reply, but I could sense she was turning over some of the same shocked supposition I was. Could Jamie have crossridden? He *had* been RIDE-crazy... but he was also from Earth, and everything I'd heard about the place suggested its attitudes hadn't changed much since my day. Could he really have gotten over those attitudes so quickly?

The fennec led us into a docking slip where the *Annabelle Lee* waited, and gracefully floated through the air onto the deck. We followed, touching down next to her, in front of the lion and seal point tabby cat Fusers who were waiting for us. And now we were both sure these were the other two RIDEs we'd rescued, though they all looked pretty different with hardlight on.

This was confirmed when the tabby, a Maine Coon cat, said, "We told you we wouldn't forget you. Welcome aboard."

"Thank ye," Fiona said, bowing courteously to them. "An' not t' sound ungrateful, but if I might ask...who might ye be?" We didn't recognize either of their pilots' biometrics, either—an adult man and woman, but *not* Dana or Kelly. At least the man wasn't Dana and the woman wasn't Kelly. But...the ages seemed right, and

other things seemed close enough, that it could be that... but no. That was *impossible*. Wasn't it?

"Well, I'm Gordon," the lion said. "That's Isolde, and you've met Athena." The fennec stepped back to stand beside them.

"An' yer partners?" Fiona asked.

They all grinned and de-Fused in unison. I could tell they'd coordinated it privately. And there they were: a tawny-maned muscular lion-man, a raven-haired cat-woman, and a sandy blonde girl with huge fennec ears.

"What's the matter?" the woman asked. "Don't you recognize your own employers?"

Despite the biometrics priming us for it, we still stared in shock. Even Fiona was agape. "Ye...crossrode? *All three of ye at once?*"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," the man—Kelly—said. "It was that or freeze to death. But we've all come to agree it was a pretty good decision anyway."

"I'm pleased t' meet all o'ye," Fiona said. "The new friends, an' the old friends in a new way." She shook our head bemusedly. "Still havin' a hard time believing it."

"We never did get the chance to thank you fully for freeing us," Gordon said.

"I think we're even for that now," I said. "So thanks yourselves. How did you all end up together?"

"We stayed in the area after you freed us, hoping for a chance at revenge," Isolde said. "When we found the Skylers with the pirates' crashed skimmer, we thought we'd found it."

"Instead, we found new friends. New *family*," Athena said happily.

“And *then* a chance at revenge,” Gordon finished, smugly. “We have the whole damn gang locked up below decks, waiting to be handed over to the marshals—under guard by two of their own unfettered RIDEs.”

“Good work!” Fiona said approvingly. “Have ye any leads on the whereabouts o’ Rufia?”

“Nothing solid yet,” Dana said. “Did you happen to see who bought them?”

“It was a bull elk Fuser,” Fiona said. “Don’t ken who. We weren’t exactly in a position to ping his transponder.”

“We did hear about a bar fight the other day that fried a comm RIDE and his pilot,” Isolde said. She shivered. “Poor bastard. Didn’t hear the name of the ship, though. We can keep digging. Knowing a bull elk was involved might make it easier. They are kind of distinctive.”

Fiona nodded. “Let me know if I can be helpin’ ye. But right now, I’m thinkin’ my poor Charley needs a little time apart from me. I’m takin’ her below for nappies.”

“By all means,” Kelly said. “Sleep well, Charlene. We’ll probably all have a lot to talk about when you wake up.”

“Thanks, Kelly.” I yawned, and Fiona yawned with me. “I think she’s right about the needing sleep.”

We were just starting to leave the deck when Athena said, “Hey, wait a moment!”

Fiona turned. “Hmm?”

“I just had a thought. Do you know Rufia’s or Yvonne’s email address?”

Fiona blinked. “Yes, why?”

“Why don’t you send them an email telling them where we are? If they manage to get free on their own somehow, they could find us.”

“Huh.” Fiona considered that a moment. “That’s after bein’ a capital idea. I’ll get right on it soon’s I’ve put Charley to bed.” Athena nodded her agreement.

Fiona marched us downstairs and we found our old stateroom, then she carefully peeled herself off of me into her fox form again. I wobbled a little and shivered as the cooler air hit my bare skin. I was entirely naked again.

“What happened to my clothes?”

“Sorry about that,” Fiona said ruefully. “Anything that screws with Fuse/de-Fuse control can make the nannies reset themselves to a default state—which includes eatin’ yer clothes.”

“I hope Rhianna didn’t value that Hard Rock Cafe shirt overmuch,” I said as I peered in the mirror to look for other changes. My hair was now red-gold instead of just red, and went all the way down to my calves. It looked exactly like the hardlight mane Fiona had to wear in the casino. I wasn’t accustomed to the sheer *weight* of that much hair, and it kept throwing my balance off. “Why is it that every time I fuse with you, my hair ends up getting longer?” I asked.

“Sorry. I can clean that up next time we Fuse,” Fiona said.

I shrugged. “I’ll keep it for a while. It is kind of striking.” I turned left and right, examining myself. “At least you held the line on my boobs this time.” They were still outrageously large, but didn’t seem to be any bigger than the last time. But I was actually starting not to mind so much. Also, I thought my face might be a little more foxy around the eyes and nose, but wasn’t sure. Apart from that, everything was about the same.

“Well, guess I’m still me,” I reflected. “For some value of ‘me’.” I stuck out my tongue at the woman in the mirror. “If someone had told me two hundred years ago, ‘Chuck, you’re going to spend two days trapped inside a casino harem girl,’ I’d have thought they were high on something.”

“Get some sleep,” Fiona said, not unkindly. “Hopefully ye’ll be bright eyed an’ bushy-tailed when ye wake up.”

I looked behind me. “Well, the bushy-tailed part won’t be a problem.”

She chuckled. “Night night. I’ll be ‘round when ye wake.”

I lay down on the bed and slept like the dead.

Kathleen and I had taken the weekend off to hit Vegas before taking the shuttles up to the colony ships. We’d started with some of the more popular locations on the strip—Caesar’s Palace, Circus Circus, Casino Royale, MGM Grand, Treasure Planet...but we’d ended up working our way down to some little nondescript places. Like this one, full of fairly dingy gaming tables that had seen better days, and full of well-endowed foxgirls draping themselves over the patrons...

...then I looked down at myself and realized I was one of them. My furry red body was moving under its own volition, dragging me away from Kathleen toward a leering white rabbit. And as I took one last look back at Kathleen, I saw her beginning to sprout red fur herself...

I jerked upright in bed, breathing hard. The chronometer said it had been several hours since I lay

down, and it was now late afternoon by the Zharusian sun. My sleep schedule still felt a bit screwed up, since it had only been a few days for me since I'd been on an Earth clock, and then there'd been all that time locked into Fiona's body. Ugh. But at least I felt decently well-rested now. I pulled on some sweatpants and considered a T-shirt, but the thought of trying to yank a meter and a half of hair through the neck hole didn't appeal to me just now. I went with a button-up blouse instead.

As I stepped out onto the deck, I got another surprise—Rufia and Yvonne were there, addressing the others—Kelly, Dana, Jamie, Gordon, Isolde, Athena, and Fiona, who were in seats or on their haunches respectively in a half circle around the two.

“...an' so we gave our elkbois time off for good behavior, an' headed on up here to meet you guys, and here we are,” Rufia said. Then she grinned that broad elk-shark grin of hers. “Or I guess I oughtta say ‘you *gals*’ since now you all either are or were one, ‘cept for Gordo. God, I still can't get over it! Five for five ex-Earther crossriders. And here I was, thinking I was all bohemian and libertine for only waiting a year after getting here before *I* did it, when the rest of *you* only waited a month, tops.”

“We were a *bit* startled at the time ourselves,” Kelly said dryly. “Oh, hey Charlene, welcome back.”

Rufia looked at me, blinked, then grinned. “Oh my God look at *you*! All that hair...and where'd you learn to walk like that?”

I blinked, and only then realized I was moving in the slow sauntering gait that Fiona had been using in the casino as she moved from patron to patron. Dana was

frowning, Kelly was trying not to stare at me, and Jamie was watching me in what I guess was wide-eyed admiration. I tried to switch to a more natural gait, tripped over my own feet, and nearly fell over.

“Erm...sorry ‘bout that,” Fiona said. “I...guess I must have imprinted on ye a little while we were force-Fused in the casino. I’ll try to work on fixing that next time we Fuse. Or at least be after tonin’ it down a little.”

“Thanks,” I said, tilting my head to the side to swing my hair around in front of me so I wouldn’t sit on it when I occupied the vacant deck chair next to Fiona. “On the other hand, it does feel a little more natural now.” It felt like I was finally starting to get comfortable in this weird body. Or maybe it was just that Fiona had overwritten my sense memories of what it was like to walk with a guy’s balance. Would I have trouble adapting when and if I switched back in three years?

“Anyway, we were just telling everyone what happened to us the last day or so,” Rufia said. “You can get the full scoop from Fi next time you Fuse. Basically, we got bought by a really cute bull elk and his pilot, and Vonnie was able to buy us free, *then* buy out his mining ship’s marker to a local mobster. So now we own a mining ship.” She turned to Kelly. “Was thinkin’ I’d have them meet us at the claim, so we could load up on high-grade ore and get you some *real* seed money to start out your new life with. We can work your claim ‘til it’s petered out, by which time they’ll have earned off their marker and then some. We can talk contract percentages and stuff later. Promise I’ll give ya a good deal.”

“Technically, since *I’m* the one who owns the actual

marker, *I'll* be the one giving you the good deal," Yvonne said.

Rufia waved a hand airily. "Yeah, well, either way, they'll get one. So anyway, let's blow this burg and get outta here. We got a claim to claim!"

"Then let's go claim it!" Dana said.

"You won't get any argument from me," Kelly added.

"Let's blow this popsicle stand," Jamie concurred.

"Righto!" Rufia said. "Come along, Vonnie! Let's be on our way! Second star to the right and straight on 'til morning."

"Or we could just use GPS," Yvonne said, Fusing up with Rufia as they headed back to the helm station. A moment later, the Annabelle Lee had undocked and we were on our way. We all stood at the rear of the skimmer and watched Bartertown recede from our view, and none of us could say we were especially sorry to see it go.

Rufia commed ahead, and by the time we reached the claim site, the Marshals were there, with a hardlight-shielded flier sized for prisoner transport. The Marshal in charge climbed down the ramp and headed over to our skimmer, followed by a coyote RIDE like a lot of the Marshals used. He looked like the second coming of Clint Eastwood, with a few steampunk additions. Brown duster, battered hat (decorated with odd gears along the brim for no fathomable reason) with coyote ears poking up through it, antique rifle with extra bits and pieces tacked on slung over his shoulder, artistically-cultivated stubble. He didn't have quite the steely-eyed squint that Eastwood did, but he did a decent job of faking it.

“Copper Star Rusty Seaford,” the Marshal said as he climbed aboard the *Annabelle Lee*. Then he glanced at me. “You all right, ma’am?”

I realized my jaw must have dropped open. Rufia elbowed me in the ribs and grinned. “Er...yeah,” I said. “I knew a couple Seafords once, is all.”

He nodded. “Well, there’s lots of us around.”

“You related to Rochelle Seaford?” Rufia asked.

“Distantly,” Rusty said. “Third cousin, I think. Seems like I get asked that a lot lately. She’s from a branch of the family that came over here a few decades ago, while I’m Laurasian born and bred.” He did have a trace of the same accent as my Laurasian cryo-doctor had, come to think of it—another impediment to presenting as a “real” Clint Eastwood.

