

Rochelle and Rufia Redux: Foxing About

By Robotech_Master and Jetfire

[Timeline: Immediately after the ending of Integration #17: "Family Matters".]

After various people had been chased out of a recovering Zane Brubeck's hospital room, the gathering at Diane's lasted into the late evening hours. Rhianna, Rochelle, Rufia, Myla, and the others had even been joined partway through by Aggie Brubeck, after Zane had gone to sleep to continue his recovery. Eventually, the group had broken up and everyone went their separate ways—or in some cases, their combined ways.

"Well, that was fun," Rochelle said, as she and Rufia left the bar together. Uncia and Yvonne, who were also leaving together, had offered to drop the two humans off at Rochelle's house, but they'd declined—it was a pleasant evening for a walk, and the house was just a few blocks away.

"Yeah, it was," Rufia agreed. She grinned. "You were right—that Aggie chick is even cuter than Zane."

“You showed great restraint in not making a pass at her,” Rochelle said.

Rufia snorted. “Hey, give me credit for a *little* sensitivity. I’m not usually gonna pounce a girl the first time I meet her, especially when she’s only here ‘cuz her bro is in the hospital.”

Rochelle nodded. “Yeah, I can see that. Sorry.”

Rufia shrugged. “Eh. No big. I do kinda encourage people to underestimate me a little, sometimes.”

“Speaking of which,” Rochelle said, “what’s the low-down on this thing with you and Vonnie? You lost your shirt to her at poker and now you’re her salaried Fuse slave? Seriously?”

Rufia grinned. “Yep! She controls the purse strings now, and rents my thumbs by the hour. I expect it’ll catch on once more RIDEs become full cits and start managing their own money. Legally, Vonnie *isn’t* exactly, but in the eyes of the law any arrangement we make between us is up to us to keep.”

“So you think we might see people offering themselves up for rent to RIDEs the way RIDEs are renting out for taxi or mall cart service?” Rochelle asked. “That’s an interesting idea.”

“I’ll bet we see things we haven’t even *thought* of yet,” Rufia said. “Me an’ Vonnie, we’re doing the whole trailblazing thing.”

“So, seriously,” Rochelle asked, glancing across at her. “How’s that working out for you?”

Rufia shrugged. “It’s...different. It’s *not* paid bodyjacking, though, where she’s in charge and I do whatever she says. Unlike your Lindas, we don’t get off on

that kinda thing. It's just me backseating to her half the time 'stead of her backseating to me. I can jump in if I need to, just like she can when I'm running things."

"So what sorts of things does she do with her thumbs?" Rochelle asked.

"Nothing too special. Takes care of business, does a little shopping, sees a movie...goes to singles Fuser bars to pick up guys..."

Rochelle blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah." Rufia grinned. "Oh, she *consults* me, just like I do her when I'm the one doing it. We don't wanna end up with someone the other one can't stand. But it's her choice in the end. Really, I kinda like it. It's fun to see what Vonnie wants out of life, when she's the one in the driver's seat."

"Huh. I might have to try that myself, with Uncia," Rochelle said. "Though...well, the *first* time that happened, she ended up getting me drunk off my head." She chuckled. "But more seriously, I *should* do it. It's too easy to take her for granted. She supports me, backs me up, but doesn't ever seem to ask for anything herself."

Rufia nodded. "Lot of people are that way with their RIDES. With Vonnie...well, I guess she finally just got fed up with watching me blow all my dough and had this whole 'Ur doin it rong' reaction." She shook her head bemusedly. "Funny thing, but now that she's running the show—and taking care of all our utility bills, too—well, I've actually started trying to keep a little money back myself, just to prove I still can." She rolled her eyes. "Damn it's hard. There's so much crap I *want*. And beer."

"Welcome to budgeting in the real world," Rochelle

smirked. “We hope you enjoy your stay.”

Rufia snorted. “It’s not the *real* world, it’s *this* world that’s the problem. Back on Earth, saving up was easy, ‘cuz there wasn’t all that much you could spend it on that wouldn’t end up with *someone* looking at you funny.” She put on a fake Russian accent. “On Zharus, you can always find party. On Mother Earth, Party can always find you.” She shrugged. “Just as well Vonnie’s handling the money matters now. Burning through as much money as we’re getting would really *suck* afterward.”

“Mmm.” Rochelle nodded. “So how’s it been working out on the business side?”

Rufia shrugged. “Oh, you know. Got a lot of jobs lined up the first couple of weeks—everyone wanted to see the gal who got in hock to her own RIDE. Tapering off now I’m not a nine day wonder, but I did snag a couple new regulars from the ones who were more than just curious. You get your foot in the door with a gimmick, you get the chance to wow ‘em and then they’ll ask you back.”

Rochelle nodded. “Well, good.”

“I like to think so.” They walked through the park, down the trail where Roger met Uncia, approaching Rochelle’s neighborhood.

“So that’s why you’ve been such a stranger the last few weeks?” Rochelle asked. “Busy busy?”

“Something like that!” Rufia said, putting a hand behind her head and flushing a little. “It’s been so busy, I haven’t really felt quite myself.”

“Boy, have I ever been *there*,” Rochelle said. “Especially since this whole Fritz thing kicked off. Sometimes it feels like we’re the main ones carrying the

fight for freedom in all of Gondwana, ya know?”

Rufia shook her head. “I’m glad that’s not on *my* shoulders. I’ve had enough to worry about lately as it is.”

“Why? What’s wrong?” Rochelle asked.

“Oh...nothing worth worrying over, really,” Rufia said in tones just a little too light. “Just things.”

Rochelle frowned. “Whenever someone says something’s *not* worth worrying over is usually when it’s *most* worth worrying over.”

Rufia actually chuckled at that. “Reminds me of what the Skylers said about gourmet food.”

Rochelle blinked. “Huh?”

Rufia shook her head. “Forget it. Anyway—oh! Here we are.” They walked up the sidewalk to Rochelle’s house, and Rochelle sent the door unlock code from her wallet.

“You’re dodging the question,” Rochelle said. “Rufia, what’s *wrong*?”

Rufia didn’t say anything until they were inside with the door closed behind them. Then she leaned back against the door and took a deep breath—and Rochelle noticed she was *trembling* a little.

“Rufia!” Rochelle said. “What is it? If this is something Yvonne’s done to you—”

Rufia held up a hand. “No...no, she’s *helping* me with it. It’s just...well, ya know that job Charley and I took on? It went...kind of bad.”

Rochelle took Rufia’s hand and led her over to the couch. “Tell me.”

Rufia grinned shakily. “Without our RIDEs around to do a memory transfer, guess I’ll have to do it the old fashioned way. Probably better that way. Well...anyway,

right after Charley and I buddied up, we got a job offer. Earth tourists, wanted to do some Q prospecting...”

Rochelle “sat right back” on her sofa as Rufia told her “tale of a fateful trip.” She spoke of meeting the Skyler family, from Earth—father Dana, mother Kelly, son Jamie. They had set out on a tourist mining trip aboard a small mining boat without RIDEs for the Skylers, against Rufia’s better judgment.

Then, thousands of clicks into the desert, they’d run into RIDE slavers with a string of three captive RIDEs—and the Skylers had insisted that Rufia and Charlene rescue them.

“Good for them,” Rochelle said. “Ugh. I *hate* RIDE hunters. Bastards.”

Rufia nodded. “Same here. It really woulda pissed me off if I’d had to let ‘em get away.” She sighed. “But considering what happened later, maybe it wasn’t the best idea after all.”

She continued the story, describing the skiff’s arrival at the grounds they’d picked out to prospect, and the bizarre run of luck that had led to the discovery of a huge deposit of nearly-pure Q. “No threat to ol’ Zane, obviously, but a good chunk of change all the same. Our elkbois Tom and Larry just brought the third shipload back in yesterday, and they think there’s still one or two more to go. Our good luck this happened right after Zane got shut down and the market went crazy.”

Then her face took on a more somber cast. “But we didn’t have quite as good luck after that. RIDE-slaving bastards were still in the area, wanted some revenge, and...

well, they took our boat, and us with it.”

Rochelle’s eyes widened. “Oh, no!” she gasped. “What did they—?”

“Put lockdown collars on Fi and Vonnie, sending us into sleepy-bye land. Dumped the Skylers out to freeze to death when the sun went down or roast when it came back up. Took the boat and the rest of us off to Bartertown for sale.”

Rochelle stared. “Good lord! How did you get away? How did the Skylers even *survive*?”

“Well.” Rufia scratched her nose thoughtfully. “I didn’t hear about how it happened ‘til later, but turned out those three RIDEs we’d cut loose from the slavers sorta hung ‘round afterward too. And they showed up where the Skylers were thinking they were shipwrecked slavers, and then rescued ‘em when they found out they weren’t.”

“Well, that’s a piece of luck,” Rochelle said.

“Yeah.” Rufia cracked a wry grin. “Just one thing, though. The RIDE genders didn’t quite match the human ones. The family was M-M-F, and the RIDEs were F-F-M.”

“Oh,” Rochelle said. “So the husband or the son had to crossride.”

“Noooot...’zackly,” Rufia said. “They kinda couldn’t decide who would get to do it, and they asked *Kelly* to choose. This kinda made her a little mad, and then...”

Rochelle blinked, doing the math. “Oh, no. You don’t mean—”

“Yep,” Rufia said. For a moment grinning as broadly as she ever had. “They *all* crossrode. Damnedest thing you ever saw. And they didn’t even have to change their names, either.”

“Oh, wow!” Rochelle said. She shook her head.
“Wait’ll Rhi hears about *that*. A whole *family* of Earthers crossing as soon as they got here. How’re they adjusting?”

“Seemed to be getting on okay, last I saw ‘em,” Rufia said. “They’re a strong family, and crossing hasn’t changed that. If anything, it’s kinda brought them closer together as they all deal with it. Charley, too, since she’s dealing with the same thing. And the RIDEs are helping, too.”

“Wow.” Rochelle thought about that for a moment, then said, “And what about you?”

Rufia’s smile faded as she came back to the story. “I guess...we were luckier than we coulda been. Fi and Vonnie, with Charley and me asleep inside, got sold at the Bartertown slave market. Vonnie’n me ended up with a desperate mining ship captain who was in fifty big ones to a Bartertown loan shark. He was kinda paranoid over the whole slave market thing, wouldn’t let Vonnie wake me up...so she bought off the marker on his ship when he wasn’t looking, and then broke fetter on the entire crew’s RIDEs. You *don’t* piss off *my* elk.”

“Ouch,” Rochelle said. “Um...hey, wait. That captain... was that Tom and Larry?”

Rufia nodded. “Don’t spread it around, but yeah. He wasn’t exactly proud of what he did, and won’t ever do it again. And all in all we were glad we didn’t end up with someone *really* awful, so we all agreed not to hold it against him or blackmail him or anything.”

“What about Fi and Charley?”

“They ended up in a casino brothel that thought Fi was a BBV rather than a spy-RIDE.”

“Ugh, not good,” Rochelle said.

“Yeah,” Rufia said. “They didn’t wanna talk about it much, but I gather Charley was actually awake for it. But on the bright side of things, they didn’t stay too long, and didn’t do more’n flirt at tables ‘fore Jamie Skyler got in and rescued ‘em after the Skylers took their boat back from the slavers.”

“Wait, what?” Rochelle said. “The Skylers took their own boat back? From the same slavers who dumped them? A family of *crossridden Earth tourists*?”

“Well, it was mostly the RIDEs doing it. They were all ex-mil, and still armed,” Rufia explained. “Slavers never even saw ‘em coming.”

“Ah, good for them,” Rochelle said.

“So anyway, it all worked out kinda magically,” Rufia said. “We let Tom’s ship mine out the Skylers’ claim, turned the slavers over to the Marshals on the way back, and then Charley decided to go hang with the Skylers for a while. They decided to extend their vacation sorta permanent-like.”

Rochelle nodded. “I just bet. I don’t think the folks back on Earth would be all that understanding.”

Rufia chuckled. “Ya think?” She shook her head, then sighed. “So yeah, it all worked out like magic. The Skylers found friends, Charley found a place, and we all got lots of money. But I just keep flashing back to that moment when they boarded our boat and locked us down. One a’ the worst moments of my entire life.” She looked at Rochelle and added plaintively, “And I don’t even know *why*! I mean, it’s not like I got raped or tortured or anything. I just...went to sleep and only woke up after Vonnie had rescued us. But...”

“But it was a total loss of control,” Rochelle said. “You went to sleep without knowing if you’d ever wake up again, or how. That can be very traumatic. It doesn’t matter if it wasn’t ‘as bad as’ what happened to someone else if it was bad enough for you.”

“And I didn’t even *do anything* to rescue us!” Rufia said. “I never had the *chance*. It was all on Vonnie. And *she* did it without any help from me. I didn’t even get to help the Skylers get the boat back. I just slept through it all.” She snorted. “Maybe it’s just as well Vonnie’s the boss now. As piss-poor a job as I did of it...”

Rochelle reached out to take Rufia’s hand. “You can’t blame yourself. These things just...happen sometimes.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Rufia said. “That’s what Vonnie says. And she was longer in the military than most humans, so I guess she oughtta know a thing or three about post traumatic stress. She’s got a great therapy program she’s been running on me. It’s been helping some. Better than it was, anyway.”

“That much is good, at least,” Rochelle said. “And maybe I can help you forget for a while in another way.” She winked at Rufia.

Rufia slowly grinned. “I can’t think of anything I’d like more right now.”

Rochelle got up from the sofa, still holding Rufia’s hand. “Then come with me. I think you know the way.”

The next morning found Rochelle and Rufia snuggled up together in her bed, sleeping comfortably. As the morning light first peeped through the eastern window, Rochelle yawned and stretched, then considered the

sleeping giantess who still had an arm around her. After a few moments, she carefully lifted the arm off and rolled out of bed. Rufia grunted in her sleep, but didn't wake.

Rochelle pulled on a robe and headed into the kitchen to Make Coffee (such an important activity deserved capital letters in her consideration, at least at this time of day) and fab some breakfast. By the time she had finished, the sound of a massive yawn from the direction of the bedroom told her that Rufia had finally followed her into wakefulness.

"Morning, hon!" Rochelle said as the big girl in question dragged herself into the kitchen. "Coffee for ya, just how you like it!"

"Oooh, the Elixir of Life!" Rufia grabbed the steaming mug and sipped carefully. "Yum!" She wagged her elk ears appreciatively. "Feeling more human already."

Rochelle grinned. "Nothing like a full ten hours to put the spring back in your step, eh?"

Rufia grinned back. "Did we *get* a full ten hours? I'm pretty sure we weren't sleeping for at least two." She drank more coffee. "You know, we forgot to try those pheromones of yours again."

"I didn't forget about them," Rochelle said. "But the state of mind you were in, it just wouldn't have been a good time. You needed more control, not less. Don't worry, we'll get to 'em. It'll give you something to look forward to."

Rufia glanced at her for a moment. "Huh. Okay, I guess I can see that. And I think you're right."

"So what's on your agenda for today?" Rochelle asked. "Business is pretty slow lately at the garage; I can take the

day off if I want.”

“Huh. I don’t have any jobs lined up just now either,” Rufia admitted. “I’d just been planning to, y’know, hang out and stuff. The usual.”

“Wanna hang out together?” Rochelle asked. “Had a thought for something cool we could do.”

Rufia grinned. “Hey, sure. I’m easy.”

“Great! I’ll give Unnie a call and have her and Vonnie come by to pick us up. We’re goin’ on a *field trip!*”

Uncia and Yvonne pulled up a few minutes later in their respective skimper forms, collapsing back to Walker to rub against or nuzzle their respective partners. “I comes for my *thumbs!*” Yvonne said cheerfully.

“Hey, you two,” Rochelle said as she and Rufia stepped out the front door. Rochelle was clothed casually in a yellow sundress with matching blonde hair, and Rufia had on ripped-up jeans and a green T-shirt reading “Kiss me, I’m Irish!” with the word “Irish” crossed out and “Available” handwritten in. “You gals have as much fun as we did last night?”

“I can’t say for sure ‘til I read your memories of it, but I think so!” Uncia said. “Vonnies soooo much fun to play with!”

“Speaking of fun, how would you two feel about spending the day in Aloha?” Rochelle asked. “I feel like a little fun in the sun, and Rufia mentioned some interesting people I wanna meet.”

“The Skylers? Huh. Sure, sounds like fun,” Yvonne said.

“Oooh, I’ve always wanted to see Aloha!” Uncia said.

“We’re really gonna up and just...go? Just like that?”

“Huh,” Rufia said. “I guess it’s a difference ‘tween the people born here and the ones who came later, but after all these years it still kinda takes me by surprise when someone just suddenly suggests a day trip across the *continent*.”

“We’ve got a sub, and it *is* half mine,” Rochelle said. “So we might as well get some use out of it. C’mon, let’s head down to the garage.”

A few minutes later, they cruised up to the Freeriders Garage, and Uncia converted back to Walker form under her rider and padded in with Rochelle on her back. “There was a young woman from...oh hell, what place name rhymes with leopard?” Rochelle said, waving to Rhianna.

Rhianna chuckled, looking up from the workbench where she was fiddling with a disassembled servo motor. “I’m sure there must be some town somewhere named ‘Shepherd.’”

Rochelle grinned. “I’ll keep that in mind. Just stopped by to let you know I’m gonna take the day off. And, well...”

Rhianna raised an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“Can I borrow the car keys, Mom?” Rochelle asked. “I wanna go cruising with my disreputable friends.” She nodded to the driveway outside the garage, where Rufia grinned and waved from Yvonne-back.

Rhianna laughed. “Sure, just be in by curfew and fill the tank before you come home. Where you going?”

“Got a yen to take in Aloha,” Rochelle said. “Haven’t been there in a while, and figured I’d check up on Charlene and meet Rufe’s new friends the Skylanders. Earth family she guided for who decided to settle here. Why don’cha come

along?”

Rhianna considered it for a moment, then shook her head. “Nah. Too much for me to do here right now. Not a lot of customers, but there’s always stuff to rebuild, and more lessons to give the Lindae. And I’d just be a fifth lifter anyway. But y’knoooow, Aloha...hmm. That’s an idea. Maybe for our second date I could take Zane there. It’s funny—I *bought* that sub, but it’s still hard to get used to the idea I could just go *anywhere* at the drop of a hat.”

“That’s just what Rufe said,” Rochelle said. “Must be an ex-Earther thing.”

“Maybe so,” Rhianna agreed. “Anyway, you kids have fun. Comm if you’re delayed getting back. And let me know if you run across anything Zane and I might enjoy when I take him there.”

Rochelle nodded. “Will do.” She called over her shoulder to Rufia, “Hey, meet me back of the shop, we’ll get loaded and go!”

“Isn’t it a little early to get loaded?” Rhianna asked.

“It’s *never* too early to get loaded!” Rufia replied.

“C’mon, my faithful steed-*cum*-employer—Alohaward *ho!*”

“Who you callin’ a ho?” Yvonne shot back. “*I’m* not the one who sleeps with everything that moves here—”

Rufia thwapped her skimmer on the dash. “Oh, just get to the sub already, you.”

“Well why didn’t you *say* so?” Yvonne said, powering up and driving off toward the rear of the garage.

“Thanks, Rhi,” Rochelle said. “See ya later.”

“Have fun out there!” Rhianna said. “Let me know how it goes.”

“Will do,” Rochelle agreed. “Onward, my faithful

steed!”

“As you say, my faithful Peel!” Uncia replied.

Rochelle blinked. “What?”

Uncia blinked. “Twencen pop culture reference. You didn’t get it?”

“Unlike some, I’m not a frickin’ *digital encyclopedia*,” Rochelle said, rolling her eyes. “I’ll miss some from time to time, you know.”

“I’ll fill you in on the way,” Uncia promised, padding out the rear exit of the garage. Rhianna snorted, and watched them go.

They met at the hangar where the Dreamchaser was kept. Rufia glanced along the ship from stem to stern.

“Really nice little bird,” she said. “Looks cozy.”

“It is. And it gets us where we need to go and doesn’t cost an arm and a leg doing it,” Rochelle said. “It’s what we needed.” She slid down from Uncia’s back and started to walk around it with the leopard, doing the standard pre-flight inspection.

Rufia reached up to rub a scorch mark on the hull. “Seen some action too, I see.”

“Yeah—we stormed Zane’s platform in it,” Rochelle said. “You were out on a job just then and incommunicado or we’d have asked you along, you know.”

