

Barely Fused, Slightly Foxed

By Robotech_Master

Prologue

In the Laurasian city of First Landing, in the catacombs beneath the First Building, an elderly custodian with a power tracker and a hand light followed a power trace down a darkened tunnel. This was one of the oldest human-made places in all of Zharus—where the first colonists had dug in soon after landing, to provide a place of shelter where the first batches of colonists could awake and live while they built out the above-ground shelters for themselves before waking the next batches. Almost nobody ever came down this far anymore. Everything of significant historical interest had long since been extracted and placed in the museum that First Building now was.

But a recent physical plant audit had determined that *something* down here was still drawing power—and had been for nobody-knew-how-long. Rather than just cut the line, it had been deemed wise to follow the trace down, just in case whatever it was proved to be of sufficient interest to provide a new exhibit for the museum and some welcome publicity. But they hadn't been too hopeful it was anything more than a light fixture someone had left on, so they'd sent this old custodian down all by himself.

But he didn't mind. Tracing a hot wire buried in the wall was a nice change from polishing the same old exhibits day in and day out. He had gone a lot further than

he'd expected, and had reached the point where the air was so musty he'd finally had to resort to a breather mask. But he thought he was getting close.

At last, the power trace just...stopped. One centimeter it was right there in the wall; the next, nothing.

"Hmm." The custodian dialed up the intensity and radius on his light so it illuminated the area and set it down while he rubbed his stubbly chin and considered the wall before him. He knocked on it in a couple of places. It *appeared* to be solid...but wait. There was a slight discoloration down near the floor. He prodded at it with his pocket vibe-knife, and it crumbled. It looked as though a water leak had rotted the ancient concrete. The blade poked right through.

"Hmm," the custodian said again. He worked the blade upward from the discolored patch until he found what seemed to be a seam. He carefully pulled the blade upward along the seam, making sure to jag away from where the power trace ended. After he'd finished, he was able to pull away large chunks of old concrete that had been laid in place over a metal door. The custodian recognized the design as one of the old bulkhead hatches that had been dismantled from the colony ship for use in new buildings. (The custodian knew every word on the display upstairs by heart. "Realizing that building materials would be in short shrift, the clever colonists designed their ships to be entirely disassembled at journey's end, so that the parts could be used to build their first shelters on their new home...") This room, whatever it was, was *old*.

Using the vibe-knife as a prybar, the custodian was

able to work the door open enough that he could pull it a couple more feet with his fingernails—enough that he could squeeze in, at least. The light revealed another corridor, with the power trace turning the corner of the wall and continuing down along it. He refocused the light to a beam and followed the trail.

The custodian wondered if he should call a halt and return to the surface to fetch someone official. He imagined they'd probably want to know about this long-hidden corridor for the sake of archaeological study. But he suspected he was almost to the source of the drain, so he might as well have something solid to report when he did go all the way back up.

At last the power lead turned another corner, entering a small room off the corridor. And something here was vibrating, motors running on live power. The flashlight beam traced across random debris on the floor, then settled on a long metal and glass cylinder. And the custodian caught his breath.

Slowly, almost reverently, he approached. He knew what *this* was from the displays upstairs, too. They had pride of place in the museum above, and he had cleaned their glass and polished their metal fittings enough times to know their very contours by heart. But he had never in his life expected to see one *under power*. Was it even possible? Could it be real?

The custodian finally reached the cylinder, and gently, oh so gently, brushed a thick layer of dust off of a panel on the side, revealing a row of green lights with just one or two blinking amber. Then he reached up to rub away a thin layer of mud from the glass, where dust had met

condensation. He lowered his eyes and his light to the glass to look within.

Then he stumbled back from the cylinder, face ghostly pale in the reflected light from his flashlight.

“Holy *shit!*”

Part I: Barely Fused

“Well,” I said. “Here I am.” I slung the duffel bag on my shoulder and stepped off the ramp of the passenger shuttle. They called it a “suborbital,” but it felt like a plain old shuttle to me. So what if it went up and down instead of around and round? It still shuttled. But whatever. Seemed like half the things they called stuff nowadays didn’t make much sense.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the shiny chrome of the shuttle’s re-entry shield as I turned to look back at it, distorted by the curvature of the hull. Not much to look at. Average height, clean-shaven, shock of unruly brown hair up top, brown eyes just below. Wearing denim jeans, sneakers, and a dark blue Colonist Corps uniform jacket. I couldn’t read the name tag in the reflection, but I already knew it said “C MCCLAREN”.