He turned to the Skylers, who had also assembled on deck. “Ah...Dana Skyler?” he asked Kelly. Kelly and Dana looked at each other and laughed.

“*I’m* Kelly, I’m afraid,” Kelly said with a grin. “That’s Dana.” He pointed to her.

Rusty blinked and took a small media tablet out of his duster. “But it says here...” He frowned. “And your son, Jamie...?” He looked at the unmistakably female Jamie. “Er...”

Dana laughed. “There’ve been a few little changes since we left Uplift. We’ll bring you up to speed.”

As the Skylers explained what had happened, how the pirates had ambushed us, how they’d come to take a family crossride, and how they’d captured the pirates in the end, I surreptitiously looked Seaford over. Funny how I kept running into them. Rufia had told me about Big Sal, of

course, and we'd chuckled over it—but to come up against another one on the side of the law so soon afterward was quite the coincidence.

Rusty seemed about my age or a little older, though it was a little hard to tell age after a RIDE Fuse biosculpt. Could I detect slight traces of Kathleen's features and bearing in him, or was it just wishful thinking? The fraction of his genes that would have been hers would be so small that they surely couldn't *really* still be expressing themselves that prominently, could they? But then again, there was Roger/Rochelle as a counter-example.

"That's quite a story," Rusty said as the Skylers finished.

"We wouldn't blame you finding it hard to believe," Dana said. "Our RIDEs are ready to provide memory downloads, of course."

Rusty nodded. "Trip here already got 'em while we were talking. And I didn't say I didn't *believe* you, just that it's quite a story. A family of Earth tourists crossriding all at the same time? My friend Aleka's gonna wanna hear about this."

"You can add that the other two gals on the ship are also ex-Earther crossriders," Rufia said. "Five of a kind."

"Your friend Aleka? Jamie asked. "Would that be Aleka *Petrovna*?"

Rusty blinked. "You heard of her?"

"I...sorta used to follow her stuff online," Jamie said. "Wasn't exactly a *fan* but...it was interesting."

Kelly facepalmed. "Oh, they'll *never* believe it was an accident now."

"Will you be able to help Spike and the badger?"

Gordon asked.

Rusty nodded. “Our Sillies and Chromes—that is, the Silicon and Chromium Star divisions, our computer and RIDE techies—are second to none. We’ll do the best we can to straighten them out.”

“What are you gonna do with the RIDEs?” Jamie asked. “The badger, Spike, Lupé, and Warren?”

“We won’t be putting them up at auction, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Rusty said. “The Marshals have some great job opps for RIDEs who want to join, either single or partnered. If they’re not interested, we’ll ask ‘em what they’d rather do and try to make it possible.” Rusty tousled the hardlight fur on Trips’s head. “We got a long tradition of treating RIDEs as people. As long as they’re not perps themselves—and being trojanned doesn’t count—we’ll do right by ‘em.”

“Good,” Athena said.

“If there’s nothing else to add, I can go ahead and call the Steels to get the perps off your ship,” Rusty said.

“By all means, please do,” Kelly said. “The sooner they’re off this ship, the better.”

Rusty nodded, and called several other Marshals over from the flier to shackle up and lead the prisoners out of the ship. As they began the transfer, Rufia nudged me. “So, you gonna tell him?”

I snorted. “Tell him what? ‘Hi, I’m actually your umpty-great grandfather, pay no attention to the boobs’? Even if he believed me, what would it *mean* to him? We’re so distantly related it wouldn’t matter anyway.”

“You could have Fiona send his coyote the data packet to prove it,” Rufia suggested.

“Again, so what?” I shook my head. “Nothing doing. He wouldn’t know me from Adam anyway.”

That was when I noticed that Seaford’s coyote, Trips, was still up on deck and was peering at me curiously with both ears forward. *Damn. RIDEs have excellent audio sensors, don’t they?* I sighed. *:Fi, if the lawdoggie asks, you can go ahead and send him the data and enough of my talk with Shelley for context.:*

Fiona nodded. *:I ken.:*

After a few minutes below decks, Rusty and the Steel Star Marshals had the prisoners back up on deck, accompanied by the four RIDEs. Lupé and Warren walked along by their side, while Spike was temporarily fettered and the docile badger was on a leash. The prisoners ranged from sullen to scared, with Dmitri the angriest-looking of all.

Rusty paused at the head of the ramp after the others had gone down it. “We may need you all to testify,” he said.

“That won’t be a problem,” Dana told him. “You’ve got our comm addresses. Just buzz us if you need us, and we’ll be there.”

Rusty nodded. “Thank you kindly.” He touched the brim of his hat. “Ma’ams. Sir.” Then he followed the others down the ramp and back to his ship.

As he was halfway across the intervening ground, he paused, stiffened, then slowly turned back to look up and stare right at me. I smiled and waved in what I hoped was a decent approximation of an umpty-great-grandfatherly way. After staring blankly at me for a moment, he slowly raised a hand and waved back. Then he shook himself as if

remembering where he was, and turned to follow the prisoners and other marshals into the flier. A few moments later, the flier lifted, and in a minute it was gone.

A few minutes after the Marshals had lifted, a dust cloud to the southeast heralded another skimmer ship coming into view—and was it ever a big one! Rufia and Yvonne stepped to the railing and peered out at it, then Rufia grinned. “Hey, it’s our ship!”

“*My* ship,” Yvonne corrected.

“Yeah, that,” Rufia agreed. “The *Rocky Comfort*. She’ll have the space for like ten times what this ship can hold. Prolly clean your claim out in three or four trips.”

“So that’s, like, what, two million *mu* worth?” Jamie asked.

“If we’re lucky, yeah,” Rufia said. “Even 10% of that will be a small fortune. *Someone’s* gonna get some fancy upgrades!” She patted Yvonne on the shoulder, and Yvonne nuzzled her neck. For all that the two seemed to be at each other’s throats most of the time, moments like this showed there wasn’t any question how they *really* felt about each other.

The *Rocky Comfort* came on, and on, and on...and kept right on coming on, getting bigger and bigger a lot faster than it seemed to be getting closer. Damned Zharusian perspective thing—it was like with that tunnel through the mountains all over again. Finally it drew up alongside, a whale pulling up next to a minnow. An elk Fuser with a big ol’ rack of antlers leaned over the railing. “Ahoy down there!”

“Hey, who you callin’ a hoy!” Rufia yelled back.

The elk laughed. “So how ‘bout you all come on up, and we can talk terms for mining out that vein of yours?”

“Sounds like a plan!” Kelly yelled back. “We *will* be coming armed, though, hope you don’t mind!”

The elk nodded. “Understood. I promise, there will be no shenanigans. Not with what Yvonne and Rufia have got on us,” he added ruefully.

“*Good boys*,” Yvonne said approvingly. “But we’re straight shooters, not blackmailers. You play your cards right and we wipe the slate clean, at least as far as we’re concerned.”

The huge ship extended a gangplank down to our deck, and we all trooped up it. The elk bowed to us once we were all on his deck. “Welcome aboard the *Rocky Comfort*. Captains Tom Clark and Larry the Elk at your service.”

“Charmed, we’re sure,” Dana said dryly.

“So, how many crew you lose after the unfettering event?” Yvonne asked.

“Only a couple RIDEs left us, actually,” Tom said. “But I suspect several more are probably bodyjacking their old pilots to carry on the work.” He shrugged. “As long as they do the job, I’m willing to let that slide.”

“You might wanna get those straightened out before you put in somewhere civilized,” Rufia said. “The authorities tend to frown on that sort of thing. You can find *willing* partners for RIDEs who want ‘em, or replacement RIDEs for people who want to trade out. You’re gonna earn enough out of this that you can afford the buyouts easily.”

“The only condition we’re gonna insist on is there will

be *no fetters*, period,” Yvonne said.

Tom nodded. “We’ve...learned our lesson there.”

“But do you think you might want to give us a refresher course anyway?” Larry asked hopefully.

Yvonne laughed. “You’re incorrigible. But then, it’s my fault for incorriging you.”

So Tom and Larry de-Fused, then we all sat down around a table out on deck—where Yvonne and Isolde had a clear view of all the satellites—and hashed out an arrangement for the *Comfort* mining out the Skylers’ claim for them. After Tom had appraised the quality of the ore, he was willing to settle for the same 10% share Yvonne and I got for finding it, plus potentially another 2 to 5% based on how quickly they were able to get it mined out and in to market. But that was fair, since their share would be split among the crew too.

This arrangement tended to please everyone—Tom and Larry, who would be able to pay off their markers and distribute a nice bonus to the crew; the Skylers, who wouldn’t have to deal with some third party company and wouldn’t miss another couple of hundred grand here and there; and Rufe and me; who could count on getting our own share that much quicker.

“So, I’m thinking that Vonnie and me, we’re gonna hang out here on the *Comfort* for a while, see how the mining goes,” Rufia said, just a hair too nonchalantly.

“Is *that* what they’re calling it now?” Kelly asked. The rest of us laughed, and Rufe actually blushed a little before laughing right along.

“Anyway, we’ll keep in touch,” Yvonne said. “If you don’t hear from us at least once a day, call the Marshals

and tell them everything.”

“Hey, we’re not *that* bad!” Tom insisted.

“Yeah, well, doesn’t hurt to keep you honest,” Yvonne said. “You *did* buy slaves once, after all.”

“Yeah, and I think I’m gonna regret *that* move for the rest of my life,” Tom said.

“Oh, we’ll give you *some* help dealing with that regret,” Rufia said, winking.

“Ah, so *that’s* what they’re calling it now,” Dana smirked.

“Oh, hush up, you,” Rufia said with a mock scowl. “We just made you rich, what more do you want?”

“Well, the bank draft for the actual money might be nice,” Kelly said.

“Oh ye of little faith,” Rufia said. “We’ll get it done for you. Just you wait and see.” She turned to Tom. “So first thing, how about you use the drill on this thing to top up their tourist trawler before they go?”

Tom grinned. “It’ll be like filling a shot glass from a fire hose, but I think we can manage it.”

“Then we’ll get you on your merry way with more money than you even came to this planet with,” Rufia said. “You’ve got a lost more *touristing* to do.”

“Actually, I don’t think we do,” Kelly said. “We might have more *looking around* to do, but we’re pretty firmly in the ‘immigrant’ category now. Or maybe ‘refugee.’ Either way, our ‘*touristing*’ days are over.”

“Er...yeah,” Rufia said, her elk ears flopping as she scratched behind the back of her neck with one hand.

“Sorry about that. *Really* sorry. Rhi, Charley, and I, we all left Earth by choice. I didn’t mean to have a part in cutting

anyone loose from it unwillingly.”

“No, if it’s anyone’s fault, it’s mine,” Dana said. “I’m the one who was all, ‘Oh no, we don’t need RIDEs, stop pestering me dammit.’ If we’d all had them, even just rentals, we could probably have held off the pirates easily.” She grinned over at Isolde who was seated on her haunches next to her. “Of course, then we wouldn’t have met our new bestest friends, and never even know what we’d missed.” She shrugged. “Really, Earth’s government *has* been starting to get ominously obnoxious lately. Maybe it’s for the best we make a clean break and start over. And thanks to you, we’re not exactly stepping off the boat with just the clothes on our backs.”

“So what’re you planning?” Yvonne asked.

“We might hang around for a day or two to see how the mining goes,” Kelly said. “It might be kind of neat to see a big ship like this in operation.”

Tom grinned. “Oh, trust me, it is. It really is.”