Rufia nodded. “Yeah, I’m sorry I missed it. Maybe next time.”

“If you’re around, we’ll call you when we’re ready to go kick Fritz’s butt from here to Proxima,” Rochelle said. “You might wanna stick close. Probably won’t be more’n a few weeks, feels like.”

“I shall take that under advisement,” Yvonne said primly. “But *I’m* the one who makes the decisions here, you know.”

Uncia snorted. “Aw, c’mon, tasty elk. You know you wanna.”

“I’ll think about it, silly leopard,” Yvonne said.

Rochelle finished up her walk-around. “Looks like we’re cool to fly.” She held out her arms and Uncia Fused over her, and Yvonne did the same for Rufia. They climbed into the Dreamchaser’s flight deck, adjusting the cockpit seats for Fuser bodies. Rochelle and Uncia took the pilot’s seat, and Rufia and Yvonne took the co-pilot’s.

“I’ll warm up the engines,” Rochelle said, pulling up the hardlight flight controls in front of her and Uncia. “*Someone* should probably file our flight plan with Uplift ATC. Alas, if only we had a comm specialist who knew how to handle that kind of thing...”

“Yeah, wonder where we could ever find one of those,” Rufia said, pulling up a hardlight panel configured for comm work and interfacing Yvonne into it. “Flight plan for Aloha filed and cleared,” she reported a moment later. “We got lucky, there’s an opening for an exit path in just five minutes.”

“I think we can make it if I let Uncia run the preflight checklist at RIDE speed,” Rochelle said. “Go, kitty o’mine!”

“Sarium batteries to power!” Uncia reported. “Lifters to speed!”

Yvonne snorted. “That’s not a checklist.”

“It’s *my* checklist,” Uncia said.

“It’s *Adam West’s* checklist!” Yvonne said.

“Maybe he was just ahead of his time,” Uncia retorted.

Yvonne responded with an argument-ending raspberry.

Moments later, the Dreamchaser hove majestically out of its hangar and rose on its lifters to clear the garage buildings before coming around to join the flight path Uplift ATC had assigned. Under Uncia's control, her and Rochelle's shared body shoved the throttle forward and the sub accelerated toward the exit gate.

They passed through without incident, and Uncia opened the throttles, then they were pushed back in their seats as the Dreamchaser clawed its way into the sky.

"Oof!" Rufia said. "Hey, why are we feeling the Gs? Don't you have dampers?"

"We keep them at about 50% most times," Rochelle explained. "We kinda like a little kick when we go into space. Makes it feel more like we're really *going* somewhere."

Rufia nodded. "Yeah, guess I can see that. Just a little startling is all."

"We turn it off completely at the top of the arc, enjoy a little zero-gee time."

"Good plan," Rufia said. "I approve."

Rochelle chuckled. "Glad to hear it."

"So," Rufia said, Yvonne's eyes twinkling in lieu of her own, "ever 'done it' in zero-gee?"

"Can't say I have," Rochelle admitted. "It's not exactly something you have time for on the average sub flight, and I never really felt like trying an anti-grav hotel."

"It can be fun, if you get an orbital permit," Rufia said. "Just you, them, and more stars than you've ever seen from on-world. As for anti-grav hotels...bleah. Too fakey. You want the real thing."

“I’ll keep that in mind in case the chance ever comes up,” Rochelle said with a smirk.

Rufia stared out the transparent aluminum canopy panels as the sky grew darker around them. “Y’know, I don’t do subs that often, but this one’s pretty nice. What’cha think, Vonnie, could we mebbe swing one ourselves?”

“Hmm. The Dreamchaser models are pretty economical,” Yvonne admitted. “And sized just about right for our needs—basically a flier with longer legs. I’ll run the numbers and see if we can fit in in.”

“We could kit it out like a mobile home and ditch our apartment, just live out of it,” Rufia said dreamily. “Take it where the jobs are.”

“You’d have to get in the habit of actually throwing crap away if we did that,” Yvonne said dryly.

“I could do that!” Rufia insisted. “I think.”

Yvonne snorted. “*Sure* you could. I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Rufia nodded, and stared out the windows some more. Rochelle let her have her peace. “Sure is different from last time we were on a sub,” Rufia said after a while.

“The Towers incident?” Rochelle guessed.

“The Towers incident,” Rufia confirmed. “Going out to salvage a busted-up hauler full of milspec RIDEs. Ended up meeting an annoying Intie teenager and the Intie asshole to end all assholes.”

“Quinoa’s gotten better, at least,” Rochelle said.

“I know, I know. Saw it last night,” Rufia said. “Still, I remember when she first showed up, actin’ all wise and mysterious.” She snorted. “*That* sure didn’t last.”

“I felt kinda sorry for the kid, really,” Rochelle said. “Not exactly easy growing up rich and then Integrating.”

“And then getting nearly killed, kidnapped, and nearly killed *again*.” Rufia shook her head. “It sucks. The kidnapping part, anyway—got experience with that one now.”

Rochelle nodded sympathetically, then groped for a way to change the subject. “So when’s the last time you were in Aloha?”

“Can’t really recall,” Rufia said. “Work hasn’t taken me down that way a whole lot. They got guides down there who know the locality lots better’n me. Me an’ Vonnie, we tend to stick with what we know.”

“What about vacations? Sub tickets are pretty cheap, y’know.”

Rufia shrugged. “You know me. Suck at saving even *that* much money at a time,” she said.

“But things are gonna be *different* now,” Yvonne put in smugly.

“So a trip to Aloha is just the thing to celebrate with,” Rochelle said.

“Right you are!” Yvonne agreed. “I’m kinda looking forward to seeing the ol’ place again myself. I think the last time we were there was after the Oldfield job four years back, remember? Guy was so happy with our work he invited us to his daughter’s wedding.”

“Oh yeah!” Rufia said, snapping her fingers. She grinned. “And we figured it’d be rude to turn him down, might lead to losing work in the future. So we rented me a tux and went down and hung out. Awwwwkward! We didn’t know a soul at the reception, and I was about as stiff

as a cadaver in that damned suit.”

“You didn’t wear a dress?” Rochelle asked.

“I told ya, girlie, they just don’t suit me. I’d have looked like someone’s easy chair.”

“Aw, you just haven’t found the *right* dress,” Rochelle said. “I might take that as a challenge, ya know.”

“Not that you’ll need it for this trip,” Uncia put in. “Aloha’s pretty easy on the nudity taboos.”

“Oh hey, that’s *right*, isn’t it?” Rufia said, grinning. “I think I’m *really* gonna enjoy this trip.”

They finally reached the turnover point, and Rochelle and Uncia grinned and unstrapped from the seat as gravity faded away. She drifted back out of the flight deck, and Rufia and Yvonne unstrapped to follow.

“We’ve got a big viewport back here in the utility space,” Rochelle said, pointing up to the huge transparent aluminum port in the ceiling. “I’m gonna roll the ship so we get a good view of the planet.”

“Cool beans,” Rufia said. “Bet it’ll be awesome.”

“Oh, it will, and I hope I don’t ever get so jaded by all the sub travel I’ve been doing lately that it doesn’t knock me out every time I see it.” Rochelle grinned and had Uncia send the signal to roll the ship. The starfield slid out of view overhead to be replaced by a huge expanse of sandy desert spread out before them like a map.

“That there is one *hell* of a view,” Rufia said as they floated up next to the viewport. “It all looks so peaceful from up here.”

“Yeah. No sign of desert pirates or rampaging Inties in sight.”

“Maybe someday there won’t be any left on the

ground either,” Uncia said.

“That’d be nice,” Yvonne replied.

They hung there in silence for several minutes, staring down at their world, and Rochelle’s hand somehow found its way into Rufia’s. Then the chime signalling the impending end of weightlessness ended the moment.

“Gravity is a harsh mistress,” Rochelle grumbled as they slid back into their seats on the flight deck.

“Maybe someday we can get an orbital license and you can join the Zero Gee Club,” Rufia said.

“I’ll look forward to that,” Rochelle replied, reaching out to pull up the flight data on the panel in front of her. “But for now we’ve got something else to anticipate. Twenty minutes to Aloha final approach.”

“Whee!” Rufia grinned, watching the horizon rise above the Dreamchaser’s nose. “Dooooown we go!”

“And she knows a thing or two about going down,” Yvonne added.

“Oh, hush up, you,” Rufia said. Uncia and Rochelle giggled.

The Toptown freelance orbital courier waiting room was a small, library-quiet enclave just inside the eastern rim of the dome at the top of the Aloha Elevator. Comfortably upholstered chairs, sofas, and RIDE couches played host to a number of men, women, and their RIDEs. Many of them were flyers of one form or another—birds, bats, even a small dragon. They were arranged according to a hierarchy that might have eluded outsiders but was obvious to someone who knew what he was looking for.

One of the lower-ranked in the hierarchy was one of

the few pilots who didn't have a RIDE based on a flying animal. A teen-aged girl with sandy-orange hair and fennec ears paged down a tablet as her fennec curled up next to her and snoozed. Jamie Skyler smiled at the rest of them from their place of exile in a far corner of the room. All in all, she couldn't say she minded so much. None of the other couriers seemed to be any great prizes to be close to anyway. *Bunch of prissy, stuck-up avian chauvinists*, Jamie thought darkly.

Athena perked up her ears. *:Your thoughts are leaking again, dear,:* she said, her voice dulcet and melodic even across their mental link. *:Just ignore them. We're showing them up every time we make a run.:*

:I was ignoring them,: Jamie insisted.

:Well, don't ignore them so loudly, then,: Athena smirked. *:You know, if they annoy you we could go somewhere else. As long as we stay within a few blocks we can hit the drop almost as quickly.:*

Jamie shook her head. *:Nah, I don't mind them. It's just what they represent that annoys me.:*

Athena raised her head, swiveling her ears as if seeking for some familiar sound. *:Happily it's about to become a non-issue, at least for now. Just got a ping from Spindletip, Inc. They've got another package, and they asked for us specifically. Their man's on the way over, ETA five minutes. I'm reserving a slot in the drop now. And—ooh! Another ping! Rufia's inbound to Aloha on a sub flight!:*

Now it was Jamie's turn to perk up. *:Rufe? Really? That's great! It's been weeks! Why's she coming?:*

:Showing a friend around, looks like. Oh! And the

friend's Rochelle Seaford, Charley's greaty-great descendant.:

:Oooh, the one who's supposed to be even hotter than Charley? I've wanted to meet her!: Jamie still wasn't sure what her relationship preferences were yet—the hormones didn't seem to have quite settled—but she found the ex-guy parts of her id still seemed to appreciate a good-looking woman regardless. All the crossrider self-help books she read seemed to suggest that was perfectly normal for this early on, so she was going to enjoy it while it lasted.

:We'll get our chance. We should be through with this run by the time they land.:

Jamie nodded. Then she turned her eyes toward the door, as did a half dozen other couriers, as a middle-aged, business-suited man carrying a small package came in, looked around, and headed her way. She chuckled inwardly. Part of the rules of the local couriers' guild was that companies who wanted specific couriers rather than taking the next one up in queue paid a line-jumper's surcharge. So far, most of the companies Jamie had worked for were happy to pay the surcharge, and every time was an in-your-face to all the birds-of-a-feather who thought land animal RIDEs had no business in aerospace.

Wasting no time on words, the man placed the package in Jamie's hands and nodded to her. She nodded back as Athena converted to her streamlined crotch-rocket skimmer bike form and opened a protected storage compartment to receive it. Then Jamie mounted up and silently hovered out the skimmer exit at the back of the room, kicking the lifters to noisier life as the door sealed

behind them and they pulled out into a broad corridor with lighted acceleration arrows rippling down the center

“Traffic is clear all the way to the drop,” Athena reported. “We’ve got solid greens.”

“Then let’s kick it.” Jamie crouched low over the bike’s panel as the lifters and inertial dampers kicked in to shoot them down the tunnel at an ever-increasing speed. Ahead of them, hardlight panels sealed off cross-corridors to prevent accidents as others shifted to align the path into a certain exit. The bike was already hurtling through the air at 200 kph as the tunnel angled sharply downward and narrowed, and gravity bent 90 degrees straight ahead and multiplied. Focused lifters in the tunnel walls accelerated the bike straight ahead like a giant gauss projectile and moments later it hurtled out into space.

Athena Fused up around her rider just before they passed through the semipermeable hardlight wall that kept atmosphere in the station. As they streaked downward at an angle taking them well clear of the elevator’s danger zone, the space around them shimmered as the RIDE called a protective hardlight aeroshell into being. A classic lifting body shape, it was well-shielded for a swift re-entry.

As their course settled in, Athena opened their usual VR—the two of them seated in camp chairs on a Deep Dry promontory looking out over one of the most scenic parts of the Trench, with the foreboding curtain of the Western Wall mountain range in the background. A frosty pitcher of lemonade sat on a small table between them, and displays showing the real-world view through Athena’s eyes hovered in front of them. Jamie had already mastered

the trick of splitting her attention, being both there and in the real world at the same time, though right now she had most of it out in the real world.

Jamie grinned as the planet started to flatten out beneath them at a speed that would have frightened many pilots. “I am so glad you talked me into using our celebration bonus to get you this aeroshell. *Power* diving is so much more fun than just skydiving!” When the payment for the first shipload of ore had come in, her parents had been so amazed by how much they’d gotten that they’d decreed each family member could spend 10,000 *mu* on some crazy thing to celebrate. The funny thing was that all three of them had ended up spending it on their own RIDEs. Go figure.

As they picked up speed, they also began to pick up heat, a fiery red glow surrounding the shell. Even with the insulating vacuum between their Fused body and the shell, and Athena’s internal cooling systems, Jamie could still feel the heat picking up. It would be worse by the time they made it all the way down, but Jamie had never *quite* gotten cooked yet, and was confident she wouldn’t this time either. “Wheee! We’re on an express elevator to Hell, going *down!*”

As the uniformly flat ground began to develop distinguishable features, Rufia busied herself in VR for a few moments. Then she opened Yvonne’s eyes on the outer world again and grinned across at Rochelle. “Hey, look over thataway. ‘Bout thirty degrees to port.”

Rochelle followed Rufia’s gaze. “What am I looking at? Besides the Aloha’vator?” The space elevator rose in

the distance, a just silver thread in the starlight but still impressive.

“Wait for it...” Rufia said. A moment later, a burning cinder flared to life halfway down and a couple degrees left of the elevator, burning brightly and falling fast.

Rochelle blinked. “What in the—?” She dialed up the magnification on Uncia’s optics enough to spot the hardlight aeroshell in the heart of the conflagration—and the darker form of a Fused RIDE in the heart of that. It was taking the steepest possible re-entry path, diving at meteor speed.

“Not *quite* the steepest possible, but closer to it than not,” Uncia corrected. “Wow. You don’t often see that outside of military combat drops.”

“Or high speed urgent couriers,” Rochelle said. “At a guess, delivering something from high orbit to the ground floor that couldn’t wait hours for a lift car.”

Rufia nodded. “Prototypes from some zero-gee fabbery, most like.”

“Makes sense,” Rochelle said. She was well aware that some exotic materials needed true zero-gee to grow, because emanations from lifter antigrav would scramble the delicate crystalline structures. “Still, whoever it is has got to be at least a little nuts.”

“You’ll have to judge for yourself when you meet her,” Rufia said, still grinning. “She’ll be waiting at the aerodrome when we land. Rate she’s falling, she’ll have plenty of time to finish the delivery ‘fore we even hit approach.”

Rochelle looked back at Rufia. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.” Rufia chuckled. “That there is Jamie Skyler

and her gal-pal Athena, part-time superfast couriers for hire. I was just on the horn with them to see if they were around, and we had the luck of perfect timing.”

Rochelle glanced back at the ember, now cooled to a dull red glow and almost all the way to the bottom of the elevator. “She took a job?”

“Yeah, her Mom and dad figured it’d be good for her. Teach her responsibility *annat*, and give her a little extra spending cash. They *all* got jobs, in fact. Keep from getting bored, feel useful, and be all frugal-like while they ease themselves into the whole piles o’ money thing.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” Rochelle said. “I’d probably do the same if I got rich.”

“*I’m* doing the same and I’m rich,” Rufia said. Yvonne cleared her throat loudly, and Rufia rolled their eyes. “Oh, all right, *Vonnie* is. But if we didn’t *want* to work, we wouldn’t have to for a good while now.”

“Personally, I get my jollies watching Rufia sweat and toil for her room and board,” Yvonne said. “So, yeah.”

Rochelle chuckled, then Uncia took over the flight controls to bring them in on final approach. Rufia opened a channel to the Aloha traffic control tower, and they were all too busy for casual conversation for a while. There was a slight delay before they could land due to some commercial sub traffic congestion, but fifteen minutes later they were taxiing to a halt within a rental hangar just off the main landing strip.

“Well, here we are,” Rochelle said as she swiveled the seat around and got to her feet, taking a moment to adjust to the feel of full gravity again. “Wanna go see what trouble we can get into?”

Rufia grinned. “Sounds like a plan.”

They began braking at 100 km up, first with lifters and then by adjusting the shape of the aeroshell for a broader lifting surface. If they hadn't, they'd have burned up by the time they hit the lower atmosphere. After just a couple minutes of lifter thrust, half-draining the external sarium battery packs they carried for the fall, they had managed to upgrade their probable fate to klick-wide splatter.

Athena banked the aeroshell, converting their glide path into a wide spiral so they wouldn't range too far afield from their target, shedding more momentum. The shell shook a little as its lifting surfaces bit into thicker air. “We're on track for splashdown in seven minutes,” Athena reported, flashing her partner a thumbs-up in VR. “Another perfect dive!”

“Don't get too cocky just yet,” Jamie reminded her. “It's still a long way down.” She was feeling downright toasty now. She knew she would have been soaked in sweat if Athena's nanites hadn't whisked it away as soon as it left her pores.

“But we'll get there!” Athena said.

Jamie snorted. “How could we *not*?” But she grinned nonetheless. The rosy glow was starting to fade from the aeroshell's transparent hull, giving Jamie a clear view through it at the coastline spread out beneath them like a map. This was her favorite part of the ride, just drifting down where she could savor the sight of their gorgeous new home. Too bad it only lasted a couple of minutes.

“You know, when we're not busy sometime, we could

stay up here for hours,” Athena pointed out. “I like the view myself.”

“Maybe sometime,” Jamie said. “But I dunno. It’s kind of nice to enjoy just in quick bites, so I don’t get spoiled for it.”

“That’s a good point,” Athena conceded.

They continued plummeting, straddling the border between a controlled dive and an uncontrollable fall. Jamie was thankful that Athena could override her inner ears. It wouldn’t do to get sick inside her partner.

She began to be able to make out individual neighborhoods in the urban spread beneath them, then individual buildings. By now they were right over the coast, tracking southeast. Athena put a carat mark over their destination in Jamie’s head-up view. “Almost there!”

“About time! This is taking *forever!*” Jamie sent with a grin. Athena snorted.

Spindletip was a company that took its space-to-ground deliveries seriously, even going so far as to situate its ground-based facility on the coast to permit splashdown landings. Athena could have touched down on land, of course, but a splashdown could shave a few minutes of braking and a few batteries’ worth of thrust, letting the sea dissipate the excess velocity they would otherwise have had to dump themselves. Jamie could appreciate that.

“How’s our speed looking?” Jamie asked as they passed one klick high.

“We’re right in the green!” Athena said as the Spindletip facility grew and grew in front of them. “As I said, another perfect dive!” Her VR avatar hopped up and

did a little victory dance.

The sea rushed up at them and Jamie mimed holding their nose. The inertial dampers took most of the splashdown shock, and for a moment Jamie was treated to the bright green panorama of the Alohan undersea coast. Then they rose back to the surface and out of the water. Athena converted to her bike form and dropped the aeroshell. The water that had clung to the shell fell into the sea around them like rain, leaving them dry but for the few drops that fell from right overhead. Then Athena kicked in her thrust and they motored for the drop-off station.

Things worked just as efficiently here. The station was reminiscent of a bank drive-up window, with a container airlock beneath a transparent aluminum viewport. They slid the package into the slot, waited a few moments for its condition to be verified, and received an instant cash transfer to their wallet account. Within just a couple of minutes, they pulled away free and clear, stopping at a quick-charge station on the way out to pick up the battery refill that was their due.