I moved away from the shuttle to get out of the way of the other passengers, and glanced around. The architecture of the buildings was mostly unfamiliar to me, though there were several of that Quonset hut style of prefab that had been around for centuries before I was born and probably still would be centuries after I died. A lot of the others seemed to be concrete or adobe, made from the local sand of which there was no short supply. Further onward were taller buildings—tenements, office buildings, even some skyscrapers, though nowhere near as many as there had been in the cities in Laurasia.

“So this is Nextus,” I said to myself. “Jewel of Gondwana, so they say.” I’d never quite seen its like before. And that was what brought it all crashing home to me. “Chuck, you damn sure aren’t in Kansas anymore.”

And then I got dizzy and had to sit down.

They'd told me that was going to happen. The doctors had some fancy name for it—something something syndrome—but what it boiled down to was “freezer burn.” They told me I was really lucky to be alive, and that I'd have these dizzy spells for a while—they were part of the price of even being able to bring me back at all. But they usually passed after a minute or two.

But if I was being honest, I wasn't really sure whether something syndrome was even the cause of the dizziness at all. It could just have been delayed shock. The world I'd thought I was going to wake up in was 156 years gone. And so was Kathleen.

From my own point of view, I'd last seen her just a few days ago. We were gathered in the departure lounge for our last few hours on Earth, crowded in along with everyone else going to the shuttles. We were making our plans to meet again when we woke up in the new world and continue our lives together.

Her name was Kathleen Heidelberg. We'd met in the training classes for pioneering, where I was learning things like survival, farming, and basic carpentry, and she was learning things like survival, colony administration, and government. As you might guess, she came from richer stock than I did. Her Dad was a big-time investment banker who'd managed to sell his stock *just* in time before another bubble burst, and had decided it was an auspicious time to colonize a new world before the angry governments could get their ducks in a row to investigate and indict. I was a college drop-out who'd barely managed

to scrape together enough cash to buy my way into a “physical labor” colonist slot. But Kathleen and I overlapped on “survival,” which was considered important enough that every colonist had to take it.

Unexpectedly, Kathleen and I had managed to hit it off. We’d paired up in the class and helped each other study, and started spending more and more of our free time together. Then we slept together (though we didn’t tell her Dad!) and now we spent almost every waking moment together. Her Dad hadn’t been too happy about the whole thing, because he had his eye on one Gary Seaford, a manufacturing family scion who he figured was the next best thing available since all the Steaders were either paired up already or much too young. Now, *theoretically* we were all supposed to be “equal” once we got to the colony. But I guess some of us were just more equal than others.

But right now we weren’t worrying about all that. Even though we were about to be split up, as she went up on one of the rich-people shuttles while I was consigned to refrigerated freight, we had determined to spend our last moments on earth together before we were split up. And I had a hand in my pocket for a little velvet box that was waiting there.

She’d arrived just a few moments before, flustered, out of breath, her blue eyes sparkling and blonde hair in disarray. “Sorry I’m late!” she said. “Dad wanted to be sure we’d packed our *entire* storage allotment. Twice.” She rolled her eyes. “I slipped out at the last minute. Promised to meet them on their shuttle.”

“I’m glad you did.” *God* she was gorgeous, even half-

disheveled like this. She even made the standard-issue Colonist Corps uniform look custom-tailored. “I had a little something I wanted to show you,” I said, reaching into the pocket—and then kneeling.

And then I sprang it on her. Yeah, maybe it wasn’t much of a stone, but it took basically everything I had left over after my buy-in. The important thing was what it symbolized. “Kathleen Heidelberg...will you marry me?”

Her reaction was everything I could have hoped for. She blushed, she teared up, she looked even more flustered than she had been from being late. A round of spontaneous applause broke out from the crowd of bystanders. (I later learned that they had already seen five marriage proposals and one honest-to-God impromptu *wedding ceremony* that morning in the lounge. Wonder how they managed *that*.)