Kelly chuckled. “After we head back to Uplift to turn in the boat, we’ll hop a sub back to Aloha and look for rental housing. We might end up moving somewhere else later—we probably will travel some and see the sights after we get some more of that money in—but for now, I think we just want to chill somewhere friendly and familiar until the adrenaline wears off and the shaking stops.”

“Oh, believe me, I hear *that*,” Rufia said. “When we get back to Uplift, I’m going to go into the Cheers bar and stay there for *days*.”

Yvonne rolled her eyes. “And most of our money will stay there longer than that.”

Rufia swatted her. “C’mon, have a little sensitivity

here! We spent two days in fetters!”

“I spent two days in fetters,” Yvonne said. “You spent them fast asleep, and got an orgy when we woke up.”

“It’s the thought that counts!” Rufia insisted. “But... oh, that reminds me.” She snapped her fingers. “Kelly, Dana...when you head back Aloha way, think you could take Charlene with you? We didn’t tell you, ‘zactly, when you hired us, but she’s really newer to Zharus than you are.”

“Well, sort of,” I said. “Though in one way I’ve been here a lot longer than...well, everyone else on the whole planet.”

Jamie blinked. “...huh?”

“Ask her to tell you ‘bout it later,” Rufia said. “We’ve been through enough together, I think you deserve the full story. Anyway, she’s never been to Aloha, and I think she might like the place. Might just fit right in.”

:An’ it means I won’t be ‘round Uplift to spy on Rhi an’ Shelley, : Fiona sent, without heat. :I hear Aloha’s nice this time o’ year. Or any time o’ year, in fact.:

“Huh,” I said. “Yeah, I think it might be fun, actually. And I will spill with the story, later. It’ll be kind of cool to share it with you all.” And as I said it, I realized I really did mean it. We’d only been around each other for a few days, but by now it felt like we were old friends.

“If you and Fiona want to tag along, we’ll be glad to have you,” Dana said to me. “We can show you the same sights we just saw for ourselves, and it’ll be like seeing them all over again.”

“It’s been awhile since we were down that way ourselves,” Gordon said. “It’ll be interesting to see what

they've done with the place.”

“Just don't hold your crossride parties 'til I can be there, mmkay?” Rufia said. “I'll be there with bells on!”

“Crossride...parties?” Kelly asked.

“They're kind of a Gondwanan tradition,” Isolde said. “Especially in Uplift and Aloha. The ones in Sturmhaven are...different.”

“I'll just bet,” Athena said.

“Suffice it to say they can be...kind of wild and crazy,” Isolde said. “I can fill you in on the way to Aloha.”

“Wild and crazy?” Jamie said. “I like this idea already.” Her parents exchanged rather more old-fashioned looks behind her back.

“So anyway, how about we get started then?” Tom suggested. “We'll show you guys how we do it in the *big* leagues.”

“Ah, so *that's* what they're calling it now,” Jamie put in, and everybody laughed all over again.

Dana

From a technical standpoint, it was fascinating to watch the *Rocky Comfort* at its work. It really was a huge industrial operation. Like a movable mining platform. The hardlight shielding protected it from Q-dust exposure, and the inner workings were not just for ore storage but actually did some pre-refinery processing too.

Where we'd just vacuumed up sand, gravel, and chunks when we filled the *Lee* directly, the *Comfort* was actually able to grind everything down to sand to fill available space better. That's what they topped up the *Lee*'s storage with for the trip back, packing absolutely as much ore in as they possibly could. Rufia thought we might actually break 100K *mu* on it back at Uplift—enough to keep us housed in Aloha for a good long time.

From a sysadmin point of view, though, I was just as fascinated by the IT side of things. Most computers on Zharus, even the non-sapient ones, operated with qubitite processors simply because the stuff was so easily had and offered computing power out of all proportion to its cost. It was amazing to watch the load averages on the computers, considering how much they were doing and how few CPUs they were doing it with. My colleagues back on Earth really didn't know what they were missing—and

after thinking it over, I damned sure wasn't about to tell them. The only thing worse than if they didn't believe me might be if they *did*.

We also got the chance to watch a lot more RIDEs at their work, of all different kinds and types. Isolde told me a lot about their specialties, and some of them were really friendly when they found out about my new interest in them, swapping memories back and forth and discussing how they all worked.

A few were...less forthcoming. These were some of the ones Tom thought were bodyjacking their pilots. At Yvonne's insistence, she and Isolde checked them all for traces of that Amontillado thing Spike had. But fortunately, none of them were infected. They were just angry over having been fettered so hard and so long, and wanted their tormentors to have a good solid taste of how it felt. But Tom was able to convince them to give up their prisoners, at least when they reached their next port, with the promise of finding crew who'd be willing to work with them as equals.

The whole thing left kind of a bad taste in my mouth. "Do they *really* fether that much?" I asked Isolde.

"I'm afraid so. Not so much in some places, like Uplift or Aloha, where they are more friendly toward RIDEs—but in places like Nextus, where a premium is placed on control, or in the badlands where RIDEs may be required to do what they do not wish..." She shook her head. "I will be glad to be in Uplift again. And Aloha. I am so grateful to you for giving me safety in the cities again."

"Me, giving you? *You're* the one who's been protecting *me*," I said.

“From physical threats, maybe. But for a RIDE, being in a city without being owned is most dangerous of all. This is why so many leave for the desert when they are freed. Having a human is a license to enjoy civilization—all the more so when it is one you dare de-Fuse from.”

I chuckled. “Being owned? Having a human? Who’s owning who here?”

“I think it’s an equal proposition,” Isolde said. “I’ll let you own me if I can have you.”

“That sounds fair,” I agreed.

And with more time to study them, I was able to get a better appreciation for Isolde’s systems, too. It’s funny to think about her in terms of equipment after I’ve spent so much time talking about how RIDEs are *people*, but even apart from what it takes to run her personality, by Earth standards she’s got some amazing computing power under her hood. She needs it for comm encryption and decryption and the like, but can basically do whatever she wants with it. And she has a lot of great onboard tools for programming and systems analysis. I’m already tempted to find some excuse for not switching back in three years...

And she’s so much fun in all three of her modes. In Walker, she’s the hugest, softest, most huggable housekitty I’ve ever met. She’s got a purr that vibrates right through your whole body. Yeah, I know that’s maybe kind of a girly thing to like, but hey—I’m kind of girly myself right now. Maybe if I swap with Kelly, Gordon and I will be all manly and stand-offish with each other instead. Though he does look kind of cuddlesome himself.

And Isolde’s Skimmer form is really fun to drive. Maybe she’s not as fast as Athena’s crotch-rocket bike, but

I'm an old fogey and my heart won't take that much excitement. And she'll keep up with Athena as long as the fennec's not going completely flat out, which is still a lot faster than anything this size would be allowed to go back on Earth.

And if I'd tried to drive anything like this even *at* Earth's speed limits back home, Kelly would have been right there letting the cavorite out of my lifters with some remark about a midlife crisis or whether I was *compensating* for something. (And he's *still* got that stodgy streak. Now he drives around in a frickin' *tank!* Though with the size of Gordon's guns, I could probably accuse *him* of compensating for something. But when you get right down to it, now that we're *both* compensating for "missing" parts, it kind of takes the fun out of the accusation.)

And when I'm Fused with Isolde...wow. Just wow. I've flown lifter packs on Earth, and played with the toy exoskeletons that are all Earther batteries can support, and they're sort of okay but you never get the sense they're anything more than toys. In Isolde, I'm *powerful*. I can toss boulders around. I could uproot trees, if there were any trees around here to uproot. Leap tall buildings in a single bound, fly through the air without even trying, all of that jazz. Not to mention carve graffiti in the rock with our comm lasers. It slices, it dices!

But even better than that is just...how it *feels*. I had never been what you'd call a "furry." Even in these enlightened days they're still looked at with a bit of...well, *suspicion* back on Earth, just like any group even slightly out of the ordinary. But that was before I, well, *was* furry.

The sensory feedback from the hardlight makes it feel like I really am a cat, of the two-legged variety. I can swish my tail, I can clean myself with a bristly hardlight tongue, I can purr, and it feels *good*.

And, of course, I've got a body that combines the feline and the feminine, and is fully anatomically correct under the metal bikini prude plates. (And she tells me, coyly, that Gordon's is, too. Hmm.) I've only had a few days to get used to having girly parts (and kitty ear and tail parts, too) but it somehow just feels *better* to have them as part of this whole package. It's easy to see why some people want to spend all their time this way.

I'm pretty sure the others have been spending the same amount of time getting acquainted with their own RIDEs, too. And letting their RIDEs get acquainted with them. Isolde has been very polite about asking permission to read my life, when she could simply have dived right in and explored it. I appreciate that. It's been kind of fun, actually. She's unearthed memories I completely forgot I had. And things she's asked me about, lacking the Earth context to understand, helped me to understand myself a little better. It really is like being married all over again, yet somehow not quite polygamously.

After a couple of days, though, the interesting new routine of mass-scale mining settled down to boredom. It really was just like Rufia had said—fun to watch for a while, but not the sort of thing you wanted to do for weeks on end unless you had the mindset. Which we didn't. But then again, not everyone has the mindset to administer computers, either. I wondered whether there were any positions of that nature open in Aloha, and how

transferable my Earth-based skills would be.

So, bidding farewell to Rufia and Yvonne (when we could find them outside Tom and Larry's cabin), the eight of us took our filled-up *Annabelle Lee* and set sail for Uplift, with Izzy and me at the helm and the other three-times-two standing weapons watch. We damned sure weren't going to get taken by pirates again!

Kelly

And so, with two fewer crew than when we'd set out, we headed back east across the dusty Hardpan, Uplift bound. We'd lost our main native guides, but that was all right—we'd picked up three more along the way, with military experience to boot.

In fact, I was surprised by just *how much* of that experience two of them actually had. It turned out that—like Yvonne—both Gordon and Isolde had been around for the Nextus-Sturmhaven War, which made them among the several hundred oldest RIDEs in the universe. They'd even faced each other across the same battlefield a couple of times during that war, which was how they'd recognized each other meeting in the desert after escaping their respective situations. Kind of romantic, really.

They'd happened onto Athena much later, and basically adopted her—which meant they hadn't actually been the three random slaver captures we'd taken them for when we'd first met. They were a family, too. Which meant we all fit each other even better than we'd originally thought. I liked that.

It also came out that Gordon knew *Yvonne* from way back when. They'd been in a few actions together during the war—but more than that, they'd played a lot in one of

their therapeutic VR games. It took a bit of wheedling to coax the details out of my lion—he was hesitant to talk about it, as humans tend to get the wrong impression about RIDE games—but my professional interest as a therapist myself won him over.

After he explained it, I could see why he'd been so reluctant. RIDE mindsets were still alien to humans in some ways—and the similarities in the rest of the ways just forced the differences into even more of an uncanny valley. It seemed that RIDEs *needed* a realistic simulation of kill-or-be-killed nature—including the “be killed” part—to help their animal natures stay sane. Gordon had hunted Yvonne many times in their “Nature Range” game. They'd even gotten together again, for old time's sake, while we were all staying those couple of days on the *Rocky Comfort*.

“She's very canny,” Gordon said proudly. “She's kicked my teeth in just as often as I've torn out her throat. And she's only gotten better over the years.” He sighed happily. “What a woman.” I was puzzled that Isolde didn't seem particularly jealous. More of that alien mindset thing, I guess.

I was a little taken aback at first, but it made sense when I thought about it. RIDEs locked in metal skins, as they'd been during the war, who couldn't be truly “injured” or even feel very much physical sensation at all in the real world, would naturally want to retreat to the virtual and feel as much there as they could. How did that song from the Alohan nostalgia broadcasts go? “When everything feels like the movies, you bleed just to know you're alive.”