On another day, they might have lifted back for Toptown, taking an hour or so to get back, sign in, and prepare to do it all again. Depending on how business went, they could get as many as three or four runs out of a weekend day like this. But since Rufia was in town, they both agreed that it could wait. Let the avians enjoy themselves for a while. They could afford it, as good as business had been lately.

“We could ‘afford it’ anyway,” Athena pointed out. “It’s not as if we have to pay our own room and board, and even if we did, you’re rich.”

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Jamie said. “C’mon, let’s hit the spaceport.”

The two Fused RIDERs stepped down the gangplank and sealed the ship, then the RIDEs de-Fused off them into their Walker forms. Rochelle blinked and looked down at her new attire, which was considerably different than than the dress she’d been wearing. Her clothing now consisted entirely of sandals on her feet, a pair of Daisy Dukes, and a fairly narrow light blue bikini top, nano-tailored as usual to show off her perfect figure. “This is new.”

“That dress would have been too hot here,” Uncia said. “And it’d make you look like a tourist.”

“We *are* tourists,” Rochelle retorted.

“Then you wanna hire a couple of friendly native guides?” a slim, sandy-haired waiting outside the hangar door asked. She was in her late teens, though the immense fennec ears poking up through her hair made her look younger—not to mention adorably cute. “Theenie and I work chea—*guh!*” Jamie trailed off as she caught sight of the exquisitely-shaped Rochelle, and just *stared*—even when the oversized fennec RIDE next to her bit her on the leg.

Before Rochelle could override them, the nanites’ stare reflex kicked in. She tossed her head, setting her lush hair swinging in its usual slight slow motion. Jamie just stared harder. “Argh!” Rochelle muttered, pulling on her interface specs and finding the controls to dial the nanites back. “Sorry ‘bout that. I swear, these damn things are more trouble than they’re worth...”

“Um...you don’t need to be sorry, not at *all*,” Jamie mumbled, shaking her head and clearly trying to force her eyeballs back into it. “I didn’t know I even *had* a thing for women anymore.”

Rochelle smiled at her. “It’s my cosmetic nanites. I’m so used to them that I keep them on all the time—even when I probably shouldn’t. They do make quite the first impression, don’t they? Anyway, I’m Rochelle Seaford, and you must be Jamie Skyler.” She held out a hand.

Jamie took it. “Well, if I must, I must. Nice to meet you. Rufia’s talked about you, and Charley too.”

“And same to you,” Rochelle said, looking her over. Jamie was wearing a light pastel pink bodysuit of a micro-thin thermal fabric that would pass heat and wick away sweat under normal circumstances but serve as an insulating wetsuit when immersed. It left essentially nothing to the imagination by itself, so she had Bermuda shorts and a violet halter-top on over it. Most places in Aloha, she could have gotten by without them, or with even less, but they were probably a concession to her Earth upbringing.

Then Rochelle turned her attention to Athena. “I see Nuevo San still knows how to build ‘em.”

“And Aloha RIDEworks knows how to upgrade ‘em,” Athena said in an unexpectedly melodious voice. “Though I’m told you’re not exactly bad at it yourself.”

“If you’re ever in Uplift again, stop by for a tune-up,” Rochelle said.

“Heeeey, kiddo!” Rufia said, stepping up next to Rochelle. She was wearing a bright red one-piece spandex swimsuit, with a big belly cut-out panel. “How’s the

courier biz?”

“Fine as frog hair!” Jamie said. “We’re getting a rep as some of the fastest couriers around, thanks mostly to my pard here.” She patted Athena on the head, and the fennec wagged her tail. “You should see all the avians eating their hearts out.”

“You’re too kind,” Athena said. “The credit should really go to the aeroshell upgrade you bought me when the first ore sales receipts came in. Without that, I wouldn’t have the juice for those power dives.”

“But *you’re* the one who picked it out,” Jamie said. “Great choice, I thought.”

“It sure looked like fun to *me!*” Uncia said. “Shelley, can *we* get one, too? *Pleeeeeeease?*”

“I’ll...*think* about it,” Rochelle said, grinning. “So, Jamie, how did your parents take your choice of job?”

“They were...kinda against it,” Jamie said. “Until Theenie pointed out that it wasn’t exactly likely I’d get hijacked by pirates from orbit, and *she* was the one who’d be doing all the work.”

“It didn’t hurt that they were still rather impressed with our performance retaking the boat back in Bartertown,” Athena said.

“So after they looked into the whole thing in depth, and reviewed her service record for suborbital drops, they said we could do it part-time as long as I kept my grades up,” Jamie said, grinning. “Not only do I get to ‘dive, I get paid for it. How cool is that?”

“Very cool,” Rochelle agreed. “So what’s your schedule like today?”

“It’s open,” Jamie said. “I freelance, so it’s all up to

me. I could take more jobs, or just take the day off. And since it's Saturday, no school."

"Cool!" Rufia said. "We were thinking of hunting up your folks and Charley. Is she in town?"

"Yeah, I think she just got in last night," Jamie said. "I 'spect she and Fi both will be happy to see you."

"It'll be a regular family reunion, it will." Rufia grinned. "In maybe more ways than one."

Rochelle was still regarding Jamie with more than a little curiosity. Even though she was very familiar with crossriding by now, it always took her a little aback when she met someone from such a different culture who'd done it. "So how have things been for you since..."

"The change?" Jamie asked, her ears swiveling forward like twin radar dishes. "It's been...interesting. You know how it is, you did it yourself. Different reflexes, ways of moving...*hella* different plumbing...it's even kinda different *thinking* anymore." She shook her head. "Gets a little harder every day to remember how it even *felt* to be old me. Which is kinda disturbing when I think about it, but I guess it must be normal."

Rochelle nodded. "Even for non-crossed, it can be hard to remember 'how it felt to be you' even a year or two ago. Your body lives in the now."

"Speaking of living in the now, how 'bout we do some of it somewhere more scenic than this airport?" Yvonne suggested. "I wanna hit the beaches before it's time to go home."

"Sounds like a plan!" Uncia said, converting to her sports-skimmer form.

Rochelle grinned. "I'm picking up some *subtle hints*

that we should get a move on. So where to now?”

“Let’s go see my Mom,” Jamie said. “He’s on shift over at the Chalmers physical rehab center today.”

“Cool!” Rochelle climbed into Uncia’s cockpit as Yvonne and Athena converted to their own bike forms. Together they headed away from the aerodrome and up the road toward the city proper.

As they drove along, Jamie cheerfully pointed out local landmarks with the pride and verve of a long-time native. It was hard to believe she’d only been here for a couple of months altogether.

:She seems to be adjusting well,: Rochelle commed privately to Rufia.

:You know kids,: Rufia said. *:Can get used to just about anything. Little harder for us geezers.:*

Rochelle snorted. *:I’ll make sure to get you some Geritol on the way back.:* She watched Jamie and Athena trundle along ahead of them, Athena’s engines barely ticking over as they moved with the flow of 150 kph freeway traffic. *:Gonna be interesting to meet the parents.:*

As they cruised along the freeway, only the fact that Athena had a rear-facing camera kept Jamie from turning to look over her shoulder all the time. After a couple of minutes, Athena sighed dramatically over private comm and took over steering so Jamie would be free to stare back at Rochelle—as much of her was visible through Uncia’s hardlight canopy, anyway.

“Didn’t we go through this with Charlene?” Athena reminded her.

“Well, yeah, but...I mean *wow*, just look at her,” Jamie said. “It’s like...she’s *hella* perfect. Even the ways she’s *not* perfect are perfect.” She sighed. “And just like Charley, I’m sure she won’t give me the time of day.”

“You know, you’re still technically a minor,” Athena pointed out. “You’re not *quite* 18 yet.”

“Yeah, but the statutory rape laws around here take into account the maturity level of the teenager,” Jamie said. “I hold down an orbital courier job, that’s gotta count for something.”

Athena sighed, reflecting it would probably not do much good to remind Jamie that *she* was the one who did most of the work there. “Are you sure you even really *are* attracted to her? Or is it just the ghost of your pre-Change self?”

“I...don’t know,” Jamie admitted. “Some people who Change keep their old preferences in addition to their new ones. Some never even change *from* the old ones.”

“Well, it’s pretty clear you’ve got the new ones,” Athena said. “From all the VR play you’ve been doing, not to mention the way you’ve already slept with half the guys in Dayla’s pod...”

Jamie rolled her eyes. “It was only three of them, geez.”

“But you haven’t done anything with other girls yet,” Athena continued.

“Yeah, and that’s why I’m not sure.” Jamie took another look at the camera view, and sighed. “I don’t know,” she repeated. “I’d say there’s just one way to find out, but it doesn’t look like that’s gonna happen. Probably for the best. Since she’s Rufe’s friend, Mom and Dad would

find out right away.”

“That would be...problematic, yes,” Athena agreed.

“I’m not sure they don’t already know about...what I’ve been doing already,” Jamie said. “But that would be too much to ignore.”

“We’re almost to the clinic,” Athena pointed out.

“Yeah.” Jamie shrugged. “I guess I’ll worry about it later.”

I know you will, Athena thought wryly. But she didn’t really mind. As annoyances went, teen angst wasn’t even in the same league as a burned-out old drill sergeant. So whatever Jamie wanted to gripe about, she’d gladly lend a semi-sympathetic ear.

As they pulled up at the Chalmers Clinic, a small medical campus not far from the coast, Rochelle looked at the sign in surprise. “Huh,” she said.

“What is it?” Rufia asked.

“If I remember right, this is where Doc Munn’s clinic is, too,” Rochelle said. “He’s back in Uplift right now treating Zane and Carrie-Anne.”

“Huh,” Rufia said. “Ships that dock at each other’s ports in the night.”

Jamie pulled into the parking lot and dismounted, Athena converting back to her fennec shape. The others followed suit, their RIDEs changing back beside them. Jamie glanced at Rufia, and a little longer at Rochelle.

“This way, everyone.”

Rochelle and Rufia traded glances and followed. “I think she’s got it baaaaad for you,” Rufia whispered.

Rochelle rolled her eyes. “Of course she does, she’s a

crossridden teenager. Double-stacked hormones. She'll get over it."

Jamie's fennec ears twitched. "Ah, Mom's in the gym," she said. "He says come on in, he's just finishing up."

"Cool, let's go meet him," Rochelle said.

The gym was furnished with the traditional varnished hardwood floor and basketball hoops along the walls and sides, much like any high school gymnasium. A fairly large, muscular man with a tawny mane of hair, mutton-chop whiskers, and lion ears and tail was standing beneath one of the hoops. He was talking to a slender brunette woman with the ears, horns, and tail of an oryx antelope, holding a basketball in her hands.

"See, you're still trying to shoot like a man," the lion-man said. "You can't just slam it in with muscle strength anymore because you just don't have as much. Your body's not built that way. You're going to have to use more finesse. More like this." He made an exaggerated slow-motion shooting gesture with his arms.

"Oh...I see," the woman said. "I'll try it again. Thanks, Kelly."

"No problem," Kelly said. "You should have seen me a few weeks ago when I first tried to shoot hoops. No aim whatsoever, and the balls were going all over the place. But now..." He took the ball and shot. It hit the rim and bounced away. "...I *still* can't sink it worth a darn. But I'm getting better. And so will you, Bonnie."

The oryx-woman ducked her head in a quick nod. "Thanks," she said. "I wish I could be just a *little* stronger."

Kelly nodded back. "I know. But very few male to female crossriders keep that much muscle."

Then they both turned to see the newcomers, and Bonnie glanced from Rufia back to Kelly. "...really?"

Kelly chuckled. "Then again, there are exceptions to every rule."

Rufia laughed. "I'm no exception. If you think I'm beefy now, you should have seen what the *old* me was like. I could probably have bench-pressed Gordy."

The immense lion RIDE in question, curled up at one end of the gym, raised his head long enough to shoot Rufia a doubtful look. "Oh? In what gravity?"

Kelly grinned. "I'd like to have seen that. Hey, Rufe, Jamie, and...from those looks and that leopard, I'm guessing you must be Rochelle, right?"

"You can call me Shelley, Kelly," Rochelle said. "Hey, how 'bout that, we rhyme."

Kelly glanced at Bonnie. "Anyway, keep trying, you'll get it. Same time next week?"

The oryx-woman nodded. "Works." She scooped up the ball and tried another shot. It missed, but she grabbed the ball on the rebound and tried again, an expression of determination writ plain on her face.

Kelly walked over to Gordon, and the others followed. "So what brings you all to Aloha?" Kelly asked. "Visiting your great-great ancestor?"

"That's part of it," Rochelle said. "But I also wanted to meet you-all, after Rufe told me about what happened on your trip. I wanted to see how you were managing. Crossriding isn't always easy even for people who've spent a lot of time here."

"Let alone ones who just got off the banana boat from poor ol' backward, repressed Earth?" Kelly asked, without

rancor. “Well...it’s not always been easy. Some nights I still wake up completely disoriented until I remember what happened and where I am, and Jamie and Dana have their own problems. But we’re getting by.”

“And you’re helping other people with the same problems,” Uncia put in. “That’s really cool.”

“It was Dr. Munn’s idea,” Kelly said. “There was an opening for a physical therapist, he liked my credentials, and thought it might help me cope. Sort of a learn-by-doing thing.”

“Did it work?” Rufia asked.

“Well, I’m learning at least as much from my patients as they are from me,” Kelly said. “And it seems to be getting easier. So I guess that would be a yes.”

“How did you happen to meet Dr. Munn?” Rochelle asked. “Funny coincidence, but he’s currently back in Uplift, treating a couple of friends of ours.”

“Whoa, that’s one hella big house call,” Jamie said. “Dayla recommended him when Mom and Dad asked about doctors with a lot of experience in crossriding.”

Kelly nodded. “So we set up an appointment, and he was really good! He knew exactly what we were going through. It helped that he’d been through it himself, repeatedly, and knew other ex-Earthers who had it happen involuntarily.”

“And he’s had time to build up a *lot* of experience,” Rochelle said.

“We were more than a little surprised when we learned he was one of the founding parents of this whole polity,” Kelly continued. “I’m a little surprised he’s still practicing. I expect he wouldn’t have to work another day

in his life if he didn't want to."

"Rich person who does what he does because he loves it?" Rochelle said. "Gee, *that* sounds familiar."

"When you put it that way, I guess it does." Kelly grinned. "Speaking of which, want to go track down my husband? Wife? Whatever."

"Works for me!" Rochelle said. They followed the man and his RIDE out of the gym.

As they were walking out to the parking lot, Rochelle caught something out of the corner of her eye. She turned to see a white racer-style skimmer pulling up to one of the spots reserved for the staff of the clinic. As she watched, the hardlight canopy dissolved and a white-haired man with the ears and tail of a Samoyed dog hopped out. The flier drew in on itself and converted back to a dog RIDE to match.

"Hey, would you guys excuse me a minute?" Rochelle asked. "I think I know those two."

Kelly looked over and his eyes widened a little, "You know Doctor Munn's son?"

"Doctor Munn's son?" She thought a moment and pieces clicked together. "Well I'll be... Come on over and we'll sort this out." She headed over to catch the pair before they could leave the parking lot. "Hey, Chimo, wasn't it? And Aaron? How're your other halves doing?"

The dog peered at her in confusion. "Pardon me, but do I know you?"

Aaron nodded to the lions, and regarded the attractive leopard-woman appreciatively. "I don't *think* so. I'm pretty sure I'd remember you. Did we meet at Kokomo?"

Rochelle offered a hand for Chimo to sniff. “The size of the hole you made in our garage wall and you don’t remember me? Gosh, I’m crushed.” She grinned. “Of course, I have changed just a *leetle* bit since then.”

Chimo’s eyes widened. “*Roger Seaford?* Is that you?” His tail started wagging excitedly.

“Well, it’s Rochelle now, but yes.” She nodded to Uncia, who had come up behind her along with all the others. “I finally found the right RIDE. Or she found me. This is Uncia, my RIDE...and here are my friends Rufia and Yvonne. Looks like you already know the Skylers. Everyone, meet Aaron Munn and Chimo.”

“Hey, cool to meet you all! And it’s great you two found each other.” Aaron said, warming up from his initial wary reaction. “Chena and Ashley are getting along fine. We’re all keeping busy at school lately, but we usually get together on the weekends.”

“How have the new bodies been working out for you? I don’t have my partner’s eye for detail, but it looks like you’re keeping it pretty well-tuned.”

“We are,” Chimo said. “We have a great local shop that we go to. They’re the ones who suggested Ryan’s place.” His smile dropped for a moment. “We did mean to come back by your garage the next time we were in Uplift, but we haven’t gotten out that way the last couple of years.”

“Though Mom has,” Aaron said. “He’s in Uplift right now treating...well, a couple of special cases. Have a few Inties in your family and suddenly you’re the expert on healing them it seems.”

Rochelle nodded. “I know. Zane Brubeck and one of

his bodyguards, Carrie-Anne. They're good friends of ours. Rhianna and I saw your Mom just yesterday, in fact." She grinned. "It's kinda what jogged my memory about you guys. Been a lot of customers since then, but not too many named 'Munn'."

Aaron raised an eyebrow. "Rhianna? So Ryan stopped going passive with Kaylee?"

"Hey, you met her back in his stick-in-the-mud days? Cool!" Rufia said. "She never told me she knew one of the Munns!" She considered. "Of course, knowing her, he probably didn't even put it together himself back then. One track mind, that gal."

"Well, the Munns aren't a big name up your way. And we weren't making a big deal of it. We had other concerns on our minds back then. Still, whether by himself, or as Kaylee, he really helped set our minds at ease."

Now it was Rochelle's turn to be surprised. "You knew Kaylee was really him all along? How did you..." She thought back, and her eyes widened. "It was Scratch, wasn't it? He's an Integrate! Now that we've been working with them...all those little things that seemed kind of odd about him back then make sense. Like that little smirk he was always wearing whenever he looked at 'Kaylee'."

Aaron smirked. "Good guess. He filled us in the first day once we left Chena. I think I nearly blew his cover myself later on, if Chimo hadn't caught me."

"Seems I'm always muting you guys. We've got a lot of Inties in our family; keeps Mom on his toes." Chimo pointed out.

"I think I may have met one or two of them at Intie get-togethers," Rochelle said. "Heh, just wait'll I tell Rhi

we had an Intie in the garage three years before the Towers. How is Scratch, by the way? Did you ever find his Dad?”

“We did!” Chimo said.

“It was kind of a rocky start at first, but... they’re working on it,” Aaron said.

“How long are you going to be here?” the RIDE asked eagerly. “We did promise to show you some of the non-touristy sites of the city.”

“We’ve got our own sub, so we’re pretty flexible,” Rochelle said. “Rufe and I came down to visit the Skylers. Had been planning to head back tonight, but can stay over. Or for that matter come back any time.”

“Ashley and Chena will be glad for that; they’re out in the Dry on a class project, but they’re coming back in soon. Scratch is around and I’m sure she’d love to meet you again. Being able to drop all the cloak and dagger act has helped her tonnes. We could get her, and kick off a pub crawl. Or whatever else you might prefer to crawl to. You and your friends of course.”

Rufia grinned her characteristic shark-width grin. “Did someone say pub crawl? Are you buying?”

“Be warned, Rufia will clean you right out,” Rochelle said. “I swear she’s got a portal to jump space where she puts it all or something.”

Aaron laughed. “That I’ve gotta see. I’d love to pit you against Ash.”

Rochelle grinned. “I’ll bet at least a hundred *mu* on Rufia in a drinking contest any day. I *would* like to meet Scratch again, though. Since you called her ‘she’ I guess she’s one of those Inties who can swap genders?”

Chimo wagged his tail proudly. “She’s got it down to five minutes now for a switch. She tends to stay female most of the time, for Amy’s sake. That’s her dad.”

“Well cool. I would like to meet her again. How’s her DIN work for her? We’ve been doing a bit of work on those.”

Aaron blinked and laughed. “You’re *that* Rochelle Seaford? Man for someone who doesn’t know us, you sure know a lot of us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our cousin, Wanda, is our in family tech guru, and Astranikki’s daughter. She’s been updating Nikki and Scratch’s DIN’s ever since they came home. With all the Intie stuff you and Ryan-Rhianna have been putting out lately, she’s been testing new stuff daily. Scratch and Nikki have been trying more DIN’s in the past few months than they’ve had since they came home. Aunt Nikki put her talon down on more alpha versions, but Scratch is still a willing test subject.

“You’ve probably been talking to her on the mesh and never realized it.”

Rochelle chuckled. “Really? What’s her handle?”