“Of course I will!” Kathleen said when she could speak again. “Ooooh, but Dad’s gonna have a cow when he finds out Gary Seaford is out of the running.”

“Well, he’s too late,” I said smugly. “There’s nothing he can do to stop us now.”

How little I knew.

The hours of waiting flew by like seconds, and all too soon we were parted to our respective shuttles, ready for the trip up to the ships to be frozen in cryo like so many cheap disposable dinners.

I still remember my very last glimpse of her. The laughing blue eyes, the golden hair swirling around her shoulders. “Dream of me!” she yelled in that lost moment before we were parted.

Forever.

I shook my head and forced myself back into the present. Kathleen was gone—fifty years dead now. I'd looked her up. But she'd left a legacy of a kind, anyway. There were thousands of "Seafords" on this benighted world, and since after all she'd married Gary, the only one by that name on the colony ship, they all owed their existences to her. Gone but not entirely forgotten.

"Your pardon, kind sir!" a female voice called behind me, with what would have been reckoned a strong Irish lilt on the world of my birth. "Would ye perhaps be lookin' for a ride or a guide?"

I turned and blinked. "Excuse me?" There was a creature there who looked for all the world to be a red and white fox, if one had grown to the size of a pony or small horse. Vulpine muzzle, fluffy tail, fur, the whole deal.

"Fiona's me name. I'm after being very affordable to hire for the likes o' ye. Tourist, I reckon? I know more about this place than any three other guides or RIDES! Complete guide service and unlimited clicks, 50 *mu* a day! Or ye can be buyin' me outright for just 600 *mu*! Ye'll find no better deal this side of Uplift!"

I stared blankly at her for a moment, before remembering one of the things I'd seen while surfing the net from my hospital bed. Something about the greatest advance in AI in five centuries being used to make large furry animal 'bots who turned into antigravity scooters. I hadn't looked much further into it at the time because I'd thought I was hallucinating from something syndrome again. Apparently I hadn't been hallucinating after all. Or else maybe I was now, which was not a cheering thought.

“Uh...no, thanks,” I mumbled, not sure I was really in the market for a motorcycle who could talk back and possibly steal chickens. It was also a little creepy to hear someone who sounded so much like a *person* so blithely offering herself up for sale.

Her foxy face fell. “Aw. All right, then. Top o’ the mornin’ to ye anyway.” She padded past me, and on to the next passenger. “Your pardon, mistress! Would ye perhaps be lookin’ for a ride or a guide?”

I turned back to stare at the town again. Maybe it had been a mistake to turn her down. Maybe I could have used a guide. God knew I had no idea what the hell I was doing or where I really was. I hadn’t exactly gotten much of an orientation before I snuck out of the hospital back in First Landing. But I’d done it anyway because I couldn’t stand the thought of the dog and pony show they were readying for me, the last of the original “founding parents.”

I had come back to full awareness in a hospital bed. The decor was weird, though that didn’t totally surprise me. It might have been a few years since the ships landed before they were able to wake me, and they’d have had to make all their amenities from scratch. No reason those particularly had to look like the things that were familiar to me.

I got my first real shock when I glanced out the window and saw a city skyline, lit with a mid-afternoon sun. It really was a *skyline*. Not a couple of tall buildings and some houses—a real, *mature* city, with a forest of skyscrapers. Had something gone wrong? Was I still back on earth? But this was like no Earth city I’d ever seen. The

architecture was all wrong. The buildings were too tall and spindly—almost gossamer compared to the squat, thicker towers of Earth. And strange vehicles were flying among them, or hovering along the ground closer to me, in clearly delineated lanes of traffic.

The next thing that gave me pause was my hands. I was wearing one of those God-awful open-at-the-back hospital gowns that they've been using for hundreds of years, and my arms were bare. And looking down at them, I saw new, healed-wound-pink skin all the way from my fingertips to up past my elbows. All the scars I remembered were gone—including where I'd lost the last joint of my left pinky finger in a high school shop accident. I had a perfect unmutated left hand, all five pearlescent pink fingernails winking at me. I felt the new finger joint with my other hand and it felt completely real in every way.