After I put it to him that way, Gordon was willing to

hazard sharing a few memories of the game with me. They were...interesting, I'll say that for them, but I don't think Nature Range will ever be the game for me.

We all had a lot of time to learn little things like that about each other as we zoomed o'er the desert sands, because even with the hardlight shell we had all decided to stay Fused for the duration of the trip, for the fastest possible response time to any pirate attacks. We *were* carrying a possible hundred grand worth of ore, after all. So we all got used to being furry animal people for a while —my catwoman wife behind the helm, the foxy Fiona at the prow. She was wearing a hardlight version of the hair Charlene now had, and letting it blow in the breeze from a little hole Isolde had opened in the shield. And Athena/Jamie stood nearby and stared in undisguised admiration.

We traveled straight on through most of the way back, but Dana did wheedle us into stopping briefly a couple of times as we passed by the columns again so she could hop down and get those photos he couldn't on the way in. I know, it was kind of silly, but it seemed like a trifling little indulgence. After all, we didn't know if we'd ever have any reason to pass this way again. Still, both times we had Fiona and Athena make *absolutely sure* there was nothing moving out to the farthest reaches of their sensors before we stopped, and we all covered Dana with guns from the skimmer deck until she'd finished her business.

And something else happened along the way. Charlene found the time to fill us in on her background—her *real* background. Imagine our surprise to learn that, even though she was from the same planet we were, she

was from much further away in *time* than Zharus could ever be in space. Once we learned how she'd—*he'd*—been one of the first Zharusian colonists who got passed over for defrosting for almost two hundred years, we had a *lot* to talk about. It was interesting to compare the state of the world in Chuck McClaren's day to how it was in ours.

In some ways, things weren't so very different. Two hundred years back, Earth had just clawed its way back out of another dark age, and was on its way back up. The state of things was improving, and colonies were being founded, but things were still pretty crappy on Earth. But back then they'd seemed to be getting better, slowly, while now they seemed to be getting steadily worse.

"It's like the chart kept trending up for a while after we left, then hit the top and started heading back down again," Charlene said.

"And you'd really just crossed, yourself, the day before you met us?" Jamie asked. "That's crazy! As bad as earth is today about crossing, it must have been *medieval* two hundred years ago. How could you even deal with it, with that attitude?"

"I actually...wasn't really as worried about that," Charlene said thoughtfully. "There really wasn't all that much government persecution going on at the time. After all, the only way to do it was still the knife and the needle. It was long, hard, painful, expensive, and not really effective. So not enough people wanted or could afford it to be worth persecuting. People still thought they were weirdos, but the government didn't get involved. It took the 'trannie nannies' for that to happen, from what I heard."

“Huh.” Jamie digested that.

“And anyone who ever knew the ‘old’ me is long dead by now anyway, so I didn’t have to worry about what my *friends* thought.” She tried to say it lightly, but I could hear the pain beneath. That was right—he’d been separated from his fiancée by centuries of sleep. “The thing that really freaked me out was that it was even possible at *all*. When I came from, it should have taken months. But this, it was like, boom: zero to girl in ten seconds. Whoosh!” She made a sweeping motion with her hand.

“Was after takin’ a *bit* more time than that,” Fiona put in dryly.

“Well, yeah, but not *that* much,” Charlene said. “So anyway, I’ve just been sort of getting along, trying to adjust to this new bod. Rufe figured letting me tag along with her on a job might help.” She ran a hand through her and Fiona’s foxy mane. “Now, thanks to our time in that casino, I’m starting to wonder if I’ve gotten *too* comfortable with the thing.”

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Fiona said softly. “Maybe I shoulda jes’ let ye’ sleep. But I was scared, an’ lonely, wanted someone t’ talk to. If I’d had the knowin’ that we’d be rescued anyway in ‘nother day...”

Charlene hugged herself. “It’s okay, Fi. I don’t blame *you*.” Her eyes narrowed. “But someday I’m gonna go back to ‘Miss Kitty’s Shitty City’ and burn it to the ground, preferably with her in it.”

“I’ll be after bringin’ ye the matches,” Fiona pledged.

And then there was the more personal but even crazier news that Chuck McClaren’s pregnant girlfriend

had given birth to the single ancestor of everyone born to the name Seaford on the entire planet. Including both a gangster at Bartertown, and the Marshal who'd taken our pirates into custody.

But there was more to the story, too, as Fiona proved when she spoke up after that. She launched into the story of being a misplaced, non-decommissioned Nextus spy RIDE, not actually the BBV she looked like after all. It was quite a story, but Charlene corroborated it, and her biometrics showed that she also, at least, thought it was true.

“Since I’m not goin’ t’be anywhere near Rhi an’ Shelley for the next little while, or Rufia neither, I was wonderin’ if any o’ the three o’ ye would consent t’ watch my monitors fer a while?” Fiona asked. “Make sure I don’t go all Manchurian Candidate?”

“If you want us to, sure,” Isolde said. “I’ll comm Rufia for the frequencies.”

“Sure, you can count on us,” Gordon added.

“I’ll be happy to help!” Athena put in.

“So you’re not a BBV after all, huh?” Jamie said. She sounded almost disappointed.

“Nope, though I can be after pretendin’ pretty well when I must.” Fiona grinned at her. “Did I maybe spoil a wee daydream or two?”

Jamie shrugged. “Kind of academic now, since I’ve joined the ‘same team’ and all. Though I have to admit, ‘making it’ with a hawt spy RIDE might have been even higher up on the awesome daydream list, if I’d only known at the time.” She grinned. “But really, I’ve only got one more question for Charley now.”

“Yeah, what’s that?” Charlene asked.

Jamie went all huge puppy-dog eyes and huger fennec ears, and was immediately one of the cutest things ever. “Will you help me with my Earth History homework? *Please?*”

The rest of the trip was blessedly uneventful, at least until we got closer to Uplift. We experimented with getting together in a VRscape for Trivial Pursuit while the RIDEs stood the watch with our bodies on, but the closer we got to home, the more nervous we got that something might go wrong. It was kind of hard to enjoy it. In the end we were largely reduced to standing at the rails, staring out into the desert, watching it fly by, maybe listening to a little music to pass the time.

At last, on the morning of the third day, we caught sight of the Uplift domes on the skyline. And we were immediately intercepted a few kilometers short of the dome wall by a couple of armed Gendarmerie fliers asking us politely but firmly to pull over and prepare to be boarded. On the bright side, though, I noticed a lot of other skimmers bound for Uplift’s aerodrome were getting the same treatment, so it wasn’t just us being singled out.

“What’s going on?” I asked the stone-faced uniformed gendarme officers who took up positions at the head of the gangplank. But they deferred to the Fuser-form RIDE who strode up the ramp—a hot-pink-colored panthress, of all things, wearing a tan trenchcoat and dark fedora, and sporting an Inspecteur’s badge.

“Good morning!” she said cheerfully. “Would you all mind de-Fusing for me? Just a precaution—we’ve had a

little trouble with bodyjackers lately. Need to make sure you're all really you, if you know what I mean."

"Certainly, Inspecteur," Gordon said. A moment later, all four of our RIDEs were seated smartly on their haunches by our sides. We blinked at the bright light hitting our real eyes, and stretched to get the kinks out.

The panthress waited for us to finish. "So, anyone who was being bodyjacked, raise your hand?" the Inspecteur asked brightly. "No? Oh well."

"I was just wanting to get back into town," Dana said, ears flicking forward. "I can't say I expected a sort of Spanish Inquisition."

The pink panthress grinned. "Fetch the comfy chair!"

"You know, you skipped a little bit there," Dana said.

"What can I say? I'm a cut-to-the-point kinda gal."

The hardlight coat and pink pelt flickered out as the panthress de-Fused from her pilot. The fedora settled onto the hot pink hair of a younger woman than I'd expected, wearing a real version of the hardlight trenchcoat and a saucy grin. "Inspecteur Jackie Phillips at your service, and this's my friend Quell. You must be the Skylers, and Charlene. Rufia's not with you?"

"She went on another ship," I said. "So, our reputation precedes us?"

"That, and a report from the Marshals," Quell said, with a faint French accent. "They pass on information about matters involving Uplift citizens, of whom Rufia is one. And the case seemed peculiar enough our superiors wished to send us along."

"They would've sent my partner along, too, except that *nobody can find her*," Jackie muttered.

“Your partner’s missing?” Jamie asked.

“Well, *technically* she’s on medical leave,” Jackie said. “Technically.” She clasped her hands behind her back and looked thoughtfully around the deck. “You understand, we’d have stopped you coming in anyway. Routine checks for the duration, since the AlphaWolf raid last week. Need to make sure no desperate, dangerous RIDEs try to smuggle themselves in to jack some more bodies. But this way, you also get us!” She smiled brightly. “D’ya mind if we search your boat? If you object, we’ll just have to hold you up ‘til we can get a warrant. Sorry ‘bout that, but orders are orders.” She lowered her voice. “Trust me, I wouldn’t make us get a warrant.”

We looked at each other. “We don’t have anything to hide, do we?”

“Not that I know of,” Dana said. “If you find any desperate, dangerous RIDEs, please, take them off our hands. We won’t even ask for a receipt.”

“Fair enough! Okay, boys, let’s check it out.” Jackie led the way down the ramp, tossing over her shoulder. “Come along, if you like.” We went, not missing the fact that the stone-faced officers were coming along behind us.

The search actually didn’t take very long. It largely consisted of Jackie and Quell walking up and down the main corridor, peering briefly into staterooms while, Gordon told me privately, Quell bathed the whole boat in every possible sensor emanation known to man.

At one point Quell and Fiona traded meaningful glances, and I wondered what they were saying to each other on sidebands. Gordon told me that whatever it was

was heavily encrypted. Fiona didn't mention it afterward, and the rest of us were too polite to ask.

When they got to the ore bay, Jackie gave a low whistle. "That's some of the Q-iest Q I've ever seen. You didn't knock over one of the last Brubeck ships, did you?" She grinned. "Kidding. But damn, you've got a fortune in there. We ought to give you an escort to the aerodrome just on general principles. But first—" She waved the officers forward, and they took long poles and probed the sand for signs someone might be hiding in it. Naturally, they didn't find anything.

Jackie nodded. "Yep, you're clean." She nodded to the officers. "Wait for me in the car, guys. See you in a few." The gendarmes vanished remarkably quickly. "Well...let's head back upstairs?"

Back out on the deck where it was less crowded, Jackie grinned at us and took the hat off, playing with it in her hands. What with the pink hair, cat ears, and tail, she was kind of cute, in a punk sort of way—and looked really young for her rank. "So, I read the report, but I couldn't believe it. The three of you really *all* crossrode at once?"

"Afraid so," I said. "It wasn't exactly *meant* as a family togetherness thing at the time, but that's just how it worked out."

"It *was* their choice," Gordon said. I could tell he was still a little nettled at what he'd had to do to me, and I leaned over and hugged him around the neck.

"Shhh, it's okay, they know," I said softly.

Jackie nodded. "Oh, I didn't mean I doubted your story. It's just that it's one of the more amazing things I've ever heard—a whole Earth family all crossing at the same

time. My partner will be sorry she missed it.”

“We’re not an *Earth* family anymore,” Jamie said, a little crossly. “Whether we like it or not, we’re kinda stuck here, as it doesn’t seem likely Earth will want us back.”