Chimo smirked, “You want just one? She uses a dozen that I know of, and at least a dozen more I don’t know of.”

“Yeah, that sounds normal, especially for our business. So she’s been working on your family’s DINs?”

“For years now. Ever since she saw the junk they came in from the Cave of Wonders with. I think Scratch only goes through one or two a week now, if that. Mike’s got it worse; between the Sillies and Wanda competing to make him a better DIN, he rarely knows which way he’s going.”

“Years, huh?” Rochelle shook her head. “It’s kind of weird. I keep thinking we’re the only ones doing any work on that front, since Fritz basically stomped anyone he could find who was trying it. But every so often I keep getting these little reminders that there *are* others who just hid it better. Like the Marshals and your Wanda.”

“They didn’t hide it better, just differently. It’s usually obvious when you know where to look; but you have to know where to look in the first place.”

“Now you’ve really got me curious to meet her. Fresh, different point of views can lead to interesting breakthroughs.”

“I suppose we could arrange something,” Aaron mused. “But knowing her, you may want to have your next month free.”

“Hey, we’ve got a big house, plenty of spare room even with Charlene,” Kelly put in. “We’d be happy to have you over as long as you wanted, save some hotel fare.”

“Well, we can’t be away *too* long right now, there’s too much crap going on we need to be there for,” Rochelle said. She made a face. “That mess with Fritz. We’d planned to go back tonight. But maybe we *could* swing an extra day or so.”

Rufia glanced at her deer. “What’s my social calendar like, Vonnie?”

“As empty as your wallet usually is!” Yvonne said cheerfully. “I wouldn’t mind sticking around myself. It’ll be fun to play with some new friends!”

“Great! A trip to Aloha should at least be an overnigher, to see the sights. Send Chimo your contacts, we’ll send you where to meet up tonight,” Aaron said.

“On it!” Uncia said cheerfully.

“By the way, if there’s anything you’d like to send to your Mom, we can drop it off for you express when we do fly back,” Rochelle offered.

“We don’t have anything, but maybe there’s something in the office they want sent up. We’re just here on our own business, gathering data for some of our own projects.”

“Oh right! I guess we did interrupt you. We didn’t make you late for anything did we?”

Aaron waved his hand dismissively, “Nah, nothing important. But we should get going. It was good to meet you again. I hope to see you tonight, and if not I’m sure we’ll be in touch some other way.”

Rufia smirked, “Let’s count the ways: through your RIDEs, through your mother, through your cousin,”

“Ruf! Right, I’m sure we’ll see you tonight. We’ll be in touch. Good to see you two again.”

“You too. See you ‘round, Skylers.” Aaron waved and set off for the office again, with his RIDE beside him.

“Well, that was interesting,” Rufia said as they walked away. “I didn’t know you knew any Munns ‘sides the doc.”

“Well, it was more of a passing acquaintance,” Rochelle said. “One of their RIDEs got busted up and we were conveniently placed to swap the core to a new DE for them. Two core swaps actually, since they did both dogs at once. I hadn’t thought about them in years ‘til I saw them. Didn’t even link them to Doc Munn.”

“I’ve only met a few of them a few times, but they’re good people,” Kelly said. “Probably why this polity is so

well off.”

“So where are we going now?” Uncia asked.

“Dad works out of VR most of the time, so she and Isolde go different places day to day for variety,” Jamie said, straddling Athena’s cycle form. “You know where they’re at now, ‘Theenie?’”

“Survey says...the Arch observation platform,” Athena replied.

“Oh, cool! I’d wanted to show you guys that place anyway,” Jamie said. “Let’s go!”

Gordon converted into his mini-tank form and Kelly climbed inside. Rochelle whistled. “Impressive.”

“He gets me where I’m going,” Kelly said cheerfully. “Can’t ask for more than that.”

Uncia also converted over and Rochelle climbed into her cockpit as Jamie straddled Athena’s bike mode. Rufia chuckled as all four of the vehicles headed out of the parking lot. “Mercy sakes, looks like we got us a *convoy*,” she quoted.

“Oh, *thank you*,” Rochelle said. “Now I’m gonna have that song going through my head for hours.”

“We aims to please!” Rufia replied cheerfully.

The four skimmers pulled out onto the freeway, merging onto one of Aloha’s main east-west arteries. Traffic was brisk, but traffic control did a good job keeping the four grouped RIDEs together. As the RIDEs handled the driving, the humans met in a VR simulation of a small coffeehouse, the laptops on the tables in front of them showing the view from the road ahead.

“So, do you ever get used to seeing that big shiny tower poking up into the sky north of you?” Rochelle

asked.

“I dunno, do *you* ever get used to having a big hardlight dome over your heads all the time?” Kelly grinned. “Really, I’m still trying to get used to a *lot* of things--being on this planet, being a *guy*...the local architecture is the least of my worries.”

Rochelle smiled. “Point taken. So how is it? All my experience, and that of my friends, comes from crossing the other direction.”

“It’s...different. Awkward sometimes,” Kelly said. “Of course, Dana and Jamie have advice for me, like I do for them. There are some things it’s nice not to have to worry about, but other things I never thought I’d have to. I’ll spare you the details.” He shook his head. “But I try not to lose sight of the important things. No matter how different we are now, we’ve still got each other.” He reached over to the seat next to him and caught Jamie in a one-armed hug.

“Aw, *Mom!*” Jamie protested.

“That’s a good way to look at it,” Yvonne said from the laptop in front of Rufia. “Each other’s a good thing to have.”

“Doesn’t hurt to be feelthy stinkin’ rich, either, I’ll bet.” Rufia winked. “More money than *I* could spend at one go, anyway.”

Kelly chuckled. “The money really isn’t important. Though I have to admit, I’d probably be singing a different tune if we didn’t have *any*. Still, we’re not about to go around buying mansions or islands or anything.”

“Sensible,” Rochelle said. “Live like you want to, save for rainy days.”

“Meanwhile, now that we’ve gotten settled in, we’re

thinking about taking a short break and getting some more touring in, since we got interrupted during our first go-round,” Kelly said. “There’s still a lot of Zharus, and even just Gondwana, that we haven’t seen yet.”

“You know, we’ll always be happy to guide ya!” Rufia said. “Might even not get waylaid by pirates next time!”

“We might just take you up on that,” Kelly said. “The middle parts were kind of bumpy, but I can’t say we were displeased with how the last go ended up.” She glanced down at her laptop screen. “Oh, looks like that’s our exit.”

“Cool!” Rochelle said, dropping back out of VR to look around as they pulled off the freeway onto a smaller but still-well-trafficked road, festooned with touristy signs advertising scenic overlooks, hotels, souvenir shops, and so on. “Wow, kitschy much?” Rochelle smirked.

“Seems like tourism is tourism the galaxy over,” Kelly said. “When you actually *see* the place, you’ll understand the appeal. I’m surprised Dana manages to put her camera away long enough to get work done around here.”

“Sometimes miracles *do* happen,” Jamie intoned.

They drove along the side of the briny lake, past the hotels, health spas, malls, and other places that sprang up along the salty shores. Rochelle felt as if they were passing through a giant filter designed to separate money from the droves of people who flowed through it. Every shop was its own tiny little piece of financially-activated charcoal, ready to soak up the impurity that was loose change.

“I know that as a native resident I’m supposed to be all blase about all this and complain about ‘those damn tourists,’ but just a month or so ago I *was* one of them, and sometimes the only thing that keeps me from filling the

house with souvenirs is that I'd look pretty damn silly with a house full of souvenirs of places from just a few clicks away," Kelly said.

"Maybe you should buy a vacation condo in Uplift or Nextus, or even Laurasia," Rochelle suggested. "You could put all your Aloha souvenirs there, and all your souvenirs from over there here."

"Don't *tempt* me," Kelly said dryly, and they all shared a chuckle.

The tourist traps started to thin out as they approached the midpoint of the lake. "The way I heard it, the Munns wanted to keep the natural beauty of the arch area as pristine as possible, so the stuff over thataway is a lot more subdued and tasteful," Jamie said. "There's a resort hotel with a sort of observation and eating plaza open to the public, and not a whole lot else."

"Good for them," Rufia said. "Gotta admit, the pics I've seen of the place look pretty cool. Been meaning to get down and see it in person."

"Well, here we are." Kelly led them down an off ramp into a parking lot, and headed over to the RIDE shifting area to dismount and let Gordon shift back to his Walker shape. The others followed their example, and the four humans and their RIDEs headed up a walkway to an elevated plaza built within sight of the immense stone arch that marked the end of the great briny lake. At the end of the plaza facing the arch was a railing with fee-operated telescopes and binoculars spaced along it. The other three sides had a number of food and drink kiosks and shops. In the middle were a number of metal tables and chairs, a number of which were occupied by people and RIDEs.

“There she is! Hey, Dad!” Jamie called to the raven-haired woman who occupied a table near the edge, sipping a coffee and peering at a hardlight display in front of her. A Maine Coon Cat the size of a large pony was curled up on the ground at the other side of the table.

Dana Skyler looked up. “Hey, Jamie, what’s going on?” She glanced from Jamie to Kelley, Rufia, and Rochelle. “Oh no, it’s an invasion! Hide the children!”

“Rufia and Rochelle are in town to see us and do a little tourism,” Kelly said. “Since you were hiding out here, we figured we could kill two birds with one stone.”

“I’m not hiding! I’m simply avoiding distractions so I can concentrate on my work!” Dana protested.

Jamie wandered around behind her father, peering over her shoulder at the screen. “Your *work*, huh? Your work looks a lot like photos of the Arch with you posing dramatically in front of it.”

“I’m working *too!*” Dana insisted. “I was just...resting my eyes.”

“Suuuuure you are,” Kelly smirked. “We all know who’s doing most of the *real* work here.”

Dana rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, rub it in why don’t you.”

“What is your job?” Rochelle asked.

“Well, back on *Earth*, I was a sysadmin,” Dana said. “Here, well...”

“Ahhhh,” Rochelle said. “I’m a coder myself. I see the problem.”

“What problem’s that?” Rufia asked.

“Earth doesn’t have strong AI,” Rochelle said. “So they have people in charge of administering computer systems.

But here, RIDEs make better sysadmins than any human ever could.”

“Yeah,” Dana grumbled. “Sure brought me down to earth--Zharus, whatever--when I applied for the job and they asked to talk to Isolde without even checking *my* qualifications.”

“It’s really not *that* bad,” the cat ride pointed out. “Dana *does* have a lot of experience with a wide range of hardware and software. It was a valuable point in our favor.”

“Yeah. Means you can shuffle through my memories to find out what you need to know, then apply it at RI-speed,” Dana said. It sounded like an old argument.

“It means I can *consult* you,” Isolde gently corrected. “And I do.”

“Yeah.” Dana smiled. “Yeah, I have to admit just because you *could* rummage my memories doesn’t mean you *do*.”

“You’re always spotting things I miss,” Isolde said. “And with all those implants of yours, you’re closer to RIDE capabilities than you think. We make a *good* team.”

“Yeah, I guess we do,” Dana said. She chuckled. “It was just a bit of a shock is all. I still don’t know why they treat you guys like property. You should be *running* the place.”

“Well, that’s starting to change,” Rochelle said. “But like anything worthwhile, it’ll take a while to come to anything. Meanwhile we just muddle on as best we can.”

“And be thankful we found such good ‘owners,’ ” Gordon said. “The free life out in the desert was free...but was it ever boring.”

“It’s good to be where people are,” Athena agreed.

Dana closed the hardlight display panel. “Well, if we’re going to have our work interrupted, might as well have it interrupted in a big way. Push some tables together, get yourselves some brunch, enjoy the view.” She waved in the direction of the Arch. “Never get tired of looking at that thing.”

“Don’t mind if we do!” Rochelle said. “I think I saw a coffee kiosk over there...think I’m gonna go see what blends they have.”

“They make some great croissants here, too,” Kelly said. “They call them ‘arches,’ but yeah, they’re croissants.”

Rufia grinned. “Sounds good! I’m starving!”

While their RIDEs found RIDEsafe power sockets, the four humans scattered to various food stands. They returned a few minutes later with laden trays and took their seats at the pushed-together tables. Rufia’s tray was heaped high with baked goods, fruit, and yogurt, while Rochelle had a more traditional breakfast of bacon, eggs, biscuits and gravy, grits, and, of course, coffee. Kelly had a breakfast similar to Rochelle’s but as large as Rufia’s, and Jamie had a bacon, egg, and cheese “arch” sandwich and an orange juice.

“Egad, I’m surrounded by carnivores,” Rufia said.

“If God didn’t mean for us to eat meat, he wouldn’t have made it so tasty!” Rochelle said cheerfully.

For a while, conversation lulled as most of the party concentrated on their food. But as plates cleared out and glasses emptied, Rochelle glanced over at Dana.

“So...Rufia’s told me all about what happened to you all. It happened to me too a couple months ago. I used to be

Roger.”

Dana nodded. “Ah. I used to be...still Dana, actually.” She smiled wryly. “It’s been an...experience.”

“I can imagine,” Rochelle said. “I didn’t exactly have a choice about it myself, but at least I grew up with the possibility.”

“I still find myself starting into men’s rooms by mistake before I go, ‘Hey, wait a minute.’” She made a face. “Sometimes I even stand there and put the toilet ring up, then I reach down and remember.”

“Oh, I have so been there,” Rochelle said.

“It’s been a weird experience overall, but maybe the weirdest thing is just how *normal* it’s getting,” Dana said. “I’m starting to think of myself *as* a woman now, not just a man in the wrong body. I wonder if it’ll feel wrong all over again if we switch back in three years?”

“I think we’ll somehow be able to get used to it,” Kelly said dryly.

“Of course, you guys have each other to switch *with*,” Jamie said. “Not exactly an option for me, unless I get a boyfriend and we get on well with each other’s RIDEs. Doesn’t seem likely at this point, but who knows?”

“Yeah, same here,” Rochelle said. “Honestly, that’s probably about the only way I *would* go back, and even then just for a while. I like Un-hon too much to leave her for good.”

“I can’t see me doin’ it either,” Rufia said. “Apart from me an’ Vonnie getting along so well, I’d hafta stick with just *one* steady, and it’d hafta be a guy at that. Nope, never happen.”

“Sam, sorry, Doctor Munn, says that swapping can be

good for the relationship, but it seems to work best when the RIDEs are compatible with both partners. He and his wife really lucked out, considering how spur of the moment their RIDE plans had been,” Kelly said. “They’ve got a full file of cases where swapping didn’t work, or was disastrous for the couple involved.”

“Well, we’ve still got years before we can even consider it, one way or another,” Dana said.

“Speaking of unprepared crossriders, how’s Charlene getting on?” Rochelle asked. “We mean to hunt her up next to check in.”

“She’s getting along okay,” Dana said. “Still living with us, when she’s in town. She’s kind of following in Rufia’s footsteps and taking jobs with mining boats--but on the prospecting end, rather than comms. Her sensors are some of the best available, I understand, and doesn’t hurt that she’s gotten a rep for having located our strike.”

Kelly nodded. “She says the work is boring, but after the last couple of months a little boring is just what she needs.”

“Oh, I so hear that,” Rochelle muttered.

“She hangs out with us--with Dayla and Donna and the crew--when she’s in town,” Jamie supplied. “She’s probably with them today in fact. Was gonna suggest we head out that way next.”

“You kids go on ahead,” Kelly said. “I think I’ll hang out here with my hubbie for a while, then head on back to the clinic.”

“Okay!” Rochelle said. “It was great meeting you all.”

“If you decide to stay overnight, comm and let us know,” Kelly said. “We’ll prep the guest room for you.”

“We’ll do that,” Rochelle promised.

As they were getting ready to go, Dana pulled Rochelle aside and spoke to her in low tones. “Listen,” she said. “You are *absolutely gorgeous*, you know. If I weren’t married, and straight...well, never mind. But I’ve seen how Jamie’s looking at you.” She shook her head. “Let her down easy, okay? Poor kid’s confused enough as it is.”

Rochelle blushed. “Er...sorry. I guess I really should crank the nanites back a little. I just get in the habit of leaving them turned up...”

Dana nodded. “I know. If I had ‘em, I probably would too. Too bad Kelly wouldn’t let me blow that much cash on something silly, huh?” She grinned. “Now get outta here and let us work.”

“On our way,” Rochelle promised.

Back down to three humans and three RIDEs, the group set out back for the coast. The freeways’ high speed and automation kept the trip fairly brief. Along the way they chatted about things, listened to music, had private conversations, and basically just enjoyed themselves, individually and collectively.

“So I saw ol’ Dana giving you the hairy eyeball there just ‘fore we left,” Rufia said to Rochelle on a private channel. “Lemme guess--‘keep yer hairy kitty paws off my little girl’?”

Rochelle snorted. “Just wanted me to let her down easy. Can’t really blame him, I guess. She has been kinda drooling at me. I’m sure she’s watching me even now through Athena’s rear-facing cameras. Guess I should have been more careful.”

“You could just go for it, y’know,” Rufia leered. “She’s young, cute...no risk of pregnancy...and the age of consent’s flexible ‘round here. And anyway, it’s not as if she’s exactly a virgin.”

“No way in *hell*, Rufe. Not when she isn’t even sure of her own identity yet. That’s a sure recipe for screwing someone up.” Rochelle shook her head. “If she’s gonna screw, she should do it with people her own age who don’t seduce her into it with nanotech flash.”

Rufia nodded. “Yeah, guess you’re right. Ya know, it’s weird how friggin’ *responsible* you are with those things. Don’cha know they’re supposed to be a license to do whatever the hell you want to?” Rufia grinned to show she was kidding.

“Heh. If you’re rich and can afford to buy your way out of your screw-ups, maybe,” Rochelle said. “The rest of us still have to watch our step.” She chuckled. “Besides, on the whole it’s still more fun *not* to mess people up.”

“Guess I can’t argue with that,” Rufia admitted.

“Hey, guys, we’re almost here!” Jamie commed to the others. She pointed out an exit just ahead, and the three of them swept their bikes onto it and down to the streets below. They came off the freeway into a nice, only slightly-upscale beachfront neighborhood. They cruised slowly through the suburb, passing cross street after cross street full of nice houses, until they arrived at a palisade along the beach itself.

“How are you gals in the water?” Jamie asked.

“Fine here!” Rochelle said. “Leopards are swimmy-cats.”

“We can elk-paddle,” Rufia said.

“Seriously, we’re air-tight and water-tight,” Yvonne said. “And lifters and hardlight still work in or underwater. We’re good.”

“Cool, then come on! The crew’s hanging out down at the reef a few clicks out.” Keeping an eye out for beachgoers, Jamie pulled Athena out onto the sandy expanse, then cruised right out onto the surface of the water itself.

“Swimmies it is,” Rochelle said, glancing down at her shorts and bikini. “Let’s do this thing!” She lowered the hardlight canopy on Uncia’s cockpit so she could enjoy the sea spray, and hovered out behind Athena. Yvonne followed them out onto the water.

A few minutes later, they approached the outer barrier reef, built by Zharus’s equivalent of coral. There were a number of RIDEs and people on or around them, swimming, jumping, splashing, and playing around.

“I’m looking for Charley now,” Jamie said, Fusing up and hovering just above the water. “Don’t see her yet...um, uh-oh.” She looked down at a shadow growing in the water beneath them. “Hey, uh, listen guys, could you just Fuse up real quick and hold very still? Trust me.”

Rochelle looked down. “Um? Well, okay...” Uncia molded herself around her body, and Rufia and Yvonne merged up as well. “So what’re we...*yaaaah!*”

An immense orca RIDE broke the surface of the water right beneath them and leaped into the air, its wide-open maw scooping all three of them up before it crashed back into the water with an immense splash. The three of them tumbled down its throat...and landed on oversized hardlight beanbag chairs.

“Oof!” Rufia said. “What in the hell...?” She sat up and looked around. They were seated in what was actually a fairly cozy lounge, furnished with hardlight sofas and chairs like the ones they’d landed in, and lit by displays all around and overhead showing a view of the seas beyond, turquoise green with light filtering down through it. It was like being inside an aquarium.

“Sorry about that,” Jamie said wryly. “Welcome to Jonah. He likes to greet new people like that. I figured it would be best to get it out of the way.”

“Ugh. Wow.” Rochelle shook her head. “That was...an experience.”

“Cats are supposed to eat fish, not the other way around!” Uncia complained.

“I’m a herbivore, not a herb!” Rufia added.