Then I noticed that the pattern of moles and freckles on my arms was not like I remembered. I'd had a mole with a couple of darker body hairs on the back of my wrist, and now there was nothing there. But I had another mole further up my arm where nothing had been before. For some reason, this disturbed me more than all the other weirdnesses.

As I was contemplating these new and strange things, the door to my room slid open and a harried-looking young man in a lab coat came in, holding a clipboard computer or tablet of some kind. He had short brown hair and a neatly-trimmed mustache, and a name tag reading "Dr. Travis Hilner, Cryogenic Specialist."

He stopped when he saw me sitting up. "Oh, I'm sorry

I'm late. I meant to be here when you woke up." His accent was weird to my ears, but not unpleasant. It sounded rather like what they'd used to call a "Mid-Atlantic" accent on earth—inflection that hovered somewhere between British and American pronunciation. I warmed to him immediately, despite the weirdness of the situation.

"That's okay, Doc," I said. "It was just a couple minutes ago anyway. Long enough to have a lot of questions, but not *quite* long enough to work my way up to a full-fledged freak-out yet."

"Ah, I see." Dr. Hilner smiled faintly. "I hope we can avert a freak-out, but I don't know if that's going to be entirely possible." He shook his head. "I'm supposed to be 'breaking this to you gently,' but I'll be damned if I can figure out how. If I beat around the bush, I'll just give you time to freak more and more. So maybe I should pull the band-aid off quickly."

"Yeah, let's take all the 'gently' as read and skip to the 'good part,'" I suggested. "Whatever it is, I'm a big boy, I can take it."

"I'm not so sure of that," Dr. Hilner said. "But...since you asked for it...this is the year 156 AL, or 'after landing.' Or 2506 Anno Domini. I'm afraid that, counting travel time, you've been frozen for nearly 200 years."

At first I thought I hadn't heard him right. "What?"

He repeated it for me. "You've overslept...by about 150 years."

"That can't be right. I was going to be married," I said inanely.

"I'm sorry," Travis said. "Do you need some time alone, or—?"

“I want to know how the hell this could even have *happened*,” I said. My brain was still struggling to process it. 156 years. I didn’t want to think about what that must have meant. I mean, as far as I could remember I’d just seen Kathleen a few *hours* ago. She was on another shuttle. It felt like she should just be in the next room, or in the next town over, and I could go and see her...

“We’re not really sure,” Travis admitted. “And any clues are 156 years old. We do know you were hidden away in a little room off a corridor that was walled over and forgotten about. We only ever found you when someone noticed something was still drawing power and they sent someone down to see what it was.” He shook his head. “It’s really kind of puzzling why anyone even *would* wall up one of those tunnels. They weren’t even used for anything anyway after the first year or so.”

I knew. It hit me with absolute certainty. “Her Dad,” I growled. “My fiancée’s Dad was a big wheel in the colonial planning board. And he had someone else he wanted her to marry.”

Dr. Hilner shrugged. “It’s as good a working theory as anything else. They’re all long gone now, so it’s not as if we can ask them.”

Then the reality of it hit home for the first time. I was all alone, a stranger in a new land, with no family or friends. Everyone I had ever known in my life—friends and family back on Earth, all the people I’d trained with in the colony classes...and of course, Kathleen...gone. All gone. And then the tears came. I hardly even noticed when Dr. Hilner compassionately excused himself to let me grieve in peace.

I was apparently still exhausted from the healing process. I managed to cry myself to sleep. When I woke up, it was the middle of the night. Thirty-hour days, I remembered. We'd laughed about it in the colony classes. "Finally we'll have enough hours in the day to get things done!" Never mind how badly it was going to screw up our sleep cycles...

They must have been monitoring my room. Dr. Hilner came in a few minutes later, as I was sitting on the edge of the bed and staring out into the brightly-lit night-time cityscape. I'd also noticed that my legs from just above the knees down had that shiny new pink look, with the same missing scars and different birthmarks.

"Feel a little better now?" Hilner asked.

I shrugged, then asked, "Hey, Doc, what's the deal with my arms and legs?"

"Ah, those," he said. "Your nose and ears, too, though you won't see that until you look in a mirror. Don't worry, they'll fade to normal flesh tones in a day or so."