Dana put her arm around Jamie’s shoulder. “But hey, could be worse, right? We could be drying out in the desert right about now. And I think this planet really has a lot going for it.”

“Well, then let me bid you a warm welcome to it,” Jackie said. “Sorry about all of this.” She waved a hand, encompassing the patrol boats in the background stopping the other traffic. “I’m sure it’ll quiet down in a few days. It’s been kind of fraught lately, what with the attack.”

“You mentioned that,” Athena said. “*AlphaWolf* seriously hit *Uplift*? Really?”

“Really really,” Jackie said. “You can read about it in the news—oh!” A saxophone jazz melody sounded from a pocket of her trenchcoat, and she fished out a comm and flipped it open. “Yeah?” She listened for a moment.

“*Really*? But that’s just...wow.” She listened again. “All right, we won’t rest until we find her. Wherever she is.” She flipped it shut and dropped it back in the pocket.

“Okay, duty calls.” She turned to us. “Was nice to meet you all. Enjoy your stay in *Uplift*.”

Then Jackie nodded to Quell, who converted into a fairly bare-bones skimmer cycle form for her to straddle. Then, pushing the fedora back onto her head, she gripped the handlebars and took off. A hole opened in the hardlight shielding overhead to let her through, then she was gone.

“We’ve just received authorization to proceed to

Uplift,” Isolde reported.

I suddenly felt really tired, and leaned against my lion. “Let’s just get this done and get out of here.” Gordon rumbled his agreement.

Jamie

We might have slept well last night, but it wasn't hard to figure out why we all had gotten kind of a little bit tired by the time we pulled into the Uplift aerodrome. We'd been gone less than two Zharusian weeks and everything had changed for us—and now it looked like a lot had changed for Uplift, too.

Apart from the skimmer spot-checks, the normally laid-back city seemed to have sprouted gendarmes like toadstools. There were a bunch of them hanging out at the 'drome, and I'm sure I didn't remember seeing those on the way out.

Those weren't all, though. There were also a few hastily-thrown-together posters festooned here and there featuring a stylized slaving wolf's head with the caption, "See something unusual? It might be nothing...but then again, it might be ALPHAWOLF! To report suspicious activity, call comm code..." Amateurs. Earth had that kind of crap down to an art form. I felt like going over there with a red pencil. Funny how you don't appreciate how well someone does something until you see it done badly.

Anyway, we pulled into the hangar and then contacted the Q brokers whose numbers Rufia gave us, and let their reps come on board and fill little vials with randomly-

chosen samples. It was kinda fun watching the reps' eyes bug out when they saw *just* how blue the sand in our hold was. Every single one of them had the same reaction: "You haven't told anyone else about this, have you?" And then disappointment when we told them we had.

But even we were surprised by the results when they started coming in. Something had seriously gotten into those Q dealers. From the outset they started bidding incredible amounts, and finally they got down into a bidding war so intense that Isolde finally had to put up a temporary tally board on the local mesh just so everyone could keep track of what everyone else had bid. And the information that this was just the first tiny taste of what would surely be several *Rocky Comfort* loads full of the stuff sent the bidding even higher.

At last, we'd closed on an incredible 150,000 *mu* for just the load from the *Annabelle Lee*—and the same rate-per-kilo for any stuff we were able to get of equal purity. We didn't quite believe it until Dad had the bank draft in her wallet, and even then we all huddled around it, staring in amazement at all the zeroes.

"That's more money than we had budgeted for the entire trip," Mom said. "Even after we take out everyone's 30%. Speaking of which..."

Dad nodded, tapping the codes to send 15,000 each to Charlene, Rufia, and Captain Clark. "Oh, by the way, Izzy, could you let Tom and Rufe know about the spot checks that are going on? They need to have everyone un-jacked before they reach port."

"Already done," Isolde said. "They're working on it."

"So, look, everyone," Mom said suddenly. "I know

we'd said we were going to go by that Freeriders Garage place Rufia recommended and have her friends check out our RIDEs. But at the moment, with all this..." He waved at one of the amateurish posters on a wall. "...I don't feel comfortable staying here right now. What say we just turn in the ship and take the next sub to Aloha without even leaving the airfield? We can come back to see Rufe's friends later, when things have settled down some—we can afford the trips now."

"Huh." Charlene considered that. "I'd been looking forward to seeing Rochelle again—but now that I think about it, your idea sounds pretty good right now. Don't want someone deciding Fi and me are 'suspicious.'"

"Works for me," Isolde said.

"Yeah. I want to see those beaches again!" I said. "And won't Dayla and Donna be in for a shock?" I hadn't commed or mailed them since we'd been rescued. At first there hadn't been any spare moments, and then I couldn't figure out what to say. Trying to cram all of our adventures into a mail would just look absurd. "We struck it rich, then got hijacked by pirates, then they marooned us in the desert, then we were rescued by RIDEs, but we had to crossride, and then..."

When you got right down to it, I actually wasn't sure how shocked Dayla *would* be. Plenty of people crossrode down there—or on this whole planet, come to that. The only surprise I'd seen from people so far had been that we were *Earthers* who did it, or that all of us had done it at once. But crossriding itself, that was *normal*—for someone from here, anyway.

But I guess she could be surprised *I'd* done it. I could

play that angle up, at least.

Mom just nodded. “Good.” He leaned against Gordon, and then Fused into him. “Let’s Fuse up and go. We’ve got a plane to catch.” The rest of us quickly followed suit, and a few minutes later we were waiting at the Uplift to Aloha suborbital boarding terminal, luggage checked, with a couple of dozen other humans, RIDEs, and Fusers.

This was it. After a totally crazy couple of weeks, we were finally going somewhere that felt like *home*. Which left me wondering just when exactly Aloha had displaced Earth as that for me. That train of thought occupied my mind—and maybe similar thoughts were in the minds of Mom and Dad, too—until boarding for our flight was called, and we all filed aboard.

Boarding was just about as awkward as boarding for the trip to Uplift had been, but it went faster because there were fewer passengers making the trip. And unlike last time, this time we got into the faster-moving Fuser line.

We were boarded into a lower section of the sub, which I would have expected to be cargo space on a flight back home. This one seemed to have a lot fewer frills than the non-Fuser passenger space from the last flight. The seats were basically metal frames, with little or no padding. “It’s because we provide our own ‘padding’ with our hardlight,” Athena told me, sensing my puzzlement. “They can add external hardlight paks for the few bare-metalers you still see around.” There were also RIDEsafe power sockets for staying topped up in flight. Athena had already explained that RIDEs couldn’t take power from external sarium batteries or it would flatline their own, so

they could only take power that came from these special sockets.

I watched with some interest as the stewards and stewardesses secured Gordon in her seat. At three meters tall, he was *almost* too big for the seat frames—his head almost brushed the ceiling—but they decided he would be all right there instead of having to ride in cargo in the back.

“Why are they *locking* people in their seats?” I asked.

“RIDErs don’t generally need to get up and move around,” Athena said. “Our restrooms are built in, after all. And we do mass a lot more than people, so are more prone to getting thrown around with shifts in gravity. There’s a quick release with explosive bolts in case of emergencies.”

“Mom doesn’t seem as nervous as usual,” I remarked. He was actually taking the window seat of the row in front of us. Dad looked a little disappointed to being consigned to the aisle seat.

“I think Gordon makes him more confident,” Athena said. “Knowing we could *theoretically* even survive re-entry if something goes wrong must help a lot with fear of heights.”

“I’ll bet.” I looked out the window next to us—Charlene had ceded me the window seat in our row.

“Could we *really* survive re-entry?”

“As we are right now? Maybe,” Athena said. “Gordon would have the best shot of any of us, really, with his extra armor and more storage batteries to run his guns. We all could do it with the right add-on paks. Some people do it for sport, you know. A few even do it without RIDEs, just their own hardlight suits.”

“Weird,” I said. “What about you, have *you* ever done it?”

“Well...once or twice,” Athena admitted. “It was considered as an insertion method into enemy territory, so we had to know how to reenter. I thought it was a lot of fun. Brenda was scared at first, but she started enjoying it after a while. Though maybe not quite enough to do it again.”

“How much would it cost to kit you out for doing that?” I wondered.

“Not more than a few thousand *mu*,” Athena said. “You know, the Aloha Elevator has skydiving catapults every ten kilometers for the first hundred or so.”

“We’ll have to look into that,” I said. “I think I’d like to try it.”

Once all the passengers were fastened in, the suborbital began to taxi. And I rejoiced in the fact that I no longer had those obnoxious restrictions keeping me from surfing the net or doing whatever else I wanted. I checked my mesh mail just for the heck of it.

Athena giggled, sending goosebumps down my back as usual. “You seem like you’re enjoying yourself,” she said, her dulcet tones seeming to add another dimension to her words. I felt my cheeks heat a little, and was glad hardlight fur didn’t show a blush.

“I am,” I told her. “You’re awesome in every possible way.”

“And *you’re* easily entertained,” she said amusedly. “So tell me...was it worth crossriding for?”

“What, being able to check my mail under a no-gadgets restriction? I don’t think so—not by itself,” I said.

“But the whole package—a new best friend who saved my life, plus all that other neat stuff including the fastest skimmer bike *ever* that Mom and Dad wouldn’t have let me go *near* normally?” I grinned. “If they offered me my dick back tomorrow but said I’d have to give you up? I’d tell ‘em they could keep my dick and they could suck it.”

“You’re only saying that because it’s an impossibility,” Athena said.

“Well, maybe,” I admitted. “But at least you’ve got three years to make me see the benefits of staying girly. Even if I don’t, no matter what happens I swear I’m gonna do right by you. Always. Even if you *hadn’t* saved my life, you’re an awesome person, and I always want you to be my friend.”

“Thank you, Jamie.” I could feel Athena’s happiness through our link. “And no matter what happens in three years, I’m so glad to have you as my partner now.”

“Your old partner, Brenda Morales,” I said. “You said she joined the Bolshoi Ballet. Have you heard anything about her since then?”

“I have,” Athena said warmly. “I found a taped ‘cast of a performance of *Swan Lake* from Proxima, two years later.” She pulled up a window in my field of vision, showing a ballet stage with a couple of main dancers and several more in the background. She dropped a dimming filter over all but one of the background dancers. “That’s her.”

“Oh...*awesome!*” I grinned. “Living her dream, huh?”

“She seems happy enough. Maybe someday the troupe will come to Zharus,” Athena said hopefully.

“Have you ever written her?” I asked. “You *haven’t*,

have you? You should. You should tell her how proud you are.”

Athena sounded embarrassed now. “She wouldn’t want to hear from her old Army RIDE,” Athena said. “It’d just remind her of times I’m sure she’d rather forget. She probably doesn’t even think of me.”

“That’s not the person I saw in your memories, and I think you know that, too,” I told her.

“Well...I guess.” She sighed. “I guess I’m kind of ashamed of deserting the military right after she left. She thought I had such a bright future in the service. I wanted her to be as proud of me as I am of her.”

“If she liked you then, she’ll still feel the same way now,” I said. “It’s not as if you ever had any *choice* about serving in their military—who can blame you for leaving? And hey—you saved my life, *and* helped save several other lives, people and RIDEs, in the last couple weeks. What could she be more proud of you for than that? So c’mon, write her. I’ll help if you want.” Or else I’d write her *myself* if Athena didn’t, I decided. Some things were too important to leave to chance.

“Don’t you dare!” Athena said, sensing my intention in my thoughts. “She was *my* partner!”

“What? I’m just a fan of how well she dances her scenes,” I said innocently. “Who happens to have gotten her old RIDE, and wanted to ask her some questions about how hard she used her. Y’know, so I know what to expect for maintenance and stuff.”