A panel in the ceiling slid open, and a boy with orca tags dropped out. As with most marine mammal Fuses, the body modifications were extensive--black and white rubbery skin, streamlined body with rounded features, and insulating blubber deposits under the skin. “Ah, hi!” he said, his voice a higher-pitched squeak. “Sorry ‘bout that. Jonah has kind of a funny sense of humor sometimes.”

“I figured,” Rochelle said. “Cargo hauler, wasn’t he? At least, that’s what the model was built for?”

“Yeah. But he’s kinda retired now. Levon, by the way.”

“Funny, I didn’t think RIDEs this big even *had* a Fuser form,” Rochelle said. “He’s about twice as big as the biggest one I knew of.”

“The prototypes were made with one--and Jonah’s one of those. The engineering team was afraid Fusing with something that big might not be healthy,” Levon said.

“We’re gonna prove ‘em wrong.”

“Be careful with that,” Rochelle said. “Fusing with big’uns can have unpredictable effects.”

“We don’t do it that often,” Levon said. “But it’s nice to know we can. To have that closeness, ya know?”

“I know,” Rochelle said. “If I couldn’t Fuse with Uncia...well, yeah. Anyway, good luck with it.”

Levon nodded. “Thanks. And sorry again.” He grinned. “We’ll surface and let you all out on the reef. But let me know if you wanna just cruise sometime.”

“Appreciate that,” Rufia said. “And we will.” Around them, the turquoise color lightened. Then they broke the surface, water flowing down the sides. Ahead of them, the whale’s mighty maw opened back up, the hardlight esophagus winking out to reveal diamond-deck plates beneath.

The three Fused RIDEs stepped out onto the beach of the reef, where several other RIDEs and their partners had gathered to whoop and clap. “Hey, Jamie, Athena!” a female dolphin Fuser chirped. “Who’re your friends?”

“Dayla and Donna, these are Rufia and Yvonne who I told you about, and Rochelle and Uncia,” Jamie said.

“They’re in town visiting. Are Charley and Fiona around?”

“Think they’re sunning themselves on the next island over!” Dayla pointed. “Do come on back later, we wanna get to know your friends!”

“Thanks, Day. And we will,” Jamie said. She and Athena kicked in the lifters again, and Rufia and Rochelle followed right behind.

The reef poked up above the water in a series of small

islands, some with beaches and some even with grass on top. On one of those grassy knolls, an oversized fluffy red fox and a woman with long fox-red hair, a long fluffy tail, and a huge bust that seemed barely restrained by her red bikini top lay sunning themselves.

Charlene opened her eyes and peered over at Fiona. The fluffy red fox RIDE was lying on her back nearby, all four paws poking into the air and occasionally twitching. Charlene chuckled and reached for her tube of suntan lotion.

She had considered removing her top to tan more evenly, but this close to Dayla and the crew's hangout she couldn't be sure someone wouldn't come over to visit at any time. She still wasn't quite comfortable enough with Aloha's attitude about casual nudity to want to expose herself that way—especially given how prone most of the male and some of the female members of the crew were to leer at her already. They could find some more private island later for that, she supposed.

As Charlene finished smearing the stuff on and lying back down, she saw Fiona shift position out of the corner of her eyes, then sit up and peer at something behind them. "Hey, Charley, don't be after lookin' now, but yer great-great-grand whippersnapper's here."

Charlene glanced over her shoulder, then grinned at seeing three very familiar Fused RIDEs approaching. "Rufe! Jamie! Shelley! Hey, good to see you all!" She raised her legs into the air, then used the momentum of dropping them to spring to her feet in a martial-arts move she'd picked up from Fiona's sense-memory training. Her ankle-length red hair swirled behind her as she spun to

greet them.

Her three friends de-Fused from their RIDEs as they landed and came over to her, as the RIDEs padded over to bump noses with Fiona. The little island was just big enough for the eight of them if they were friendly. Fortunately, they were.

“Heeey, Charley!” Rufia said. “Looking fine as ever! Changed your mind ‘bout you an’ me yet?”

Charlene grinned. “Sorry, noooooot quite yet. I’ll let’cha know if the Travis thing doesn’t work out, though.” Whenever they met these days, Rufia always indulged in a friendly leer. Charlene actually found it kind of flattering, though she wasn’t sure if she’d ever be interested in reciprocating.

Rochelle was looking at her thoughtfully, her snow leopard ears twitching. “You’ve changed a lot since the last time I saw you. Not just the hair and the boobs...your whole body language is different. Kinda like *mine*, actually, when the nanites are doing their thing.”

“Uh, yeah,” Charlene said, looking down at herself. It was true, really. Ever since the slaver episode, she’d been moving very differently. “I was meaning to talk to you about that. Back when Fiona and I were stuck in that casino, she seemed to have kinda...imprinted her own body language onto me. I was wondering if there was maybe any way I could have it...deprogrammed a little. I don’t want to sashay like a BBV *all the time*, but it’s hard to move any other way now.”

“Huh.” Rochelle frowned thoughtfully. “That’s kind of a...tricky question, really. My own ‘programming’ involved nanites that I could reprogram. Yours...I’m not sure. I’ll

have to look into it. Maybe Dr. Munn would have some ideas.”

Charlene sighed. “I was afraid you’d say something like that. Figures it wouldn’t be something simple.”

“Well, don’t worry, great-great-great-great-grandpa,” Rochelle said with a mischievous grin. “We’ll get it straightened out somehow, sooner or later.”

“Gee, thanks, you young whippersnapper you. Fetch me my Depends why don’tcha,” Charlene said wryly.

“So who’s this ‘Travis’ then?” Rufia prodded. “It can’t be you’ve got a *boyfriend!*”

Charlene felt the heat rise in her cheeks. “He’s not a... boyfriend,” she protested. “He’s just...a guy I’ve been dating some is all.”

“Uh, hate to tell you this, Charley, but that’s sorta what a boyfriend *is*,” Rufia said, giggling.

“It’s not *like* that!” Charlene protested. “It’s not like we’re *serious* or anything, we just like spending time together and...oh God, you’re right, I’ve got a boyfriend.” Charlene facepalmed.

Rochelle, Rufia, and Jamie all laughed. “So tell us about him,” Rochelle invited.

“It’s...a little complicated,” Charlene said, blushing harder. “His name is Dr. Travis Hilner, and he’s the doctor who revived me out of cryo and then helped me get away from the hospital to avoid publicity. I...sorta haven’t told him who I really am yet. He just knows me as this girl he met on the beach.”

“Oh, wow!” Rochelle squealed. “How did *that* happen?”

“Blame Miss Nosy Foxy over there for setting us up,”

Charlene said, rolling her eyes at Fiona. “She dumped me on the beach right in front of him with no warning, and the rest was history.”

“Ye needed some cheerin’ up at th’ time,” Fiona said. “An’ it worked, di’nnit?”

“You know you’re gonna hafta fill him in sooner or later,” Rufia said more seriously. “He’ll find out somehow sooner or later, and might be just a little ticked you been takin’ advantage of him.”

“I’m not *taking advantage of him!*” Charlene protested. “I *like* him. I just...like things how they are right now. If I come out to him, they’ll be...different.” She sighed. “They might even be...*over*, if he’s too mad or weirded or something.”

“Then you just find someone else,” Rufia said. “I mean, hey, if he’s weirded out over a tiny little thing like you actually bein’ a gender-changed two-hundred-year-old man who he probably saw nekkid before you ever woke up in the hospital, he’s not the kind of person you wanna be with anyway.”

“Thanks...I think.” Charlene smiled in spite of herself. “But I guess you’re right.”

“Anyway, if he grew up on Zharus, even if it was in Laurasia, he should be kinda used to the idea,” Rochelle pointed out. “Might still be startled by who you actually are, though, even if the crossing doesn’t throw him.”

Charlene sighed. “Well, it was fun while it lasted.”

“I guess it’s kind of a foregone conclusion to ask how well *you’re* adapting,” Rochelle said. “If you’re girly enough to worry about the guy you’re dating, I guess there’s really not that much more girly you can get.”

“Heh. Yeah, I guess,” Charlene admitted, considering it. “It’s weird, but I go for days now without thinking about myself as an ex-man. Just trying to live my life. Wasn’t exactly by choice, but I guess I got a crash course that really took.”

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Fiona said gloomily. “Still.”

“Hey, now,” Charlene scolded. “I’ve *told* you I don’t blame you for that. If I gripe a little, it’s about the whole situation, okay? I can’t think of anything I’d have had you do differently, knowing what we both did at the time.”

“Yeah,” Rufia said, looking down. “If you wanna blame anyone, you oughtta be blaming *me*. I’m the one who screwed up and got us captured by pirates.”

Rochelle put a hand on her shoulder. “Rufe...”

“If you hadn’t, we wouldn’t have met our new best friends,” Jamie said, putting a hand on Athena’s shoulder. “And Mom and Dad would never have let me partner a RIDE. On the whole, I think we’re good.”

“Yeah. And as awful as it was at the time, I think it was a good thing, all in all,” Charlene said. “After all, I *did* get over the hump with the whole girly thing, even if the method was a little unorthodox. I’m not sorry I’m not still stuck in my ‘Glen or Glenda’ phase.” She shrugged. “Look, let’s stop trying to place blame on ourselves and just admit that life sucks sometimes, okay? But it goes on.”

“Long after the thrill of living is gone?” Yvonne supplied.

“Yeah, that,” Rufia said.

Groping for a subject change, Charlene turned to Rochelle. “So what brings you all the way across the continent? Can’t have been just to visit me.”

“Well, it *partly* was,” Rochelle said. “When you’ve got a sub, ‘all the way across the continent’ is just an hour trip. But I also wanted to meet the Skylers, after hearing their story from Rufia. Then maybe do a little tourism.” She chuckled. “Funny thing, but I already got an invite to go out drinking with an old acquaintance from here I forgot I knew.”

“Sounds like a handy person to *remember* you knew,” Charlene said.

“I expect you could come along, if you want,” Rochelle offered.

Charlene shook her head. “Thanks, but I’m heading out on another job tonight. Maybe next time.”

“Why all the jobbing?” Rufia asked. “You’re rich now, ya know. Or at least well-off. You don’t *have* to work.”

“No, but it’s a way to get out into the world, meet people, and feel useful,” Charlene said. She chuckled. “I kinda like feeling useful. Besides, I don’t exactly see *you* retiring.”

“Well, that’s true,” Rufia admitted. “But that’s just ‘cuz I’m flat broke now and at the mercy of my lord and master, or rather lady and mistress.”

Yvonne smirked. “Mush, you thumbsies!”

Charlene grinned. “You know what I mean.”

“So how’s the work been going?” Rufia asked. “I hear you and Fi are hiring out as a prospector sensor package?”

“Not too bad,” Charlene said. “About as boring as you told us it would be, but it pays okay. Gives me time to catch up on two hundred years of history I missed. And soap operas.”

“Well, if that works for you, then great,” Rufia said.

“Glad to hear you’re getting along okay.”

“Guess that’s all you can really ask for,” Rochelle said. “Anyway, looks like Dayla’s waving at us from that other island there. She did seem keen to meet us. Wanna go over and mingle for a while?”

Charlene smiled. “Sure. I think I’ve had enough sun for a bit. C’mon, Fi, time to be a waterfoxy!” She held out her arms and the fox Fused up to her. The others followed suit. A few moments later, the island was empty.

“You know, it would be an awful shame to come all the way out here, then just go right back so soon,” Rufia said thoughtfully as she, Rochelle, Jamie, and their respective RIDEs headed away from the beach. “I’m thinking maybe we oughtta, y’know, take the Skylers up on their offer and stay over.”

“Rufe, ‘all the way out here’ is just an hour sub flight, y’know,” Rochelle pointed out. “And let’s be honest, you’re only thinking about it ‘cuz someone offered to buy you booze.”

“Well, yeah,” Rufia admitted. “But Shelley...*someone offered to buy me booze!*” Rochelle could almost see the little anime-style stars dancing in her eyes.

Rochelle grinned. “Okay, okay. I don’t think we either one of us have anything pressing back home for now, and Rhi shouldn’t need the sub before tomorrow anyway. Vonnie, could you patch me through to the garage?”

“On it!”

Rhianna’s head and shoulders appeared in Uncia’s head-up comm display. “Hey, Shelley, what’s up? Aloha visit going well?”

“Oh, yeah!” Rochelle said. “We met the Skylers and checked up on Charlene. And along the way we ran into Aaron Munn and Chimo, remember them from a few years back? We did DE swaps for Chimo and his sister Chena, twin Samoyeds?”

Rhianna blinked. “Hey, yeah, now that you mention it, I do. I hadn’t thought about them in ages. Munn...are they related to Dr. Munn?”

“He’s their mother. Which also makes Astranikki their aunt, come to think of it.”

“Wow, small world,” Rhianna said. “They doing okay?”

“Seem to be,” Rochelle said. “And they invited us to hit some pubs and hang out tonight.”

“Cool...wait.” Rhianna peered at her. “They invited...*Rufia*...to hit some pubs with them? How’s their credit rating?”

“I’m not *that* bad!” Rufia insisted.

“Ummm,” Yvonne said.

“Oh, all right, I *am* that bad,” Rufia admitted. “But trust me, they’re loaded.”

“As loaded as *you’re* gonna be tonight?” Rhianna teased.

“Nobody could be *that* loaded,” Rochelle said. Rufia stuck out her tongue.

“So you’re going to stay over in Aloha tonight?” Rhianna asked.

“Yeah, if that’s okay with you,” Rochelle said. “The Skylers offered guest space to crash.”

“Sure, that’s fine,” Rhianna said. “We got by without a sub for years, I can do without it for one night.”

“Great! I’ll tell you all about it when we get home tomorrow,” Rochelle promised.

“Be sure and take many incriminating pictures,” Rhianna said, grinning.

“Will do!” Rochelle grinned back and closed the connection. “Hey, Jamie, could you call your folks and let ‘em know we’re taking them up on their offer?”

“Sure thing!” the fennec-girl replied. “Will you be heading there for supper, or eating at the pubs?”

“I was thinking we’d probably get an early start on the pubbing thing,” Rochelle said. “I don’t want to impose on your folks too much--after all, I hardly know you guys.”

“There’s plenty of time to get to know us better!” Jamie said brightly. Though from the way she was gazing at her, Rochelle was pretty sure she had some idea what kind of “getting to know better” was going through her mind. “In fact, I was kinda thinking of tagging along to the pubs and having a beer or two, if you don’t mind.”

“You?” Rochelle blinked. “Are you even eighteen yet?”

“Minimum drinking age is flexible around here,” Jamie said. “If you’re mature and responsible, you get it moved up a few years. Y’know, like age of consent.”

“Uh-huh,” Rochelle said. “Well, I guess if *they* let you buy booze, I can’t exactly object. But are your parents cool with that?”

“To be honest, I kinda don’t tell them.” Jamie shrugged. “But really, I never have more than one or two anyway. I like a little buzz, but I never saw the appeal of getting drunk. If I wanna puke, I can get the flu.”

“And I wouldn’t let her have more than that anyway,” Athena said. “I don’t like *Fusing* with drunk people either.

My old Sarge was that way far too often. Yuck.”

“Really, I just wanna hang out,” Jamie said. “I mean, wow, how often do you get a chance to mingle with *Munns*? The people who *built* this city, and not just on rock and roll either.”

“Well, ask your folks if it’s all right,” Rochelle said. “I’m not gonna be accused of corrupting a minor.”

“As opposed to when you went out with Zane, which was corrupting a *miner*,” Uncia piped up.

Rochelle bapped the dashboard. “Stop that. I’m too sober by half for puns that bad.”

“Well, whose fault is *that*?” Rufia asked. “C’mon, somewhere there’s a beer or seven with my name on it!”

Rochelle chuckled. “Okay, okay. Let Aaron know we’re on our way.”

The *Corner Pocket* was a pool bar located well inland from the bright lights along the Alohan beaches. It was a large, single-story building, built with RIDEs in mind. It had a simple door, with a similarly simple sign; the place you had to know of to realize it was there.

Aaron leaned against Chimo, his RIDE in skimmer mode, waiting for his guests. The small parking lot only had a couple of wheeled bikes parked in it; most of the patrons tended to bring their RIDEs inside with them.

“Ashley just dropped a message. Her team’s coming in from the Dry now. She’ll meet us here in about an hour,” Chimo said from a speaker in his cabin. “No word from Scratch yet.”

“I’m sure he’ll show up. Last I spoke to him, he was having a hard time with his dad. He’ll want the unwinding

time.... I think that's them."

The three skimmer cycles pulled up in front of the bar, transforming back to their elk, leopard, and fennec forms and leaving their riders standing on the ground next to them. "Hey!" Rochelle said, waving. "Jamie wanted to tag along for a while, hope that's okay."

Chimo's antenna tail waved as he half shifted to walker mode before fusing with Aaron. "That's fine, the more the merrier. I know it's not really a pub, but this is a place a lot of the casino workers on the boardwalk come to unwind a bit. Nachos are great, the bartenders are top notch, and the only gambling is between the pool or dart players," Aaron said as his RIDE engulfed him. "Figured it's a good spot to warm up at least, until Ash and Scratch get here."

"Ooooh!" Rufia said. "You've got pool here? One of my favorite games!" She glanced at Yvonne. "Um...can I...?"

The elk rolled her eyes. "I suppose I can advance you some petty cash for wagers..."

"Yay!" Rufia said happily. "So what versions of the game does this place offer?"

Chimo chuckled, "Well, we have regular and Vari-G. If you go against Scratch, I'd advise the Vari-G. It's about the only way to work around his Intie advantage."

Aaron took over, "The regular tables are resettable, for billiards, nine-ball, snooker, and any other variations you can think of. But we usually just go straight pool when we're shooting for fun."

"I'm up for a game or two," Rochelle said.

"Works for me," Jamie said. "Let's go."

The fused natives lead them into the bar, waving to

the grizzly-marked barkeeper. Aaron noticed double takes as they walked between the taken tables, and shook his head, “Wow, you really do catch the eye, don’t you?”

Rochelle blushed slightly. “I kinda do. I guess I maybe oughtta tone it down a little, but...I do kinda like the looks.”

“These are almost all natives, so they’ve seen it before and more, but if you aren’t expecting it, it does catch you by surprise.” He stopped at a group of tables against the backwall and spoke louder. “These ones are ours. Shoot Chimo your poison and I’ll go get the first rounds.”

“Righto!” Rufia said. Chimo got the orders, and a few moments later came back with a dark beer for Rufia, a White Russian for Rochelle, and a Coke for Jamie.

They had just begun sipping their drinks when a house cat integrate walked into the bar. He was dressed just in a pair of shorts, his embedded hardlight belly plates glowing faintly in the bar’s lighting. He forced a smile and waved to the barkeeper. “Hey Georgia, an Intie special please. Make it green.”

Georgia grabbed a mug and started mixing, “Sure Scratch. They’re back at the usual table. I’ll bring it back to you,” she called back.

He waved to other regulars and spotted Chimo’s white fur around his friend, with a group of strangers. Aaron was already waving him over. He thumped his friend’s back, and looked over the women he was with, “Wow, you weren’t kidding, Aaron. Who are your friends?”

Aaron smirked, “This is Jamie, Athena, and Rufia and Yvonne, and Uncia. You already know the pretty lady with the cue stick there.”

Scratch peered at Rochelle curiously, “I do? I’m sure I’d recognize someone like her. Especially with a nannie cloud like that.”

Rochelle chuckled. “You’ve slowed down. I remember when it didn’t take you five minutes to notice my partner was wearing his RIDE in passive mode.”

Scratch looked even more confused for a moment, before he flicked his ear, his DIN flickering. He looked at Rochelle, then at Aaron, and back to her, “Seriously? Wow, there’s no half measures with you, is there? Good to see you again, Roger. And to be fair, spotting passive fuses are a lot easier than figuring out a crossride.” He held out his hand, “What brings you out here?”

“A Dreamchaser sub. Tomorrow it’ll be taking me back, too.” Rochelle grinned. “Seriously, felt the need for a mini-vacation, combined with checking up on a friend or two. And running into some old friends, too, it seems.”

Behind Scratch, a waitress was bringing a hardlight mug filled with a bright green liquid. Cold mist bubbled over the top of it and spilled down the sides, evaporating before it reached the bottom. Scratch took the mug and took a big gulp. “Well, Old acquaintances we forgot at least. Becoming new friends. Then again, I suppose being elbow deep in your friends’ core chambers does make you a friend.”