"But what *is* it?" I asked.

"Frostbite, I'm afraid," Hilner said.

I blinked. "Frostbite? From *cryo*?"

"Weird, I know, but those capsules were never meant to be used for 200 years at a stretch," Hilner said. "By the time we found you, you'd lost all four limbs, your nose and ears, and various other bits."

"Other...bits?" I looked down at where the hospital gown covered my lap.

Hilner actually grinned. "Trust me, you've got *everything* you're supposed to have. Nano-regenerative medicine has gotten really good over the last forty-odd

years.”

“Well, good,” I said. There didn’t seem to be much else to say to that, though I privately resolved to check myself out thoroughly next time I was in the bathroom.

“And you won’t have the weak limbs you’d expect from lack of exercise,” Travis assured me. “No need for physical therapy. The nanos are really good at rebuilding muscle. You may be a little uncoordinated at first, though. We’ve got a walker you can use.”

“Great. Well, I guess if I’m 200 years old, using a walker is to be expected,” I said, trying for levity. It didn’t really work too well. “So what happens now?”

“Well, there are a gaggle of reporters camped out downstairs who’d like to talk to you,” Hilner said. “We’ve managed to hold them off so far. Thanks to HIPAA, we haven’t even released your name, but that will only hold them for so long.”

“Oh, great,” I said, sinking back onto the bed. “Guess the damned vultures haven’t changed much in 200 years.”

“As for money matters...well, I looked up your share in the colony and did some math. Based on your buy-in continuing to accrue interest for 156 years, you *should* have close to 400 million Laurasian dollars—or about 250 million *mu*.”

“Moo?” I asked, not sure I’d heard him right.

“Em you. Like the Greek letter. It stands for ‘monetary units.’ It’s the major currency they use over on the new continent, Gondwana. Anyway, like I say, you *should* have a fairly sizable fortune coming—but you can expect one hell of a fight in court to pry it out of the central bank. After the last lost long-sleeper case, about a century ago,

they passed some laws capping the amount any future long-sleepers would recover. They were really only able to get away with it because they *thought* they'd finally found them all, and it hasn't been challenged in court since for, well, obvious reasons."

"Huh. Well, the money doesn't really matter to me, but I might just have to see if I can get a lawyer who'll work on contingency. Especially if it turns out I was done dirty by one of the original colony admins. Maybe a nice long legal battle will help distract me from a few things." It still hadn't really sunk in at that point. I was just talking on auto-pilot. But Dr. Hilner nodded like he understood.

"You don't need to worry about the hospital bills, at least. There's a trust fund set up for maintaining the First Building museum that covers costs for everything in it—specifically including any long-sleepers that might be discovered. Full medical coverage plus a \$50,000 living stipend. That'll support you until you can figure out what you want to do with your new life. And, of course, the media nets will be falling all over themselves to buy your story."

"Huh." I lay back on the bed. Suddenly I was tired again. I was still turning it all over in my head. 156 years.

I'd expected to wake up and take part in establishing a nation. It had been going to be a lot of hard work and sweat and a lot of long 30-hour days, but I had known what I was in for when I signed up. I would have been *building* something, and at the end of it all I could look back with pride on what I had done.

But instead, I woke up in a thriving nation, already built from the ground up, and built again, and built some

more. It was all finished. What was left for a grunt laborer? Did I have any marketable skills? Did they even *need* physical labor anymore?

“You stupid *bitch!*”

The harsh, ugly tones brought me out of my daydream. I turned. There was a man at the taxi stand—a rather ugly man. Tall, mostly bald, with the single stripe of hair they used to call a Mohawk. He also had tusks poking out of his mouth that slurred his speech a little, and what looked for all the world like piggy ears. Or maybe wild boar. He was cursing at Fiona the fox, who had apparently not succeeded in selling her services or herself to one of my fellow passengers.

“Why’d you keep the hardlight fur on, huh? You should have turned it off! Nobody wants hardlight fur in Nextus!” He fingered a metal rod on his belt, and Fiona cowered, burying her muzzle under her paws.

“But...you were tellin’ me to be havin’ it on because tourists would think it looked comfy!” she protested weakly.