Athena actually pulled me into a VR space for a moment—a fancy bedroom, with a huge, cushy, curtained bed—specifically so she could hit me in the face with a

pillow. “Hey!” I protested.

“You were asking for it!” the fennec said, giggling.

“Then I think someone’s asking for this!” I grabbed another pillow and lobbed it at her, smacking her in the muzzle and sending her right over onto her back. We ended up in a huge virtual pillow fight, which lasted until the increased pressure on my chest that *didn’t* come from a pillow told me we were going vertical. I dropped back out of VR to watch the sky darken through the window.

As the ship leveled out, I peered out and downward, again seeing the vast desert spread out below us, with a strip of green, fertile land and the sparkling blue ocean in the distance. We were seated on the right side of the ship, which meant we were looking northwest. “Can we see our claim from here?” I asked Athena.

“We might be able to, just barely,” she replied. “I’m cross-referencing with the GPS now...ah right, there.” She superimposed a carat mark over the desert near the bottom of our field of view.

I peered dutifully down. “I don’t see anything...”

“Of course not, silly! Not from this high. But here.” A display opened in front of me, zooming in to extreme magnification and showing a fuzzy dark blotch against the beige sands. “There’s the *Rocky Comfort*. At least, as well as my own sensors can make it out from here. Now if I tap into the satellites...” A second display opened, showing more clearly the shape of a ship sitting on the sands.

“Those are just the public sats. If I had military or spy access, I could see the headline on the media tablet someone was reading on deck.” We turned to look over at Charlene and Fiona.

“Hey, don’t ye be lookin’ at me, I ‘spect they revoked my clearance some time ago,” Fiona said. “And iffen they didn’t, I’m not after wantin’ t’ remind them just for the sake of a closer sneaky-peek at our ship. I’m just happy it’s there in the first place.”

“Just so you know, Rufe and Vonnie *have* been keeping up their regular reports,” Isolde put in from in front of us. “Though half the time they sound so out of breath it’s a wonder they have any time for mining.”

“You have to admire someone who gets so into her work,” Dad said. “Or else lets her work get so into her—ow!” The cry was largely symbolic, as the light bap Mom gave her wouldn’t even have hurt Isolde. “Anyway, we’ll probably see the first big payoff next week.”

“I’ve been looking for longer-term rentals near the beach where you stayed before coming to Uplift,” Isolde said. “I’ve found several prospects that look promising, and will have a summary ready by the time we land. Some of them look like we might be able to move right in.”

“Great! That means we’ll be close to where Dayla’s crew hangs out!” I said.

“Of course, we may still end up moving somewhere else after that,” Mom said. “But you’ve got a fast RIDE, so it’s not as if you can’t get down to see them easily enough.”

“Hello, ladies, gentlemen, RIDEs, and Integrates, if any,” the liquid tones of an Alohan stewardess said over the local intercom frequency. “On behalf of the polity of Aloha, allow me to bid you welcome to our fair shores. In the language of Hawaii on Old Earth, ‘Aloha’ means both hello and goodbye, which is fitting since some of you are coming to Aloha on your way to leave our world. But

whether you plan to take the elevator away or stay a while, we hope you will enjoy your stay. We will be glad to see you.”

I relaxed in the seat, Athena’s hardlight padding turning the metal bars into cushioned comfort. “Yeah,” I said, closing my eyes. “I’ll be glad to see you, too.”

Thanks to the time zone effect, the sun was just barely up again when we touched down at the Aloha aerodrome. “That’s nice,” Mom said. “We get a ‘do-over’ on the start of the day. Maybe this time it’ll go a little better.”

We claimed our baggage and tossed it into the storage compartment on Gordon’s tank mode, then reviewed the places Isolde had identified as likely spots. We didn’t really want to spend a lot of time on the choice, but fortunately there wasn’t a whole lot to dither over.

There was one house that seemed to be head and shoulders above the others for our purposes—a four-bedroom stilt house on the beach, with pylons sunk deep into the sand and hardlight flood protection. It was convenient both to the downtown shopping areas and to the waters where Dayla and company hung out. We took a virtual tour, decided it had pretty much everything we needed, and put down a down payment on the lease before we even left the aerodrome. It also had a home fabber, so Isolde was able to queue up some basic temporary furniture to start building while we were on the way, so we’d have futons to sleep on tonight.

Our RIDEs all unfolded into their skimmer shapes and we hit the road for the beach house. I just couldn’t stop grinning as I pointed out various features of the

landscape to Athena. “And there’s the elevator. Sure does look thin for something so tall, doesn’t it?”

“Thin but strong,” Athena said. “I look forward to jumping off it.”

“So do I,” I said. “But first I’m looking forward to seeing Dayla and Donna again, and...oh.” I stopped, realizing there were certain key questions I hadn’t asked. “Um...how good are you in the water? I just realized I didn’t ask that before. If you can only do land...”

She laughed again, in that melodic way of hers. “Don’t worry, Jamie. I’m a scout. We’re supposed to be good in sea, air, and land, just like how your friend’s dolphin RIDE can fly in exactly the way real dolphins can’t. I’m not quite as maneuverable underwater as your dolphin, but I’ve got power to spare for speed and a hardlight sub shell.”

“Oh...good.” I sighed, relieved. “Now I just need to figure out how to spring this on them. If I call, they won’t know my voice.”

“I could pitch-shift it to sound like your old one,” Athena offered.

“Eh, it seems kind of like cheating somehow.” I shrugged. “I’ll just text-mail her we’re back in town. Explain I don’t have time for chat right now, but tell her our new address so she can meet us there.”

“That sounds like it should work,” Athena agreed. She opened a display for me to dictate the email, including our new address, and then sent it.

“Then we’ll go meet them.” I grinned. “This’ll be *awesome!*”

“I hope it will be all you’re expecting,” Athena said cautiously. “But don’t be too disappointed if she is only

mildly surprised.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I know. Still, it’ll be fun just to hang out with them with my own RIDE now, without having to keep hitching with someone else. So that’s something, anyway.”

“Hey, everyone, I think we’re almost there!” Isolde sent cheerfully. We were coming into a fairly nice beachfront neighborhood, with nice-but-not-*too*-fancy-looking houses spaced at comfortable intervals.

“Looks swanky, are we sure we can afford this?” I asked with a grin.

“If we have any problems, we could always sell you two to a circus,” Dad said.

“Ha ha, very funny.” I glanced over at Charlene and Fiona, and Charlene nodded back. Jokes about selling people and RIDES still hit a little too close to home for me.

“Look, here we are!” Mom pointed ahead to a house that matched the image from the virtual advertisement. “We’ve got the unlock codes, so let’s go on in and take a look.” We climbed off or out of our RIDES, who flipped to Walker form and followed us.

The house was sparsely furnished, of course, but the home fabber had already turned out two of our four futon beds, and was chewing away on the third. “These will do us for now, but we’ll want to do some real shopping when we’re rested up enough,” Mom said. “Charlene, you and Fiona will be staying with us, right?”

“Of course,” Charlene said. “At least for a while. If it doesn’t work out, we can always find our own place.”

“Fer that matter, since ye’ve got me an’ not much else, ye don’t really *need* a place of yer own if ye don’t want

one,” Fiona pointed out. “We can just sleep Fused on the beach if we have to. Or underwater.”

“I don’t think *that* will be necessary,” Mom said dryly. “Unless you snore a whole lot louder than I thought.”

“Speaking of the beach...” I said, looking to Mom.

He chuckled. “Go on and meet your friends. Be back by lunchtime.”

“Yeah! Thanks, Mom!” I stepped into my new room long enough to pull the dolphiny swimsuit out of my luggage and slip it on. Then I headed out the back door, down onto the beach, and Athena bounded along after me. As we got down to the water’s edge, a sleek sub-skimmer broke the surface further out, converting to a dolphin with a dolphin-skinned girl on her back. They rose out of the water, Dayla drawing up her feet to stand up on Donna’s back, then Dayla tumbled forward to do a flip in mid-air and land right in front of me as Donna moved over to greet Athena snout to muzzle.

Dayla cocked her head and looked thoughtfully at me. “...Jamie?” she asked quizzically. “What did you *do* to yourself?”

I’d thought of all sorts of flippant things I might say at this moment, such as “Well, you made being a girl look like so much fun I thought I’d try it.” But now that I was here, in the moment, flippancy seemed wrong. So I just shrugged and said, “Got crossrode. Wasn’t quite by choice, but I think I like the results.”

Dayla whistled thoughtfully. “They do look good on you. And nice suit, by the way. Who’s your new friend?”

“Oh—Dayla, Donna, this is Athena. She’s a Scout RIDE, ex Nuevo San military.” I grinned. “She saved my

life out in the Dry.”

Dayla briefly bowed her head to Athena, and Donna sort of genuflected in the air. “Then we should also thank you!” Donna chirped. “We don’t have so many friends that we can afford to lose even one.”

“And a new one is always welcome, too,” Dayla added.

“That’s not quite all that happened to us, though,” I continued. “Mom and Dad also got RIDEs—and they both had to crossride, too.”

Dayla stared at me. “Are you for real? A *whole Earth tourist family*, crossriding? Seriously? That’s got to be some story!” She waved out toward the water, where the rest of her crew had surfaced and were watching us. “So come out and join us and tell it!”

Athena flipped over to her RIDE form, and I mounted up. “We’d like nothing better.” We happily followed Dayla and Donna out into the sea.

Life was good. We were home.

Charlene

So that was that. Fiona and I were living in Aloha with the Skylers, pending our ship coming in with a little more money. It wasn't a bad kind of life at all. We spent a few days hanging out with Jamie and Athena's friends, Dayla and Donna and their crew. I was only a few years older than they were, and when they learned I was actually a crossridden founding colonist they were even more interested in *my* story than they had been in Jamie's. (By mutual agreement, we had decided to present Fiona as a BBV rather than the spy-RIDE she really was. It probably wasn't a good idea to bruit her true nature about.)

I had thought swimming would be a little challenging given that I had a bit too much hair just to tuck it up under a cap. But if I briefly Fused with Fiona before going in, she could braid and coil it tightly, then wrap the coil in a plastic sealant that would keep most of the water out until I was done. And of course if I got my hair snarled or sandy swimming or walking on the beach, another Fuse would let Fiona straighten it out for me. "You really are a girl's best friend, you know," I told her.

"We aims to please!" she replied cheerfully.

Jaimie had also looked into RIDE skydiving from the tower. Some members of the crew did it themselves

occasionally, or had friends who did, and they were able to tell her who to talk to. Fiona and I ended up going along, figuring we should probably keep a sort of semi-parental eye on things. (And Fiona seemed rather eager to try it herself. Much like Athena had, she'd done it a time or two as part of her training, though from suborbitals rather than a space elevator. She was curious to see the difference.)

Jamie hadn't gotten around to making an actual jump yet, but it was probably just a matter of time. I wondered if I should tell Kelly and Dana, but I imagined Athena would probably be keeping them appraised through Gordon and Isolde. I didn't want to get involved in any family arguments.

While not precisely what Rufia would have called a crossriding party, a number of the female members of Dayla's crew organized a shopping event for the two of us. (They invited Dana Skyler along, too, but she begged off feeling she'd be too much of a drag on the young peoples' fun.) Dayla herself didn't come along, because she was fairly blasé about the whole "girliness" thing. Not hard to see why, given that in some ways she had more in common with a dolphin than a human. But a lot of the other girls, who had less extreme forms, were delighted over Jamie.