“The way to a RIDE’s heart is through his chest access panels,” Rochelle agreed. “And speaaaaking of which...could I see your DIN? Pleeeeease?” Rochelle clasped her hands and made kitten-eyes at the feline Integrate, her ears twitching forward.

“My DIN? Why do you want to see that? How do you

even know about that?”

“Professional interest!” Rochelle said. “Rhianna and I make them ourselves now, and I’m curious to see what one we didn’t make that *isn’t* technomage dreck looks like.”

“Give her one of Wanda’s latest, Scratch. She’s in the biz now and wants to check out the competition,” Aaron grinned. “And tap the news feeds. She’s good friends with that Zane fella that took you guys public.”

Scratch reached into his pocket and passed over a gem, “Well I guess it wouldn’t hurt. Wanda’s work has been better than what the mages pumped out from the beginning. Remember Cape Nord? There’s no way in hell I’d have been able to lock down those three through you on a cracked Mage DIN.”

Rochelle pulled a scanner loupe out of a pocket and stuck it in one eye, peering at the device thoughtfully. She whistled, then handed it back. “Some nice work in this! I’d really love to have Rhi and me do one of our own up for you so we could compare them side by side. Think you’ll be in Uplift again any time soon?”

The Integrate considered it, taking another sip from his drink, “Possibly. But probably not for a month or so. This is a rough time of year for Dad. Too many anniversaries for what we lost.”

Rochelle nodded. “That’s fair. We’ve got a lot going on ourselves lately. And--” She paused, then stared at Scratch’s steaming mug. “What the hell are you drinking?”

“I dunno, but whatever it is it looks *awesome*,” Rufia said. “I hope it’s not, like, some kind of sarium cocktail that would be poisonous to squishies. I really wanna try some! Heck, even if it was I might try some anyway.”

Scratch lifted the half emptied mug and swirled it, “Integrate special. Fruit juices, alcohol, and special short life nannies designed to futz with RIDE based tech. Should be harmless for humans unless you have a lot of implants, but will give RIDEs and Fuses a buzz; Inties too of course. Meant to hit both halves of us. Discovered the basics at a party in Nextus, and we’ve been refining it ever since. Now that we’re outted, it’s officially on the menu too.”

Uncia stared. “You’ve made a drink that works for RIDEs too? Apart from the whole sharing-the-human’s-buzz thing?” She turned to peer at Rochelle. “Uhm...”

“Just let me finish my *first* drink, okay?” Rochelle said, swallowing the last of it.

“I’m kinda curious myself now,” Yvonne said. “Luckily my thumbs shouldn’t need too much prodding.” Rufia immediately chugged the rest of her beer.

“I think I could try one of those,” Jamie said. “What do you think, Theenie?”

“Maybe just one,” Athena said. “I did promise your parents, no more than three drinks tonight.”

“Okay, let’s do it!” Jamie said. The three RIDEs Fused to their riders and looked expectedly at Scratch.

“Whoa ladies, give me a sec to catch my breath. Stunned by beauty here,” the Intie grinned, holding up his hands and taking a step back.

Aaron shook his head and rolled his eyes. “To be honest, Chimo and I don’t really care for them much ourselves, but it’s not bad to try a few of them. What do you think Chimo?”

The fused canine’s stance shifted slightly, “Red, Blue and Orange I’d say,” Chimo declared. “I’ll have Georgia

bring over a tray.”

“*Most* of the time I don’t let Unnie drink while we’re Fused anymore, after what happened the first time.”

Rochelle grinned.

“*Shelley...*” Uncia protested.

“But for this, I think I could make an exception.”

Rochelle chuckled. “Bring ‘em on!”

Georgia carried the orders over personally, and gave the three fused pairs a long look. “Right, any of you have these before?” she asked, “Other than you two of course.”

“They’re all virgins, Gee.” Scratch said, smirking at the reactions.

Unphased the bartender settled her gaze on them, “Right, just some simple rules. Keep your weapons safetied at all times on a time lock. These drinks mess with RIDE inhibitions mainly, so we don’t want anything nasty happening. And we are not responsible for what may happen while fused, or to the fused RIDER.”

“Not responsible? Well what’s the worst that could happen?” Athena asked.

“Unknown. But there are no recorded instances of Integration from these at least. Usually it’s just cosmetic, but I have to run through the list just in case.” She waited for the three RIDEs to timesafe their weapons, then set the drinks down on a table, “Enjoy guys.”

Yvonne picked up a red mug, “We’re just going to have the one each,” she said. “I don’t think any of us wants to get *drunk*.” She cocked her head. “They really *that* strong?”

Chimo shook his head, “Nah, not really. At least not at once. They tend to build steadily. Mainly Georgia’s just

looking out for her bar. Experimental drinks and weapons of destruction do not tend to go together well.”

“From what I recall, you and weapons of destruction didn’t tend to get along either,” Rochelle smirked as Uncia took the blue mug. White plated barrels swung up from Chimo’s back, clicking into place over his fused shoulders. “I’ve gotten better now. I can hit better than just the broad side of the barn.” He quickly put them away after hearing a low, angry growl come from the bar area.

Athena and Jamie grabbed the final mug and peered thoughtfully at it. “Down the hatch!” Rufia said.

“Kampai!” Rochelle replied.

“Cheers!” Jamie chimed in.

The three of them sipped their drinks thoughtfully, then took longer pulls at the drinks. “Not too bad,” Rochelle said. “Tastes kind of like a blueberry martini to me...but then I’m not exactly tasting the nanites.”

“Wow, it *tingles!*” Uncia giggled. “This feels different from being drunk in the flesh, but kind of similar in other ways.”

“It’s certainly...different,” Yvonne said. “I can feel it playing with some of my permissions settings. This *does* have no permanent effects right?”

Athena yawned. “I think it’s making me a little drowsy.”

Scratch finished his drink and waved for a new one, “We’ve noticed they tend to affect different RIDEs and Inties differently. Astranikki hates them herself; she claims they cause her to molt. But in any case, the nannies are short term. Expire within an hour and the effects rarely last more than a few days at most.”

“Can’t be worse than what happened *last* time Uncia got drunk,” Rochelle said.

“*Shelley!*” Uncia complained again.

Scratch raised an eyebrow. “I sense a story here.”

“Well, it’s like this,” Rochelle said. “The last night I was Roger, I was walking home through the park when this feral snow leopardess totally out of her gourd on Amontillado pounce-Fused me...and then she decided she’d always wondered what drinking felt like, so she decided to go do some of it.”

Uncia rolled her eyes. “I *said* I was sorry...”

Aaron shuddered and sipped his beer. “Amontillado. Nasty stuff. Mike just got back from cleaning up an infestation of it.”

“I know, we’re the ones who found the infestation in the first place,” Rochelle said.

“Nice job. Even if it didn’t go as smoothly as expected.” Aaron lowered his voice and watched Scratch from the side. “In hindsight, it’s not surprising that it was one of *her* projects.”

“Mm,” Rochelle said, deciding it was time to change the subject back. “Well, anyway, after a beer or two, she decided to have a Long Island Iced Tea. And she liked it so much she had several more. After all, it wasn’t like it was actually *booze*, ‘cuz it was *tea*.”

Uncia sighed theatrically and took another long pull at the blue drink.

Jamie giggled. “And of course those don’t *taste* like they’ve got booze in ‘em, so...”

“Yeah. So anyway, by the time we got rid of the trojan and I woke up, I was totally wasted...and I hadn’t even

gotten to enjoy the drinks!” Rochelle giggled, taking another sip of the blue drink. “Huh. This seems to taste better the more I have of it. Tingly.” She looked down at herself. “In fact, it feels kinda tingly all over. Uncia, what *are* you doing?”

“Nooooothing!” Uncia said. “Well, nothing *permanent*, anyway.” She giggled.

Rochelle looked down at the drink in her hands. “You really *are* drunk, aren’t you?”

“Of course not!” Uncia insisted. “Well...maybe a little.” Rochelle snorted. “Terrific.”

Jamie and Athena were the first to notice the pink woman and her pink RIDE arrive. Her appearance made Athena do a chromacheck on her eyes to make sure they were seeing correctly.

The woman had shoulder length bright pink hair, with triangular ears and a curled tail, similar to the pink Samoyed behind her. She was topless, revealing her skin as a slightly less eye searing shade of pink than her hair, but her eyes, lips and nipples, made up for it.

“I think I’ve had enough,” Jamie said, looking at her half-finished drink, then back at the arrival who was greeting friends near the entrance.

Aaron looked up and sighed, “No, it’s not the drink. It’s just my sister.” He waved towards the florescent pink woman, “Over here Ash! Chena! Who’d you lose the bet to this time?”

Ashley gave her brother a hug and took a swig from Scratch’s mug, “It was the usual, to the Sams. Bet we could read a sign as far away as they could.”

“You made a vision bet against an Eagle pair?!?”

She grinned and shook her head, “Nice kick. New alcohol base Scratch? And yes, we made that bet. We’re running Nikki’s vision upgrades, so we can see as good as any bird. We just let him win as usual. Figure a couple more wins and he’ll be willing to make the bald bet.”

While the twins were talking, Chena was greeting the others. She made her way to Rochelle and Uncia and nuzzled them, wagging her tail quickly. “Good to see you again, Roger,” she greeted them.

“You recognized us? Did Chimo tell?” Rochelle asked, rubbing the Samoyed’s head.

“Nah, I’ve had a news watch on your garage ever since we were fixed up. Unlike the rest of them, I like to keep track on my favorite places. Heard about the attack a few weeks ago, but didn’t recognize your name in the reports, until I backtraced.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re doing so well,” Rochelle said. “Nice to see you’re still ‘in the pink.’”

Chena wagged her tail and kept nuzzling, “Well, Ash seems to like to colour swap; and it certainly is noticeable. I do worry that some day she’ll want to try plaid.”

“Well, since you’re normally white, you’re pretty much an empty canvas,” Rochelle said.

“Hi!” Uncia said, taking over. “I’m Uncia! We haven’t met, but it’s nice to see another cold-weather type down here in the tropics.”

“Hi back! So you’re the one who introduced Roger to the Fused side?”

“She was very insistent,” Rochelle said. “You could say she wouldn’t take no for an answer. As I was just telling everyone before you got here...”

“*Sheeeeeelly...*” Uncia whined again.

Chena looked the pair over closer and chuckled, “The Intie special’s really working on you, isn’t it? It is nice to see some more cold types around. We’ll probably have more in a few years too. It’s still in the planning works, but we’ve heard someone’s planning to set up some dome’s near the elevator and start an arctic resort. “

“Wow, this place really *does* have something for everyone,” Rochelle said.

Ashley joined them, a mug of purple in her hand, “Not quite yet, but it’s getting there. Ready to fuse up Chena? By the look of the score, Scratch needs to be put back in his proper place.”

Still Fused, Rochelle and Uncia padded over to the bar, the sounds of pool balls clacking behind them. It was their turn to fetch the next round, and they were happy to do so. Rochelle was starting to feel a pleasant sort of rosy warmth spreading through her. It was a feeling she hadn’t gotten before from any other beverage. Might it have something to with the nanites in it? Perhaps she ought to be worried about it--after all, she had pretty fancy Fuser nanites herself, and who knew how they might interact? But it was hard to be too concerned when she felt this good.

She was just placing her order, when she heard a familiar female voice from behind her. “Well, son of a...Rochelle? Uncia? Is that you?”

Rochelle turned to peer down at a tawny Lynx Fuser, similar to Kaylee in many ways--which wasn’t surprising, since they were sisters. “Kandace? But...you’re *Fused*. How

did *that* happen?” The last time she’d seen Kandace, after AlphaWolf’s troupe had shown up to repair the garage, the lynx had sworn off of Fusing with humans for the foreseeable future.

“It’s...kind of a long story,” Kandace said. “Had to rescue a silly girl from getting scooped up by one of Alfie’s more annoying followers, and when I brought her back here to her home, it turned out her family wasn’t around. She’s sort of at loose ends, and so am I, so we’re hanging out together until her mother gets back.” She shrugged. “Maybe it wasn’t such a long story after all.”

“She’s with you now?” Uncia asked curiously.

“Yeah, but she’s locked up in VR while she does her homework. I’ll introduce you later.”

Rochelle chuckled. “Wow, it must be nice to be able to shut out all distractions like that.”

Kandace chuckled. “Yeah. *She’s* not always thrilled, but her grades are improving.”

“Your order’s up!” Georgia said from behind Rochelle. She turned and picked up the tray.

“Hey, c’mon over here with me. I’ll introduce you to my friends I’m here with.” Rochelle carried the tray back across the room, and Kandace followed along. “Hey, everyone. Don’t know what it is about this place, but we seem to keep running into old friends out here. This here’s my partner’s RIDE Kaylee’s sister, Kandace.” She introduced the others to Kandace one by one.

“Ah. Hello.” Kandace nodded to the Munns. “How’re you related to Mike?” she asked cautiously.

Aaron claimed his drink from Rochelle. “Mike? Horse intie? He’s our older brother.”

“Ah,” Kandace said. “He’s not around here right now, is he?” She glanced around.

“No, he’s out with a friend at the Cave, last I heard. How do you know him?” Ashley asked.

“He kind of fu--ah, *messed* up my home a few weeks back,” Kandace said. “Not real happy with him right now.”

“Your home? OH! You mean Alf- The Big Bad Wolf’s camp?” Ashley asked, catching herself in time.

“Yeah. ‘Personal’s not the same as important,’ my left cheek.” She snorted. “But on the other hand, his folks helped me and my partner *out* of some trouble, so it all kinda evens out, I guess.”

Aaron nodded, “A little I suppose. For what it’s worth, he got chewed out royally by mom and dad. Intie or not, you don’t want to be caught between an angry bull and an angry jag.”

“Nice to know there’s *someone* he listens to.” Kandace shrugged. “But I shouldn’t rag on him, I guess. I wouldn’t like it if someone complained on Kaylee to me. I just hope he doesn’t do it again to someone else.”

“Don’t sweat it, he’s got five siblings, including us. It’s our duty to rag him up, especially when he screws up big time,” Ashley pointed out. “The more ammo the better.”

“What my sister means is, we understand how badly he screwed up. And we appreciate you not letting it affect your view of the rest of us. Mike and Tonto are special. They’ve had a lot happen to them, and he’s not quite ready to come back into the public.”

Ashley lightly slapped the back of her twin’s head. “Oh stop being so serious. He screwed up. He’s been punished. Now it’s time for us to milk it while we can.”

“I like that philosophy,” Rufia said, gesturing with her mostly-empty red drink. Contrary to her usual habit, she’d been sipping it slowly as Yvonne got used to it.

“Yeah, I get *how* they got screwed up.” Kandace shuddered. “I only met up with what those nasties did at a couple of removes and even then it was bad enough. I just wish other people didn’t *keep* getting messed up ‘cuz of it.”

Ashley pointed her cue stick to Scratch, “Well, meet Scratch, previously Christine. Two someones, now one, who were directly affected by those nasties.”

“Hey!” Scratch held up his hands, “Leave me out of this! It isn’t the night for that sort of thing.”

Kandace nodded. “Sorry ‘bout that. Should just let the subject drop.”

Aaron gave his sister a long look, “Consider it dropped then. Chena, please make sure she complies. Can I get you a drink or something?”

“Thanks, but I got a minor on board,” Kandace said. “Her Mom’s somewhere out in deep space, and I’m *in loco parentis*. Which means I was crazy enough to agree to play parent, I guess.”

“How minor? You know, the laws here are fairly lax,” Athena said cheerfully, finishing off her drink. “Hey, could I get another?”

“Athena...I really think you’ve had enough,” Jamie said. “You’re feeling kind of loopy, mentally, and that’s worrying me a little.”

“Heeeey! *I’m* supposed to be the one cutting *you* off,” Athena complained.

“Yeah, well, deal with it,” Jamie said. “Really, I don’t even like getting drunk to begin with. And I *really* don’t

think I wanna be stuck inside a drunk RIDE.”

“Funny thing about those lax laws. Mom and Dad often point out that they never planned on making this place so open. It’s just after coming from Earth and all its regulations, they just strongly hinted to the first families that they didn’t want to get bogged down on trivialities. If the parents allow it, then the kids can do it, more or less,” Aaron explained.

“Well, when her Mom gets back I’m gonna have to justify everything I did to her,” Kandace said. “So no booze. Maybe after she gets done with her homework we’ll have a virgin pina colada or something.”

Rochelle gulped the last of her drink, and stretched. “I think I need a little air now. Un-hon, could’ja let me out again?”

“Sure thing!” Uncia giggled, then her hardlight flickered out for a de-Fuse. As she pulled herself back together again next to Rochelle, the woman looked down at herself and blinked, then reached up to feel of her face.

“Well, this is new,” Rochelle said. She was still wearing the daisy dukes and bikini top, but now she was covered head to foot in the same thick fluffy grey and white fur as on her snow-leopard tail--and had a decidedly feline muzzle as well to match her ears. “What the heck...?”

“Now you match Scratch!” Uncia said. “Don’ worry, I’ll reverse it ‘fore we go home. But I think you make a cute couple now!”

“Uuuuuuuuncia...” Rochelle said, tail swishing.

“Don’t gimme that, I saw the way you were looking at him!” Uncia said.

Rochelle facepalmed. “You really *are* drunk, aren’t

you?”

Uncia rolled over on her back, waving all four paws in the air.

Scratch smiled over at the pair then took his next shot. “I dunno, stripes and rosettes?”

“Well, *all* cats are grey when the lights are out,” Rochelle said, grinning.

“Not when you have low light vision.”

“Oh, just kiss him already!” Uncia said from on her back.

“Not on the first break.” Scratch smirked. “But maybe later on.”

“I’ll tell you this for sure...I want to meet the people who invented these drinks.” Rochelle grinned. “I know a thing or three about nanotech myself--these cooties I got gave me a free ticket to an internship in Nextus Nano’s labs. Maybe I could see ‘bout getting a franchise for Uplift.”

“Your cooties? I noticed them tickling when I came in. If you worked in those labs, then you’ve already met the people. We got them from Nextus in the first place, at a friend’s party.”

“Interesting. I’ll bet I could help fine-tune them. And maybe we could come up with a coffee-based nano-drink with stimulant effects.”

“Oh just get a boardroom you two,” Ashley giggled, rolling her eyes.

Off to the side, Jamie triggered Athena’s de-Fuse and emerged to find herself covered with fennec fur from head to foot, and a muzzle and cold wet nose to match. She looked down at herself. “Theeeenie?”

The giant fennec next to her gave her partner a slurp on the muzzle. “It looked like such fun for Shelley, I thought you should get to try it too!”

Ashley laughed, defusing as well, to show off her own pink pelt, “That’s the most common effect of the Intie drink. It lowers RIDE inhibitions somewhat, and the first one it seems to hit is how fused they make us. It’s lots of fun.”

“*Please* tell me she’s gonna have a headache in the morning,” Jamie muttered.

“Huh, so I’m gonna be all elky when we de-Fuse?” Rufia asked.

Chena smirked, “Maybe. It’s the most common, but not the only thing that can happen. And we don’t get headaches, but we do tend to need a good defrag after. It tends to mix up our indices.”

“Oh, fun. And guess who’s gonna be stuck doing those?” Rochelle rolled her eyes.

“No rush, the automated processes can sort it out eventually. I’d say Chimo’s rarely any worse for the wear when we get him to drink, but he tends to be so scatterbrained normally, I don’t think I’d know him defragged,” Scratch grinned and dodged a cue stick from the sammy.

“It’ll be interesting to explain *this* to Mom and Dad,” Jamie said, peering down at the fur on her arms.

Ashley grinned, “Wait till you have a friend to share it with. It does add a new dimension to the fun.”

Jamie chuckled. “I might just have to see if anyone from Dayla’s Crew is busy tonight.” She glanced wistfully over at Rochelle, then shook her head.

Scratch flicked his ear and looked around, “That’s strange. I’m picking up a surge of nannies in the air. Almost like the drink but different....” Across the bar, three different couples put down their drinks and started kissing each other.

Rochelle blinked. “...what? Aw crap! My pheromones...they just kicked in. Uncia, Fuse *now* please.”

“But we just un-Fused!” Uncia whined. But at the glare Rochelle gave her, she quickly headed over and enclosed her rider again.

“Aw, dammit, it looks like *I* need a defrag or something. I can’t shut ‘em off,” Rochelle said. “And...that can’t be right. Something is trying to override Uncia’s autorepair nanos to make them too.”