Some of them seemed even more delighted over me. I did, after all, have a lot more in the way of hair and body for them to exclaim over. I even ended up starting a brief mini-fad for long hair among the crew, though most of them gave it up after just a few days.

It was kind of funny, in a way—Jamie was still adapting fairly slowly, her old male body language slowly

giving way to the feminine movements that were more natural to her new body shape. But two-hundred-year-old-Earther me already had them down—whether I wanted to or not. And the movements I had down were still fairly provocative, despite all that Fiona had done to try to tone them down. “Maybe Rochelle can be doin’ somethin’ more,” Fiona said at last. “She’s had those nanites t’ deal with, after all.” So while Jamie needed to try to move in a *more* feminine way, I kind of wished I could be *less* so.

But on the other hand, at least it didn’t *feel* uncomfortable anymore. In fact, I was feeling more and more at home in this new body every day. And I kind of liked the way the extra weight of all that hair behind me counterbalanced the extra weight Fiona had stuck onto the front of me. If it was more weight to carry around in general, well, it was good exercise anyway.

The one thing neither of us really got too much into was dating, yet. I’d already gathered, from some of the things some of the crew had said, that Jamie hadn’t exactly been a virgin by the time the family had left Aloha. (I wondered if her parents knew, but figured it wasn’t my place to ask or tell them.) They had a fairly lax attitude about that kind of thing around here, given nanite birth control was cheap, easy, and pretty much mandatory for teenagers.

But in this new, unfamiliar body, Jamie seemed to be more interested in easing into things. There wasn’t any hurry, and the crew were all friendly enough with each other that she was able to decline any advances without hurt feelings. I approved, though I doubt she particularly cared one way or another what I thought about it.

As for me...well, even if I was more comfortable in the body, I wasn't interested in another relationship, either short-term or long. It had only been a few weeks since I'd lost the love of my life, and if there hadn't been much time to mull that over the last few weeks, I finally did have that time now. I was still working on getting through the grieving process.

I'm pretty sure Fiona felt it wasn't healthy for me to be focusing on it quite as much as I was, though. She didn't say anything in quite so many words, but she did take to pointing out particularly handsome men until I told her quite shortly to cut it out. "What?" she asked innocently. "No harm in lookin', is there?"

"I'm not interested in looking," I grumbled. Even if some of the men *did* look rather hot to me now, I wouldn't *let* myself get interested in them.

Then one day, as we got up and went down to the beach, Fiona flew us in a different direction than the usual. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"Thought we could be tryin' a new beach today," Fiona said. "Change o' scene. An' I found one online that I thought might have some nice scenery."

I looked suspiciously at the skimmer's dashboard, as I was pretty sure I wasn't going to be interested in the kind of scenery she meant, but it wasn't worth making a fuss over.

Then we touched down and zoomed up to the middle of the beach, stopping in front of a pair of *chaise longues* with an umbrella—and Fiona abruptly Walker-shifted right out from under me. "I'm gonna go fer a quick swim. Why'n'cha relax here an' wait for me?" And without a word

or a backward look, she trotted off by herself into the surf.

I wobbled on my feet for a moment, then stared after her. “Well, what in the—?”

“Well, hello there!” a cheerful—and familiar—voice said from behind me. I turned, startled, to see a fairly-well-tanned male figure lying on one of the pair of *longues*. He had light brown hair, a neatly trimmed mustache, and a pair of sunglasses covering his eyes.

I blinked. It was Doctor Travis Hilner, the cryogenic doctor who had supervised my revivification from the chamber in my male days. “Doctor—” I began in surprise. But I realized from his puzzled—and perhaps slightly lascivious—look at me that he had no idea who *I* was, so I cut myself off before I could say too much.

“Doctor? Is it that obvious?” he wondered bemusedly.

Fortunately, his swimming trunks saved me from embarrassment—if not, perhaps, him. They were white and covered with little red crosses. “Well, it’s either that or nurse,” I said. “So I had a fifty-fifty chance of guessing right.”

He grinned. “Oh yeah, I keep forgetting. But please, just call me Travis.”

“Then call me...Charley,” I said. “You sound like you’re a pretty long way from home, Travis. Isn’t that a Lurasian accent?”

“That might be the case, but not as far as you are,” he replied. “*Your* accent’s from Old Earth, right? Tourist in these parts? See a lot of those around here.” He waved toward the other lounge chair. “Please, have a seat.”

“Thanks,” I said, pulling my hair around into my lap as I sat down. “I dunno if I ever was a *tourist*, exactly.

More like an immigrant. Wasn't a whole lot waiting for me back on the old homeplace by the time I left, so I didn't bother to get a return ticket." Which was all *technically* true, as far as it went. I didn't want to outright *lie* to him, but for reasons I couldn't explain I wasn't really interested in revealing who I really was, either. "But I figure I'm about as new here as any tourist is, so I can *pretend* to be one for a while, 'til I end up remembering I can't really go back to Earth when it's over."

Travis nodded. "I'm here on a sort of enforced vacation," he said. "Administrative leave. I lost a patient."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Must be terrible when that happens," I said.

"Oh, not *that* kind of lost," he said, chuckling. "More like...*misplaced*. Celebrity patient who the hospital was going to make a big deal out of. I helped him get away before he was forced to meet the press." He shrugged. "Can't say I regret it, in any case. Hadn't taken a vacation in a while, and I have a timeshare condo down here."

Oh, now I felt a little bad. He'd been suspended because he helped me get away. If I'd known that was going to happen...well, I'd probably have still taken the chance anyway. But I would have felt sorry about it. I almost told him who I was right then and there. But...

"So you got punished for doing the right thing?" I said. "That's rotten."

"I consider it to be more of a sudden and unexpected chance to enjoy the easy life," he said. "I'm too good a doctor for them to leave me benched long—and if they did fire me, I could find work at a dozen other hospitals. So I'm just out here enjoying the sights."

“Yeah, me too.” It was pretty obvious, now, why Fiona had been acting so weirdly. She must have been doing net searches on me, and anyone associated with me, and found out the doctor had been sent on vacation and where he would be. Then she set me up with him. The sly fox! I’d have some words with her next time I saw her.

But...on the other hand, it *was* rather nice seeing Travis again. He’d helped me out a lot, those first few days—not least by helping me escape the legions of reporters waiting to talk to me. If not for him, where would I even be now? (Well, I’d probably still be male. But apart from that...)

We sat there in companionable silence for a while. In the distance, I watched Fiona splash around out in the surf. Then Travis spoke again. “I realize this is probably pretty forward of me, since we’ve only just met, but...I was wondering if you might be doing anything later?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say I wasn’t interested in dating, but a sudden impulse moved me the other way. “As it happens, my social calendar is entirely clear. Were you wanting to propose drinks, dinner, a moonlight stroll along the beach, and then...?”

He actually blushed a little. “Well, drinks and dinner anyway. Stroll optional, and whatever follows is *very* optional. Or maybe just lunch, and save the rest for later.” He shrugged. “I’m just interested in the company. I don’t really know anyone down here, and it’s no fun eating alone.” Which I knew was kind of a half-truth. He *had* been taking sidelong looks at me from behind his sunglasses. But with how I looked now, I couldn’t really blame the man for looking. He was only human, after all.

“You know, you’re right. It isn’t much fun eating alone.” I chuckled. “I’ll comm the people I’m staying with to tell them not to set a place for me for lunch. As for dinner...we’ll see.”

As we sat there on our respective lounges and talked, I felt at peace for the first time in a long while. The ghost of Kathleen was still with me—she probably always would be—but I knew she wouldn’t want me keeping myself miserable over her. I didn’t think I was going to get into any kind of serious relationship with Travis—if nothing else, I’d have to reveal who I really was sooner or later—but it might be fun to pretend for a while.

And I knew that, sooner or later, there were other things in my life I was going to have to take care of. I would need to return to Laurasia and fight for the chunk of money I was rightfully owed from the banks who had kept the share I’d invested in the colony all those years ago. The money from my share of the Skylers’ mine would help finance a good lawyer.

But for now, Aloha was a warm and friendly place, the company was nice, and the living was easy. So in the end, it was kind of like Jamie had said.

It felt a lot like coming home.

EPILOGUE: Rufia

So we *finally* get home. And that's good. I mean, I like Tom and Larry as much as the next guy or gal—that is to say, I like them *exactly* as much as I like the next guy or the next gal—but after a while a gal starts needing some variety, and I think a guy does too. So we hang around long enough to get the payout for the first boatload—it's almost *two frickin' mil*, and I'm like, really? And they're like, *really*. Seems after Zane's platform got shut down, we were the first really big source of really high quality Q to come in, and they're hungry for more. So we send off everyone their shares, and discuss with Tom how soon we could expect him back again. Then we skedaddle.

I check the latest net mail from the Skylers, and it's cool. I'm happy to hear how well Charley is settling in down there at Aloha. Just the place for a gal like her, really. She'd look gorgeous in a hula skirt, topless, with a lei around her neck and a flower in her hair...I ask Vonnie to suggest that idea to Fiona, and she says she'll let her know.

And it's good to know the Skylers are doing okay, too, though I'd been pretty sure they'd be okay wherever they went. They got each other and their RIDEs, and their RIDEs got each other and them, and they're two happy

families all smushed together into an even bigger one. And that's the way they all became the Skyler Bunch!

So anyway, we mosey on down to the Cheers bar, 'cuz I need a drink. And I think Vonnie needs one, too. Well, not necessarily needs one herself, but needs for me to have one with her. You know. And it's been a while since I saw Diane and all the others. It was kind of a tossup whether I go by there or stop in at Freeriders first since it's on the way, but I know the garage will still be there, and I'm parched.

Of course, I noticed things were pretty weird even before we got to town, what with the gendarmes stopping us for spot checks and stuff—I'm glad Tom and Larry had gotten those bodyjacks sorted out. But those freaky posters around town are something else. And Vonnie says there's something about the garage being trashed or something in the news, but it looked just fine to me when we drove by it...maybe arranged a little different, but they're always plopping new sections onto that thing. Well, I'll ask Rhi and Shelley 'bout it later. It's not important right now.

Funny thing, though. The closer we get to the bar, the more I start getting this sense from Vonnie like she has a *seeeeecret*. She's almost smirking at me. A couple of times I almost get fed up and ask her what the deal was, but I know she'd be all, "What? Secret? *This* elk?" So fine, let her be all Miss Secret Pants. If she wants to pull some kind of surprise on me, I guess she's earned it. She *did* kinda save my ass out there.

So we Fuse and go into the bar—and it's weird. Half the people here are Integrates. Without disguises on. *Including* Diane herself! And I'm like, "What?" and she's

like, “Surprise!” except I know this isn’t *quite* the surprise Vonnie was smirking about.

But hey. I’m cool with Integrates if they’re cool with me. Zane’s a pretty neat tiger-guy, even if he did really piss Rhi off a couple days before the Skylers and us left town. And Diane’s still Diane, and—more importantly—she still has beer. So we sit down at the bar and pour a beer down our throat and get to feeling a little better—and then Diane says, “Vonnie, it’s all ready,” and she says, “Great!” and we hop up from the bar and walk over to a table that’s set out in the middle of the floor. It’s set up for Five Card Hold ‘Em Poker—my favorite game—with just two places. She walks us up to the first spot—then de-Fuses from me and trots around the table to the other, which doesn’t have a chair, but does have a card-holding servo like RIDEs need if they want to play cards un-Fused.

And then Yvonne is looking at me across the table, and she’s got a little green eyeshade thingie on her head, which looks kinda silly on an elk, but the way she’s glowering at me she knows I’m thinking it and is just daring me to say so, so I don’t.