Scratch looked at the pair and winced suddenly. “Sorry about that. Bad habit. Would you mind if I peeked?”

“Hang on, I’ve got DINsec so I’ll have to grant you access. Um...okay, there,” Rochelle said.

The Intie looked closer, his gaze unfocusing. “Oh my, I’ve never seen that many nannies outside of an Intie. You’re most familiar with the normal ones; what are you trying to do?”

“Trying to shut ‘em down, but the controls aren’t responding right now,” Rochelle said. “Haven’t had this happen since before Zane fixed them.”

“It’s the drink ones; they’ve scrambled the control codes. I don’t know if I can do much. The drink ones are mixed with yours, and keep changing them randomly, faster than we can keep up. Until they expire, you may be stuck.”

“Aw crap. I think I’ve just got a few minutes until Uncia’s nanofactories start cranking them out too,” Rochelle said.

“That’s not good. What do you need?”

“To be away from other people, I guess.”

Ashley snorted, leaning against the Fused elks. “In Aloha? Not many places you can go to be isolated here.”

“I can think of a few,” Scratch said. “Some safe cells in Aloha U and such. But they aren’t much fun to sleep off a hangover at. We could head up to the Aerie. Astranikki’s away, so it’s just me at my place. How much space do you need?”

“Not much...out beyond a dozen meters they thin out too much to affect anyone,” Rochelle said. “And...oooh. Oh no. I think the libido enhancers just kicked in on *me*.” She took a deep breath, tilting her head back.

Scratch moved close to her, “Right, I think we’d better run then. Our place is far enough from the main house that it won’t affect the kids. And if Wanda’s home, she might be able to help out.”

“Then...take me home?” Rochelle breathed.

“I’m doing my best to keep them contained. Let’s go. It’s not too far all in all.”

Rochelle glanced to Rufia. “Um...sorry ‘bout this. I’ll comm you tomorrow.”

Rufia grinned through Yvonne’s elky face. “Hey, no worries. We’ll just carry on without you. See you in the morning, and be sure to tell us all about it.”

She looked over at Jamie, “Jamie, can you let your parents know we won’t be making it there tonight?”

“I will... I...think I better go,” Jamie said, her tail

swishing back and forth in agitation. “I, um...there’s someone I need to see. Was nice meeting you all!” She held out her arms and Athena Fused around her.

“Whoops,” Athena said. “Think she got a snootful of those nanos. Better go get that taken care of. See you later!” They lifted off the floor and headed out.

“Good night, everyone,” Rochelle said. “Thanks for the drinks.” She followed Scratch out the door.

“Well, that was...interesting,” Kandace said. “I’d probably better get a move on myself. Almost time for us to go to work. I’ve got a job as a warehouse night watchman--I watch while Jenni sleeps.”

“Efficient,” Yvonne said. “I like that. Well, it was good meeting you. Maybe see you ‘round Uplift sometime?”

Kandace nodded. “Maybe so.”

Aaron waved, “If you need anything, don’t be afraid to ask. Not a handout, but just as a friend helping a friend.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind,” Kandace said.

“Anyway, see ya.” She lifted off the floor and headed out, herself.

“Wow. We’ve just lost, like, half our party,” Rufia said.

“Just means we need to get more.” Ashley replied.

“Yeah, and there’s more booze for the rest of us.”

Rufia grinned. “Though I think I’m gonna pass on any more of those nanite drinks for right now.”

“Fine by me,” Yvonne said. “This buzz is...interesting. But I don’t think I want to get any more drunk myself.”

“Well if you’re up for more, there’s another place I know. Great for picking up folks. Better than these stuck up places Aaron usually picks.”

“Hey! It’s not stuck up! You found this place first!”

“And I’ve found better since. Come on, let’s go guys.”

Rufia racked the balls back up on her table, put the cue up, and followed the two snowdogs into the night.

The fused feline pair followed the integrate through the city and up the hills that lead to the headland that separated Tranquility Bay from the Tethys.

“Are you sure Wanda will still be awake? I don’t want to impose on her so late at night,” Rochelle asked again. “Nrrg...I think I can hold off the nanos for now...think rationally for a *little* while longer at any rate...”

“Ryan, her husband that is, has the late shift this month, and they usually keep their schedules synced, so she should be up. Unless the twins tired her out. Still, I’m sure she won’t mind,” Scratch said.

He lead them to a broad patio. At one end was a large multi story house, built into the edge of the headland, with an overhanging deck. At the other end was a smaller house, mostly glass walled.

“Welcome to the Aerie,” he said with a sweep of his arm. “The big house is the original place Nick built for his family. Wanda lives there now with her family. Over there, is the new house we built for Astranikki and I.”

“There’s a lot of windows there,” Uncia noted.

“Astranikki’s design. After a decade stuck in a cave in the ground, she didn’t care to feel constrained any more. The windows all have privacy modes, and are all transparent aluminum, so the glass houses adage doesn’t quite apply to us.”

“Right. Which way do we go?”

Scratch frowned, “Small hiccup in the plans. Wanda’s

not here. She had to make a house call down to Casa Blanca.”

“Nnngh...so now what?” Rochelle asked. She sighed. “I’m sorry ‘bout all this. I *wanted* a real date with you. I like those.”

“We can wait at my place. Your nannies don’t affect me, but I wouldn’t mind a real date either.”

“I’m glad they don’t affect *you*.” She took a deep breath. “The problem is, they’re affecting *me*.”

He led her to the smaller house, “Well no point in letting them go to waste if you wanted it anyway.”

“Oh, believe me I did.” Rochelle smiled at him. “I only crossed a couple months ago, and this is all still so new to me.”

“That recently? So do you have any preferences? Care for a regular drink?”

“Preferences...? And sure. Kahlua and cream?”

He prepared the drink for her, and another for himself and sat down, “Well, I don’t know how much you know about Inties, but I’m a gender shifter, so...”

“My one biggest preference is you don’t leave Uncia out,” Rochelle said. “We do share everything.”

“Awww, thanks Shelley,” Uncia said. “I’m blushing.”

He giggled, “That’s not a problem at all, especially since you already gave me DIN access.”

Rochelle sipped her drink through Uncia’s muzzle. “Mmm...just right. Then good. We’re all yours.”

“No need to rush. We’ve got all night,” he teased.

Rochelle smirked. “Well maybe *you* do...” She reached over to put an arm around him. “I might just make it another hour.”

He rubbed the arm and smiled, purring and leaning against her, “An hour you say...”

Rochelle purred back, and Uncia echoed it. “If we’re lucky...”

Rochelle woke slowly in a strange bed, her mind fuzzy from the night before, but pleasantly exhausted. And that wasn’t all that was fuzzy, either. She still had all the fur Uncia had given her the night before, and the feline muzzle. It was actually starting to feel kind of natural to her. Maybe she’d have Uncia put it back on her again sometime.

She stretched out under the covers, and tried to piece what else had happened. After talking with Scratch, they’d moved on to other things. Things that had felt really nice, she recalled. She smiled at the memory of the feelings; the sex-changing Integrate had shown he *and* she was very experienced with both humans and RIDEs.

Rolling out of the bed, she looked around, finding the bedroom deserted. Through the tinted walls, she saw a snow leopard RIDE on the patio, looking out over the bay.

She pulled on a robe that was on the chair, and felt it tighten and reshape around her, becoming silky and revealing even when tied up. She took a moment to try and control her nannies, and was relieved to find them responsive again. She tossed her head, and her thigh-length mane of hair, currently light grey with dark grey rosettes to match her fur, cascaded into place. She slid the door open and walked out to greet the RIDE.

“Hey Uncia, you shaken off that drink yet--oh! You’re not Uncia.”

The snow leopard turned to look at Rochelle, tail swishing slowly. Rochelle could tell that she was well cared for, with a lot of mu put into upgrades, but the underlying frame had the coarseness of the original waves of RIDEs used in the war. Uncia's luxury was obvious, built into her original frame and in everything attached to it. This one was as luxurious, but more in the style of a well cared for, well maintained classic RIDE.

“Good morning, I trust you slept well? Scratch certainly did,” the strange RIDE greeted her, not moving from her spot, her tail twitching in amusement.

“I did, though I'm a bit at a loss at the moment. I'm Rochelle, though you probably already know that.”

She nodded and stood up finally, approaching the programmer slowly, not threateningly. “That I did. Scratch usually tries to make sure to introduce us to the people he brings home. Though even by Alohan standards they aren't usually as famous, or infamous as you are. Scratch and your RIDE are in the main house, getting brunch.”

Rochelle nodded. “Thank you. Um, you never said your name.”

“I haven't. But we have met before, in VRspace many times now, under many identities and avatars. My name is Krystal Munn-Daye. Wanda's RIDE half.”

“Ah! Nice to meet you.” Rochelle grinned. “Is there something about snow leopard RIDEs that makes them perfect partners for expert hackers, you think?”

“Well, we *are* really good at dealing with ICE,” Krystal purred, tail swishing.

Rochelle looked out over the view she hadn't been able to pay much attention to on the way up. To her left,

the city spread along the shoreline, reaching out into the water occasionally. The bay itself was crowded with resorts, cruise ships and other constructions. And straight ahead, the cable reached out of the atmosphere to space itself. “Wow, this is quite the view.”

“A trillion mu view, according to what Aloha taxes us at. Well not quite that high, but it’s up there. Luckily, Nikki didn’t have to pay for it. The advantages of being a founder.”

Krystal started to walk slowly to the main house. “Wanda’s eager to meet you, especially when she heard Scratch had brought you home. But we made her promise to wait until Nikki and the twins were fed.” The RIDE paused and looked back, “Her kids, not the ones you were out with last night.”

They walked into the main house, and into the main living space of a young family. Toys were shoved into one corner, table corners were padded or rounded off, and every flat surface was stained, or well scrubbed.

Uncia was on a RIDE couch against one wall, with a pair of toddlers climbing over her. Scratch was seated at a breakfast bar that divided the kitchen area from the rest of the space. An older woman with shoulder length grey hair with snow-leopard rosettes--not unlike Rochelle’s own at the moment--was cleaning up the kitchen. She had a long leopard tail and furry ears similar to Rochelle’s, as well as an upturned feline nose and whiskers.

“Good morning. Welcome to the Aerie. Did you sleep well?” the woman greeted her.

“I slept fine. Scratch was a perfect host.”

“He always is.” The woman smiled at the Integrate,

who looked a little embarrassed. “I’m Wanda. The two little ones climbing on your friend there are mine. Cheryl is in pink, Christine is in green. You must be starved, what do you want?”

“Well...a couple eggs over easy, grits if you got ‘em, hash browns if not, a couple biscuits and gravy, and some bacon?”

“Coming up!” Wanda said cheerfully, cracking a couple of eggs into the skillet.

Rochelle watched her work. “So Scratch said you were on a call last night?”

“Yeah. Casa Blanca. It’s a small casino downtown. An Intie was hacking their machines and beating the bank.”

“An Intie? You could tell?”

Wanda grinned and set the plate down in front of her guest. “We’re sure. He tripped Watchdog trying to beat the house. Ever since your friend outted Inties, we’ve seen a surge in attacks lately. Luckily, we’ve got Watchdog installed all over the place. It’s usually enough to limit their damage.”

“Watchdog? What’s that?”

The wall next to her lit up with a device. “Our version of your DINsec. Nowhere near as good; it doesn’t stop them, but it can give them a nasty surprise if they aren’t expecting it. And let everyone else know that someone’s trying some Intie tricks. You installed some of the early versions in Chimo and Chena.”

The memory clicked and she shook her head. “They said it was your house keys.”

She laughed and slipped the eggs on a plate with the rest of the meal. “Well in the early days, we were a bit

paranoid about them. Didn't want knowledge of them getting out, since those early versions were especially easy to bypass. The house keys story was all them.

“In any case, since those early betas, we've been refining it. Making them harder to bypass, and more sensitive to Intie and other hacks in general. We started spreading them around Aloha's cities about a year after you worked on Chena and Chimo. When you released your DINsec specs, we've added that in too. The important places are hardened with both now, the latest versions we've gotten our hands on. The Elevator, the power grid, traffic control, hospitals, communications, the big casinos and so forth. But the small guys are only running Watchdog, if that.”

“The casinos?”

Scratch stole a piece of bacon from her plate.

“Tourism is Aloha's lifeblood. And the casinos and resorts are a huge part of that. If they fall, we fall. So protecting them is as important as your domes.”

Rochelle nodded. “Makes sense. Everyone wants the easy money. Hell, if I were Integrated I'd be tempted to do it myself.”

Krystal chuckled, “We outed a dozen Inties in Aloha once we spread it around, mostly newbies who'd just Integrated and gotten a DIN and figured the world was their oyster. We cut the losses the casinos had by so much, the gaming commission forced them to loosen up the odds.”

“I'd love to get a copy of the specs to Watchdog, if you don't mind,” Rochelle said. “There might be something there we could use to make DINsec even better.”

“I don’t doubt it. We’ve been meaning to send them your way for awhile, but you kept pushing so many updates out, we couldn’t catch up. We’ve got some sims going with our own latest versions down in the workshop. Why don’t we head down and I’ll show them to you.”

Rochelle chuckled, pushing her empty plate aside and getting up to follow Wanda. Uncia disengaged from the toddlers, gave each of them a swipe on the face with a sandpapery tongue, then followed Rochelle as Scratch moved in to attract the twins’ attention. “Sorry ‘bout that. You know, when you get right down to it, Rhi and I are really janies-come-lately who just happened to be lucky enough to catch the right breaks. It’s really an honor to meet someone who’s been doing this for years.”

“You aren’t that late to the party. We’ve only had Scratch, Mike and Dad back for a few years. Before that, we were in the dark as much as you. Having Inties in house to help with the testing is our biggest advantage. Our big problem is the tech end. Dad’s more of a grease birdy, not a circuit gal like your Rhianna is.”

“Any time you’re in Uplift, let us know, we’ll be happy to go over everything we know with you,” Rochelle said.

Wanda led them down to a large garage and workspace. It was divided into multiple areas, though dividers were movable. Along one wall, windows let in the light, and a view out over the strait.

“This is our memorial section,” Wanda explained as they walked. “Where we keep dad’s old IDE’s. Or what’s left of them. The Dry really did a number on them.”

Rochelle nodded. “It tends to do that.”

“This one is Ryan’s workshop. He likes to carve wood

in his spare time. Not that we have much of it any more with three kids in the house.

“And this, this is dad’s and my workshop.”

The lights came on, revealing a large space carved out of the headland. Along one wall was a half assembled jet IDE, in walker mode. Cables snaked into it, connecting to banks of computers that surrounded it. High precision fabbers and more computers filled most of the remaining spaces.

“Oooh. Too bad Rhi isn’t here,” Rochelle observed. “She’d be in heaven.”

“Thanks. It’s not much but it suits our needs.” One of the tables lit up as Wanda approached, showing schematics. “Good, the latest sims just finished. They’re looking good.”

“What’re you working on here?” Uncia asked, peering curiously at the IDE.

“That’s Sigma, Dad’s project. She’s trying to make an IDE for herself.”

Rochelle nodded. “Like Zane Brubeck’s Chauncey?”

“Sort’ve. But Dad was a jet guy back then. Not a tanker like Clint Brubeck and Chauncey.” Wanda chuckled as she reminisced a little, “The fights those three used to get into, especially after dad and Uncle Jason got their RIDes. Anyway, even though she can fly herself now, dad still wants the feel of an IDE at times. Says there may be a time when she’ll want the extra oomph and shielding it can supply.”

“I know an Intie pilot, a Cooper’s Hawk, who basically *wears* any plane she flies,” Rochelle said. “But I get the feeling you might be meaning something more than just a

normal Intie DIN link?”

Wanda sat on Sigma’s leg section and nodded. “Before they Fused, hell before Dad even brought Astra home, they installed a remote in Astra so she could fly Dad’s IDE. When they came home after Integrating, they discovered the link’s still there, even when their DIN isn’t.

“It’s hard to explain; I didn’t really believe Dad at first, but she’s convinced me over the years. The innate link, it passes along something the DIN connection doesn’t tap into; closer to the IDE’s core somehow. The problem is, that same innate link just can’t handle a full blown Intie connection. We’ve been trying to find a happy medium for years.”

“Hmm. Un-hon, upload everything we’ve got on how we used DIN links to make the link between Fenris and Guinevere work. It’s not quite the same thing, but maybe there’s something relevant there.”

Krystal read through the data and nodded her head, “Cool, neat ideas. I never heard of those projects. There might be some ideas in there we can use. At least some new approaches.”

Wanda waved her hand to the table, “New approaches are always handy. Lately we’ve been toying with the idea of maybe a partial fuse between the Intie and IDE. The Laurasian EIDE’s like Ryan’s partners, have been doing that.”

“I thought Inties couldn’t really ‘fuse’ as such,” Rochelle said.

“They can’t. Or at least the thinking is they can’t. But Dad’s willing to give it a shot. We’re sending queries to fuse experts around the continent to get suggestions.

Theoretically there's no real reason they can't fuse, but an Intie personality core is such a mess that it can't mix with another RI. Since we won't have a RIDE core, just an IDE core at best, it may work"

"Well, once all this mess with Fritz is over, Rhi and I should be more available, if there's any way we can help," Rochelle said. "If I know Rhi, she'll sink her teeth into the problem and not surface for days."

"It's just one of our own side projects. So it's not that important. But thanks for the offer. I've already sent you our data, as well as our Watchdog results," Krystal said.

"Thanks. We'll let you know if we come up with anything," Rochelle said.

"Well, if you aren't in a hurry to go anywhere, I could give you a tour of how it works. Might make the specs easier to understand."

"I'd love to, I'd *really* love to. But Rufia will probably be up soon, looking to head back...."

"Rufia--she was with my cousins right? We may have the time after all."

"She was... what do you mean? Did they get into trouble?"

Krystal smiled, and a surveillance holo started playing, showing a large fight being broken up in the middle of a dance floor. Ashley's pink fused form was clear in the middle of it. "Just the usual. It's rare that Ashley *doesn't* finish off a pub night recovering in the cells. Rex and Ryan are already on their way to release them. Don't worry, there weren't any charges, and the report says they're fine."

"I wasn't that worried. Though Rufia might be a little

disappointed. She tends to be more of a lover, not a fighter. Still, her loss. You said something about a tour? I'm all ears!" Rochelle said, twitching them demonstratively.

The fused Golden Lab walked through the station, nodding to friends along the way. He stopped at the Warden's desk on the way down. "Hey Joe. Eventful night?"

"The usual mainly. Here for your crew?"

"Yeah. Got the message on the way home. They clear?"

Joe shoved a tablet over, "They're clear. No major damage, no injuries. You know the drill. They're in number five."

"Thanks. See you next Saturday for the BBQ." Ryan left his signature on the tablet, and the warden buzzed them through the door. He made his way down to the cells and looked into the third one.

"Well well well. I didn't think it was Friday already," he said to the unfused trio in the cell. The pink furred girl wasn't unexpected, but the antlered elk woman was new to him.

"Hey Ryan. It's not Friday, we just had some out of town guests," Aaron said, laying on one of the cots, his hands clasped behind his head.

"I heard. Scratch brought two of them home. Wanda says Uncia's very polite."

Ashley yawned and stretched from the cot. "Rufia, that's Wanda's husband, Ryan. And Rex. APD."

Rufia groaned. "Owww, my head. It feels like I've got

antlers.”

“You do. Yvonne gave them to you. Forget already?”

“Who the what now?” Rufia reached up and felt the protrusions from the sides of her head, just above her ears. They were rather impressive six-point antlers--not bad for a doe. “Gaaaah!” She hastily checked her other equipment to make sure it was all there. “...whew!”

Aaron chuckled, “Don’t worry. No one’s swapped from the Intie drink yet. At least not that we’ve heard of.”

Ryan signaled, and the field faded away. “Come on you guys, let’s get you home and cleaned up. Your RIDEs are upstairs, playing with the guards.”

“Ow...” Rufia said again. “Anyone got some hangover nanos?”

“There’s a case of SoberUp upstairs with your RIDEs. After you.” Ryan stood to one side and motioned for the others to go ahead of him.

Rufia went first, but caught her antler on the edge of the doorframe, twisting her neck. “Ow!”

Aaron caught her and helped stabilize her, “Watch your head. Lower ceilings than you’re used to.”

“Just get me back to Vonnie so I can have her get these damn things offa me,” Rufia growled.

Ryan motioned for them to head to the exit. “Madam Toussaud’s has charged the damages to your usual tab. No other charges, and most was covered under insurance, so all in all, it was rather low key for you, Ash.”

“Aaron started us off at the pool hall, so we didn’t have as much time to build up our usual head of steam. Hope you had a good time, Rufia.”

“I did...except for the ending...which I can’t quite

remember right now.” She shook her head, starting a little at the “whiff” sound her antlers made in the air. “So on the whole...yeah. Even if it did leave me horny at the end. Or at least antlery.” She grinned.

“The ending is Ashley’s standard. Picking on the wrong crowd and usually shaking the place up. Usually it’s Cape Nordians, but this time it was a group from Sturmhaven,” Ryan explained.

“Those Valk bitches earned it. They were picking on my favorite guys, without paying for it,” Ash growled.

Aaron took his sister’s arm and guided her towards the exit. “Sorry, Ruf. It’s part my fault. A few weeks in the Dry tends to leave Ash in a brawling mood. Next time you’re down, I’m sure we can find a more pleasant ending for the evening.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Rufia said. “Like the song goes, Saturday night’s all right for fighting. I could just wish we’d found the time for something a different kind of physical is all.”

The RIDE lot was just outside the station. The Samoyeds and the Elk were with the two guard dogs, a Pinscher and a Rottweiler.

“Hey guys, we’re out. Time to come in off the range,” Aaron called out.

Chena refocused and shook herself, “Already? We almost had that herd.”

“Ha! Elks rule, canines drool!” Yvonne crowed. She was wearing a pair of hardlight antlers that matched Rufia’s. One of them had a lampshade over it.

“Well, of course canines drool,” Chena said. “That’s just how our mouths work.”

Chimo and Chena nuzzled the other two RIDEs as they said farewells. Yvonne trotted over to Rufia. “Hey, lookin’ good!”

“You too,” Rufia said. She raised an eyebrow. “A lampshade? That must have been some night.”

“It’s mostly symbolic,” Yvonne said. The hardlight lampshade winked out, leaving the antlers unadorned.

“So are you ready to take these things off me?” Rufia asked.

“Aw, you don’t like ‘em? I think they make a definite statement,” Yvonne said.

“Maybe some other time. Like if we’re going out ‘stag’. But right now, they’re just making my headache worse.”

“Fair enough. C’mere.” Yvonne Fused around her rider, and the antlers disappeared, as did Yvonne’s own hardlight ones. “Better?”

“Better,” Rufia said. The Fused elk moved her head experimentally back and forth. “Yeah, definitely better.”

The fused golden lab suddenly looked distracted. “Just a sec, join in guys, Scratch is calling.”

The Integrate appeared between them, overlapping his virtual persona on real space. It was slightly transparent. “Guys! You’ve gotta come back here! I’ve created a monster!”

“Howzat?” Rufia asked.

His image flickered a moment before stabilizing. “They’re taking all the bandwidth and computing power in the Aerie they can find. I’m bouncing off of one of Tracy’s cargo ships just to reach you guys.”

“They’ who Scratch?” Aaron asked.

“Wanda and Rochelle! That’s who!” He leaned closer,

his VR image growing larger. “I gotta go. I think they’re coming for me next. Avenge me!”

“Ooookay,” Yvonne said. “Maybe we should just stay away for a while, lest they want *our* cycles too. If you know what’s good for you, you don’t tug on Superman’s cape, you don’t spit into the wind, and you don’t interrupt a geek in the middle of geeking.”

Ryan laughed, as the last of Scratch’s avatar faded away in a burst of static. “Nah, he tends to be a bit melodramatic when he’s recovering. I’m sure it’s not that bad... I hope.”

“Iiiii dunno,” Rufia said. “I’m pretty sure you’ve never seen Shelley on a geeking binge.”

“I married one, and inherited a mechanical geek as a mother in law in the process. And I know where the fuse boxes are.” Ryan started to the main road. “Shall we go see how much trouble they’re in?”

“Let’s go beard the snow leopardesses in their den,” Yvonne said.

Despite Scratch’s alarm, the Aerie looked normal, if deserted, when they arrived. “Looks like they’re all down in the workshop. Denise came to pick up the twins. Probably why they could claim Scratch,” Ryan noted.

“I guess we should go see what they’re doing,” Yvonne said.

“No need to go through the house; the garage is faster.” Rex led them over the patio and over the edge. Transparent panels slid to one side, and lights came on, illuminating a large space.

The canines and elk defused as they landed, not

pausing as they walked in deeper.

“Wow, they really are geeking out in here, Ryan. Your mesh is slower than a dino in Cape Nord,” Chena noted in passing. “Lots of sat connections too.”

“And here’s the reason why,” Ashley said.

The workshop was chaotic. The two snow leopard RIDEs had their pelts turned off, with cables connecting to their access ports. Scratch was in Sigma’s cockpit, a thick connection cable connected to his DIN slot. The two women were all but invisible behind holographic windows.

“Thank goodness you got here,” Scratch called out. “Get me outta here guys!”

“Hey, Shelley, what’s up?” Rufia asked. “You do know we need to fly back to Uplift today, right?”

“Fifteen more minutes!” Rochelle said. “I think we’re on the edge of a breakthrough here!”

“She said that two breakthroughs ago,” Scratch retorted.

“If we stop now, we’ll just have to start all over from scratch next time,” Wanda pointed out. “Or, rather, all over *with* Scratch...”

“Hardy har har. Get me out of here!”

Aaron grinned and looked around the workshop. “Well, it is important, Scratch. We are playing catch-up, and we won’t always have a visiting expert to help out. An extra hour wouldn’t hurt I’m sure.”

“Oh, please? We’ll love you forever,” Rochelle said. “Or at least for another hour.”

“Another hour will *seem* like forever,” Scratch grumbled.

“That’s just what you get for being such a tease last

night,” Rochelle smirked. “An hour, you say’ indeed.”

“Oh, come on. I made it worth the wait, didn’t I?” Scratch said.

Rochelle smiled at him. “Mmm...maybe. Just think of this as some incentive to come up with new ways to drive me crazy next time.”

“Hmm...” Scratch said thoughtfully.

Rochelle glanced over at the newcomers. “Yvonne, we could use some more sat bandwidth back to the garage....”

“You’re gonna *owe* me,” Yvonne pointed out. “But hey, if it’ll get you guys done faster, why not? I’ll just be out on the balcony lighting up some birds. Rufe, why don’cha run along and have s’more fun with the Samoyeds for a while?”

“You sure it’ll just be an hour?” Rufia asked, looking at Ryan and Rex.

Ryan shrugged, familiar with his wife’s geekouts. “Don’t look at me. I just got off my shift, so I’m not gonna time them. I’m hitting the sack, have fun while you can. But if you aren’t out by the time I wake up, I’m hitting the fuse box.”

Wanda slipped out from among the screens and gave her husband a kiss, ruffling Rex’s ears as well. “Sleep well dear. We’ll be done long before then.”

Everyone else escaped while they could, following the detective up into his house.

“Well. I seem to be minus an elk,” Rufia observed, taking the drink Aaron offered.

“Chimo and Chena are both two seaters, so we can still get around. Maybe give you a lift to the Queen where we grew up. Mom’s out at Uplift, and Dad’s taking the

ankle biters on a trip to Burnside, so it's deserted. Oh! You should call your friends, apologize for not showing up last night," Aaron reminded her.

Rufia nodded, "Good point.... Damn, my usual comm's busy. Can I use one of yours?"

Chena flicked her tail to the wall, and a phonebook appeared. "Go ahead, we've gotta figure out what to do in the next few hours."

"Hey, that boat of yours..." Rufia said. "It's got private bedrooms, right?"

Aaron grinned. "I think I like the way you think."

Three hours later, Wanda, Scratch, the twins and their RIDEs were at the Subport to say farewell to the Uplifters. The Geeks still had their own RIDEs simming hard, leaving Yvonne and Scratch to guide Uncia safely to the sub.

As they arrived, they found a familiar fennec and fennec-girl waiting outside the hangar. Jamie was still covered in her full-body fur from the night before, and looked distinctly ruffled. "Uh...hi," she said, glancing nervously at Rochelle. "Could we...maybe talk a little? Alone?"

Rochelle considered the request for a moment. "Sure. Un-hon, why don't you get the preflight started? I'll be with you in a bit."

"Sure thing!" The snow leopard shifted from skimmer to Walker form, leaving Rochelle standing on the tarmac next to a huge fluffy snow leopard. The hangar door opened and the others filed inside to examine the Dreamchaser, while Rochelle followed Jamie around to the

back of the hangar.

“So how did last night go for you?” Rochelle asked.

“It went...okay,” Jamie said. “Met up with some friends. Didn’t sleep much.” She grinned, the expression looking both vulpine and cute with her fox muzzle and big ears. “I think I wore them out. Those nanites of yours are just too much.”

“Er...yes. About that,” Rochelle said. “I wanted to apologize. Not just about last night, but...in general. I wasn’t thinking, and I made the wrong first impression.”

Jamie blinked. “What do you mean? I understand about the nannies making you more attractive...”

“It’s not just that, exactly,” Rochelle said. “See...if I haven’t just had a crazy nanite drink, I can turn them down, or off. I’ve just been keeping them turned up all the time because...well, I like feeling sexy, and my nanites being ‘out of control’ gave me a good excuse. But lately I’ve come to realize...sometimes that’s not the best idea. Maybe *most* of the time it’s not the best idea. I saw how you were looking at me...”

Jamie blushed under her fur. “I...er...yes. Sorry ‘bout that. It’s just...”

“Just the nanites. I know,” Rochelle said. “I’ve cranked them way back for now, so you shouldn’t have that problem anymore.”

Jamie shook her head. “No, it’s not that. It’s just that even *without* the nanites, I still...you know.” She stared down at the ground, face still red. “It may just be something left over from my own crossride. Or...well, I dunno. But anyway, you don’t need nanites for me to *like* you.”

“Why...thank you,” Rochelle said. “But even so...” She trailed off.

“I know.” Jamie sighed. “I’m too young for you.”

Rochelle put a hand on Jamie’s shoulder. “It’s not *that*, exactly. I mean, I don’t have anything against June-Septembers. Hell, Rufia’s got more years on me than I’ve got on you. It’s just that...you’re a teenager *and* you’ve just crossed. You haven’t finished working out quite who you are yet. You’re not even really *sure* if you’re attracted to other girls.”

“I know,” Jamie said. “I just thought it might be kinda fun to find out is all.”

Rochelle shook her head. “Nuh-uh. Charging ahead into something like that, with someone older like me--or Charley, for that matter, though it looks like she’s already taken--could really mess you up.” She paused, then grinned. “And there’s also your parents to consider. I really don’t wanna tick either one of them off at me. ‘Fear Their Roar’ and all that.”

“I guess I can see that,” Jamie said. “Still, I just wish I *knew*...”

“Maybe this will help you figure it out.” Rochelle tilted Jamie’s chin up, then leaned down and placed her lips over Jamie’s and delivered a deep kiss as the fennec-girl squealed in surprise. It was a little awkward, given that both of them had half-muzzle lips right now, but for all of that Rochelle thought it went pretty well.

“There,” Rochelle said after she broke it off. “Now if you liked that, you might want to explore it some more, with girls your own age. If you didn’t, then now you know.”

“Glrk,” Jamie said, staring at her.

“If you find you *do* like it, and you still feel the same way in a few years, look me up. If I’m still single...well, we’ll see how that goes.” Rochelle grinned. “Either way, I better get back to the sub before the others blow a gasket. See ya in the funny papers, kiddo.” Rochelle patted her on the shoulder, then walked back the way they had come.

Athena looked quizzically at her as she came back around the corner. “What’s Jamie doing?”

“Just sort of standing there in a daze right now,” Rochelle said. “You might better go pick her up before a bird mistakes her for a statue.”

Athena chuckled. “I see. Thank you for your kindness. If you’d wished, you could have led her around by the nose for days.”

Rochelle shook her head. “Nah. Way too much like fettering a RIDE. Honestly, I’m starting to get fed up with the whole sexy nanite thing. Seems like it causes more trouble than it’s worth. Anyway, it was nice meeting you, and see ya ‘round. Give my regards to the rest of your family.”

“Thank you,” Athena said. “We will.” She trotted around the hangar after her partner, and Rochelle went on inside to meet the others. Everyone had already gone inside the Dreamchaser to look around. While it was a little crowded inside with that many people, the Alohan were impressed by how comfortable and how efficiently-arranged the little ship was.

At last, they all went back down into the hangar to say their goodbyes. “I wish we had more time,” Rochelle said from the base of the ramp.

“So do I. But we need a break before we started

making mistakes. I haven't had a session like that since Dad came home. When we reviewed some of what we did after some rest, we tossed most of what we did at the end," Wanda said.

"I'm just glad we had fun *before* we introduced you two," Aaron pointed out. "Next time you come down here, look us up. We've barely scratched the surface of what Aloha has."

Scratch groaned, "Please, no more puns. You'll make me go Christine on you."

Rochelle smiled, "Well, we did get a lot done, even in the little time we did spend together. Next time you're up our way, give us a shout. We'll need to pay you back somehow. I'm sure Rufia knows lots of haunts you'd enjoy."

"You better believe it," Rufia spoke up. "That's how we earn our living."

"Looking forward to it," Ashley said. "Other than the campus and that ice cream place, we didn't really do much on our trips up there."

"Hell, I spent all the second visit in VR. Be good to hang with you in Real now," Chena added.

Wanda pondered a moment, "My twins keep me close to home for the most part, at least for a few more years. But I'm sure we'll be in touch. When I'm up there, or you're down here, I'm sure we'll have some jam time. And there's always VR."

"Yeah. And now that I've met you, maybe you can do it under just the *one* net handle this time." Rochelle grinned. "I'm still surprised at just how many of the people I've chatted with over the years turned out to be you."

“Blame years of dealing with the Intie underground for that. When Quinoa shut down some of our more public boards, we had to go deeper, which meant a lot more layers.”

“Yeah, well, she won’t be doing *that* anymore,” Rochelle said. “Turned over a brand new leaf, and we couldn’t be happier.”

Wanda nodded. “You know her? Small planet. Plummeting down from space with no power tends to do that to a person. We knew her before, after, and after. Dad, Pete and Vincent caught her on that space dive she did last month.”

“After and after?” Rochelle asked, confused.

Wanda ticked off on her clawed fingers. “After she integrated. And then after she matured and rejoined the real world. From what I remember, she wasn’t really all that different before and after Integration; but a couple of betrayals and near deaths finally sunk in.”

Rochelle obviously wanted to ask more, but she was interrupted by a tug on her arm. Rufia started pulling her up the ramp. “Save it for next time. If we wait any longer we’ll need to refile our flightpath, and I don’t want to redo the paperwork again.”

“See you later!” Rochelle said.

“Remember our date for on-line Nature Range!” Uncia called down the ramp to Krystal.

“Two snows; we’re gonna freeze everyone we meet in there. Can’t wait!” Krystal called back.

Rufia waved from the top of the ramp. “Bye, everyone! Thanks for a great pub crawl! We’ll see if we can do more property damage next time.” She grinned. “And the

morning after wasn't exactly bad either."

"We all had fun," Aaron said. "And we'll give you a call next time we're down Uplift way."

"Have a safe flight back!" Ashley called. Then the ramp slid back and the hatch closed, and the Munns moved back out of the way so the Dreamchaser could taxi.

As Uncia moved the ship onto the runway by remote, Rochelle stepped into the sub's compact head and looked at herself in the mirror. Grey-white hair swirling about, lips parted, favoring the mirror with a sultry come-hither look. She sighed, shook her head, and pulled on her interface specs to start moving sliders to the left.

When she came forward, Rufia was already Fused. The elk glanced over at her and raised an eyebrow. "You're looking unusually normal," she observed. "Turned off the sex-ay?"

"Yeah." Her body language had lost the come-hither sashay and was now normal human, and her hair now only moved slightly as she walked. "It was just getting to be more trouble than it was worth, going around like that all the time. The Jamie thing and those nano-drinks last night brought that home. Kind of juvenile of me, really. I'm starting to see why most people with it save it for special occasions."

Rufia chuckled. "I was wondering when you'd figure that out. Congratulations, you've outgrown your second adolescence."

Rochelle blinked. "You're not disappointed? I thought you were all about the sex-ay."

Rufia shook her head, grinning an elky grin through Yvonne's face. "I'm all about *you*. Like I said before, all

that stuff is just frosting, and I'm down with the cake. You eat too much frosting, all you get is sick, but the cake isn't a lie." She chuckled. "It seems to happen to a lot of people who crossride, they get this whole second adolescence thing going on where the hormones mess with their heads for a while. Which is fun enough while it's all shiny and new, but sooner or later you gotta get over it and figure out what your new normal is."

"How long did it take you?" Rochelle asked.

Rufia grinned wider. "I'll let you know once it happens."

"Okay, we're next in queue," Uncia said, padding onto the flight deck. "Time to Fuse up."

Rochelle held out her arms. "Go for it, partner!" Uncia changed shape and melded around Rochelle's body, and they took their seat at the flight controls. "Time to go home."

The Aloha ground crew had been efficient. The Dreamchaser's batteries had been recharged overnight, the fee charged to the garage's account. Now Uncia poured on full power and the small lifting-body suborbital accelerated down the runway, clawing its way into the air on the strength of its lifters.

Once the course was locked in and the acceleration was pushing Rochelle and Rufia back into the couches, Rochelle turned her head to glance over at her co-pilot. "So...how you doing now?"

Rufia understood what she meant. "Doing *much* better. Thanks. Seeing the Skylers settling in so well did help a lot with the post-traumatic stress--and so did partying hearty with the Munns." She grinned. "You

missed a hell of a party, girlie. But I guess you and Scratch had your own *private* party, didn't'cha?"

"Something like that," Rochelle admitted, grinning back.

"So how is he in bed? I might just shack up with him next time," Rufia said.

"Oh, not too bad at all. It was...an experience. How were the twins?" Rochelle asked.

"Almost enough to make me regret there's only one of me." Rufia chuckled. "Fun times, girlie. Feeling a lot more like my old self again. Thanks for bringing me out here."

"No problem. I met a lot of interesting people, and had a great time myself. And you know, now that it's been brought home to me just how close anywhere is with this sub, I might just have to start doing some more touristy things myself," Rochelle said. "For example, I've never been to First Landing in Laurasia. I should go and see where Charlene got dug up sometime."

"Sounds like another fun field trip," Rufia said. "If I'm in town, give me a call, we'll tag along--if the boss-lady doesn't mind, anyway."

Rochelle nodded. "It's a date."

"Ya know, maybe we should rent a condo in Aloha," Yvonne said. "We could spend some time there, make connections, and see about getting a piece of the Alohan tourist trade. Snag the newbies right when they get off the boat, 'stead of counting on them to get to Uplift on their own."

"Well, you're the boss," Rufia said. "But it sounds like a great idea to me."

"Maybe I can see if Rhi would be up for opening an

Alohan Freerider franchise.” Rochelle grinned. “It’d be great to hang out more with Wanda.”

“Or we *could* just get a condo ourselves,” Uncia pointed out. “Not everything has to be about business, you know.”

“True dat,” Rochelle said. “Of course, that sort of thing is really going to have to wait until this business with Fritz is over with. But I don’t expect it will be long now.”

“So much stuff is having to wait on that asshole,” Uncia sighed. “The whole *planet’s* been waiting on him for more than thirty years. I’ll be glad when it’s over and we can all move on.”

“I can’t even imagine what it’s going to be like,” Rochelle agreed.

“Well, I know one thing,” Rufia said. “There’ll be some *crazy* parties in Uplift, Aloha...maybe even Nextus.”

“If what the twins said about that lion friend of theirs is true, *especially* in Nextus,” Rochelle said.

“We’d better start making plans,” Rufia said. “Right, Vonnie?”

“Well, that depends,” Yvonne said archly. “What’s in it for *me*?”

“Vooooonnie...”

Rochelle grinned as the sub hurtled through space and the planet spread out beneath them. It had been a fun couple of days--just what the doctor ordered in the middle of so much stress and angst. Of course, there were uncertain times ahead, but it felt a little easier to face them now. That was what a vacation was all about.

We will be back to take a real one, before too long, Rochelle pledged. *And when that happens...Aloha better*

watch out. It just might not know what hit it!