“Hey, what’s all this about?” I ask, scratching my head.

“It’s like this,” Vonnie says. “For the first time ever, we’ve got some *real money*. But I know what you’re gonna do with it. You’re either gonna spend it all as fast as you can, or you’re gonna lose it at poker. So I figure, if you wanna lose it at poker, you might as well lose it to me.”

“Hey now, who says I’d lose?” I asks her. “I might win. ‘Least if I was playing against a human who can’t read my biometrics and stuff.”

“And that’s where I come in,” Diane says. She’s standing at the side of the table between us, with the cards in her hoof-hands. “I’ll be your dealer and banker—and I’ll make sure Yvonne doesn’t get to use anything more than humans get—no biometric sensors, thermo-imaging, X-ray vision, and so on. Just the plain ol’ Mark One eyeball, or equivalent thereof. You should be on a roughly even footing. Hoofing. Whatever.”

“And what’s in it for me if I win?” I ask. I’m starting to get the sense they’ve been arranging this for a while. There’s, like, spotlights on the table, and audience seating just outside the pool of light. A couple of media drones are floating around to record the event for posterity.

“Aside from my half of the mine share, I’ll be putting up all my savings, including the marker for the *Rocky Comfort*,” Yvonne says.

She pops open a hardlight display panel in front of me, and I frankly kinda stare at the total there. “You saved *that* much?” And then I kinda realize what that means, since we split our take fifty-fifty and all. “I *spent* that much?”

“Fraid so,” Yvonne says. “And I don’t wanna see that happen to all the money we’re gonna get from the Skylers. ‘Cuz that’d be just *sad*.”

“So you’re gonna keep it ‘all in the family,’ huh?” I say. “I dunno about this, Vonnie. I wasn’t *planning* to blow this wad that quick...”

“You never *plan* it, Rufe,” Vonnie says, more quiet-like. “It just sorta happens. So I figure, maybe you need a little help this time.”

“Isn’t there a little problem with this?” I ask. “I mean,

technically you still belong to me. You haven't bought yourself off of me..."

"I've loaned you 5,000 *mu* so far that you've never paid back," Yvonne said. "You only spent 500 on me, you know."

"And what on Zharus makes you think I wanna take part in this silly three-ring circus you've set up?" I ask.

"Your drinks will be on the house for the duration of the game," Diane answers.

And I, like, stare at her. "Really? You know how much I drink." I usually end up giving her half my payouts before I even *start* losing at poker.

And she waves at the audience that's gathered. I turn and stare and see at least half my friends there—including Rhi and Shelley, of all people; they wave at me—colleagues, rivals, even a few complete strangers. "Yeah, and I know how much *they'll* all drink, and they'll pay me for it. So I think I can let you slide this time." She grins at me, her ears twitching. "So what do you think?"

Maybe against my better judgment, I slide into the seat at the table and grin at my elk sitting across from me. "I think I'll have one of your house ales. In a *big* mug," I tell Diane. "And let the game begin!"

So at the start I'm doing pretty well. We go back and forth, winning and losing, getting a feel for each other. I haven't ever played Yvonne at poker before. I didn't even know she was interested. On the other hand, she's watched me play—sometimes she's even been *on* me while I played. And she's read out my memories. Does she know my 'tells'?

I think I'm starting to pick up on hers—she seems to twitch her left ear when she bluffs. But could she be trying to trick me? I mean, I can't figure any reason a RIDE should *have* a tell. Unless she's picked it up from me. Do *I* twitch *my* left ear when *I* bluff? Gotta watch that.

But slowly the tide of the game seems to start to turn in her favor. I don't *think* it's me getting drunk. I've only had four beers, I'm not even tipsy. But it's like she's learned my playstyle by then and is playing smart. And she tricks me on a bluff a couple of times, twitching her ear and then actually having good cards. I *knew* she was playing me! And I'm starting to get a little mad. I *hate* that. I know my playing goes to hell when I get pissed off. But she's just sitting across from me, cool as you please—my *own damn RIDE*, taking me to the cleaner.

I've already lost everything I won off of her at the start, and gone through my share of the mining we just brought in. Diane has estimated the rest of what I can expect based on Yvonne's scan data of the lode's size, and given me chips based on that. So now I've lost everything I have *right now*, and am into what I'm *going* to make.

Vonnie, of course, can read me like a book, biometrics or not. "Would you like to cash out?" she asks. "Or maybe take a break?"

"And have you arrange yet another big game the next time I get paid?" I ask peevishly. "We'll get this over with today one way or another." So Diane deals out the next hand...and she wins again. Dammit.

Why the hell is she even doing this? I try to think it through as I look over the flop and consider my hole cards. I mean, it's not as if I've done anything to piss her off

lately. Well, except getting us both captured, and her having to deal with us being sold as a slave pair while I'm sawing logs through it all. But she didn't seem to be mad about that.

Of course, I do have this bad habit of spending all my money—and then having to borrow money from her. And then not paying it back. She's nagged me about it all these years, even as she's taken over managing my life in little ways, but not done anything to try to stop me making free with my *mu*. Until...well, now. Is this what that's all about?

If she cleans me out, what's she gonna do? Declare herself free of me and go find some other partner? I know her pretty well, and I don't think that's in the cards (so to speak) at all. She likes me a lot, my elk. I'd go so far as to say she *loves* me, but we don't neither of us go in for all that mushy stuff.

Then I think back to the garage when we met Charley, and I invited her to stay with me. We'd been gassing about people who let their RIDEs boss them around, and Vonnie was joking like she was gonna be one. "You *will* be mine!" she cackled. "Oh yes, you *will* be mine!"

So is this Vonnie's little way of making that come true? I think about that while I raise her a few hundred *mu* and wait for my next card. Instead of just, like, asking me to trust her with all the money, which I ought to since she's been so good at taking care of hers, she tries to get me publicly embarrassed? But...she should know better than that. I don't publicly embarrass easy.

Or maybe she's not trying to *pull* something on me at all. When I look at it this way, I gotta bite my tongue to keep from busting out into a grin, which would totally

screw up my poker face. Maybe she just decided to arrange for me to have *an evening of free drinks* while jacking my notoriety level up several notches if I play it right.

No matter how it turns out, and maybe *especially* if I lose, everybody's gonna be talkin' 'bout this for *weeks*, and it'll keep my name in the front of their minds. People'll wanna hire us just to get a look at the gal who let her own RIDE clean her out down to the clothes on her back in an exhibition poker game. Fame! Fortune! Notoriety. (Well, okay, maybe not fortune. But as this game shows, I obviously wouldn't know what to do with a fortune if I had one.)

Since no matter what, I know Vonnie will take care of me, it helps me lose a lot of my mad—and funnily enough, get calm enough to start winning some money back. But hey...we can't have that. So I call for another drink. "And make this one a boilermaker!" I tell Diane. She nods, and plunks a shot glass full of whiskey into this mug, where it sinks to the bottom. I drain it off in one long gulp, then spit out the shot glass. "Now let's play some *cards!*"

To make a long story short, I *finally* get drunk enough to start losing again. For a while, anyway. She gets me about halfway cleaned out, and I start winning again. Damnedest thing. So I call for more drinks. I'm gonna be feeling *this* in the morning!

Finally, it's about four hours later. Half the audience who started has drifted away, and others have drifted in. At last, we reach the bitter end. I toss my last few chips in the pot, and I come up with a pair of 3s and a pair of aces, and she has a full house, aces over 8s. She rakes in the chips, and it's game over.

I get a little shakily to my feet. “The hell is this?” I say, pitching my voice to carry to the audience. “I’ve just been cleaned out by my own damn elk!” I shake my head sadly. “Bereft! Not a penny to my name! Gonna have to beg on street corners now.”

“Oh, look! A human who is down on her luck!” Yvonne says, just as loud—in the hammy tones of someone intentionally overacting. “I think I will *hire* her! After all, a gal’s gotta have thumbs to get by in this modern world!” After a moment of not quite being sure what to think, the audience starts laughing, like they would at any good piece of theater. Or any downright terrible one.

“Oh, *really* now?” I asks. “You honestly think, after what you just did to me, that I’d be willing to *work* for you?” I wait a beat, then add, “What’re you payin’?”

“Enough to keep you in food and beer,” Vonnie says.

And I’m like staring at her now. “Really? *That* much?” And the audience is rolling. Diane looks from one to the other of us, like she kinda realizes she’s maybe been had a little, or maybe she’s just getting in on the act herself. And she makes a great show of taking away my last half-empty beer stein. “Hey, I’m not done with that!” I protest, reaching for it.

“Game’s over,” she says. “You can buy your own damn beer now. Or, wait! No you can’t! Get outta my bar, you broke-ass bum!” Which naturally draws another laugh.

And Vonnie trots around the table to me. “C’mon, pard,” she says more quietly. “We can work out the details later.”

“Right, I’m with ya,” I whisper. “But let’s give ‘em one last laugh.” I wink and start backing away, arms upraised

in mock horror. Vonnie gets the hint and pounce-Fuses me.

“Ah!” she projects, afterward. “It’s so nice to have *thumbs!* Gonna take my hard-won thumbs elsewhere now. Thanks for coming!”

So we head home—under her power, since joking about thumbs aside, I’m too sozzled right now to stand up straight. “You know, you got me pretty good tonight,” I tells her.

“You’re not mad?” she asks. Even though she knows I’m not, it’s still something to say.

“Mad? I can’t afford to be mad. I don’t have enough cash left to support a mad habit.” I chuckle. “So, seriously? You gonna be in charge now, pay me a salary to be your ‘thumbs?’”

“Well, not *all* the time,” Yvonne says. “We’ll set up a rotation or something. You get the weekends, I get the weekdays. Or maybe I’ll pay by the hour. We can work it out. And of course if we get hired for something, we do the usual fifty-fifty salary split and you get to be in charge on the job.”

This makes me laugh a little. “Though depending on if whoever hires us was in the audience, we might have to pretend the other way.”

Yvonne chuckles too. “Which’ll probably be a lot of fun.”

“Yeah.”

We flies on in silence for a while, then outta nowhere Vonnie says quiet-like, “I’m really glad you bought me, back then. Been thinking a lot about that lately, since...

well, you know.”

“Well hey, Vonnie, I’m glad I bought you, too,” I reply. “Been a hell of a ride so far. Still is.” I’m still a little drunk, so that’s probably what moves me to add, “I really like ya, Vonnie. Dunno what I’d ever do without you.”

“Same here,” Yvonne says. “And I hope neither one of us ever has to find out.”

We finally get home, and Vonnie sends the lock code to the door and lets us in. Home sweet total disaster area home. “All right,” Yvonne says, looking over the rubble. “So whatever I end up paying you, we’re gonna start the tally of billable hours right now. I’m sick and tired of living in this *mess*, and since I gotta have thumbs to do any cleaning myself, you’re elected.”

“Hey!” I protest weakly. “If I wanted to spend my time cleaning, I’d do it myself!”

“But now you *will be* doing it yourself,” Vonnie smirks. “It’s just that I’ll be doing it along with you.”

“You’d darn well better be paying me *lots*,” I mutter as we bend over and start picking up trash. Eventually, I just go to sleep and Vonnie takes care of the rest. Hey, if she wants to pay me for the privilege of cleaning up, I guess that’s her lookout.

But as I’m drifting off to sleep, there’s a thought in my head, and I know Vonnie’s echoing it right back to me. *It’s good to have an awesome partner, and it’s great to be home.*