“Bitch!” The tusked man pulled the rod off his belt and pointed it at Fiona, and she yelped and rolled over. “I’ll learn you to smart off to your master.” He advanced on her, fiddled with the rod, and raised it high above his head.

Something snapped inside of me. Before I even knew what I was doing, I’d stepped forward. “Seems to me you’re not too happy with this fox,” I said mildly. “Maybe I could take it off your hands. What was it, 300 *mu* to buy?”

The man turned and glowered at me, but lowered his

rod. “It was 600.”

“How about 350?” I reached for my new computerized wallet and thumbed the unfamiliar controls.

“I could do 550,” the man said.

“You’d rather have this millstone around your neck than, say, 400 *mu*?” I asked.

He looked puzzled. “Millstone?”

“I guess the idiom’s fallen out of disuse,” I said.

“Anyway, 500 is as low as I can go,” the man said.

I checked my wallet. I’d only gotten \$5,000 of my stipend so far, and after the suborbital ticket and the currency conversion I only had 542 *mu* left. “Would you take, maybe, 475? Don’t have much more than that on me right now and I need to get a motel room.”

He glowered at me, looked at the fox, and kicked her in the ribs. She yelped. Then he shrugged and spat. “Good enough.”

I thumbed up the money transfer, double-checking to make sure I didn’t accidentally send over everything I had, and he pulled out the title chip and crypto-signed it over to me. I took it, made sure it was all in order (as nearly as I could tell anyway), and then thumbed the cash over to him.

“Pleasure doin’ business with you,” the man said, checking the readout on his wallet with satisfaction.

“Yeah,” I said, sliding the chip into my wallet and putting it away. “There’s just one more thing,” I said.

“Uh-huh?”

I hauled off and hit him in the tusky jaw, and he went down like a felled ox. Or maybe pig. “That’s for torturing someone helpless, you sick son of a bitch.”

I turned back to Fiona, who had picked herself up off the ground and stood staring at me as if I'd grown a second head. "So, you're a taxi, huh?" I said. "I think maybe we'd probably better get taxiing before he wakes back up."

"Of...of course!" she stammered. Then the fur vanished and her metal body kind of flipped around until a fox-fur-red and white antigrav cycle was sitting there. She looked slightly battered now, but the sleek lines and powerful thrusters showed she must have been truly sleek and trim back when she had been new.

Feeling a little self-conscious, I straddled the bike and peered at the instrument panel. The displays looked fairly simple, and it didn't seem as though the twist-grip throttle arrangement had changed that much in the last 200 years. But Fiona took it out of my hands by lifting off under her own control as soon as I was safely aboard.

"And where is it I can be takin' ye today?" she asked, regaining a bit of her old aplomb.

"Uh, a hotel or motel...something really cheap."

"Ah! I know just what you'll be needin'. Hold on tight!"

She said that, but there was really almost no need. Even as she accelerated to several times faster than I thought a vehicle of that size really should be capable of going, I was hardly pressed back in the seat at all, nor was there the sort of breeze I should have been feeling. Then I noticed out beyond the handlebars was some sort of curved transparent aerodynamic shield—I'd seen them on other vehicles but hadn't actually realized what they were for.

“That was...somethin’ truly amazing,” Fiona told me as we left the runway and passed between gates onto the network of streets outside the aerodrome. “What ye did back there...”

“Bastard had it coming,” I said, massaging my bruised knuckles.

“Wish ye hadn’t paid him so much, though,” she said. “He only gave 250 *mu* for me at t’market.”

“How can you just be so...matter-of-fact about that?” I asked. “Being bought and sold like that?”

She chuckled. “You’re not after bein’ from around these parts, are ye now?”

“You...could sort of say that,” I admitted. “Not really from anywhere anymore.”

“Well, we Zharusian RIDEs are after bein’ kind of used to it. ‘S what we were bein’ made for.” She sounded resigned, though I thought there might have been just the slightest edge of sarcasm.

“Well, look,” I said. “If you want, after you drop me off you can go do...whatever. I’m not interested in owning slaves.”

“Didn’t ye know?” Fiona asked. “You have to be a *person* to be a slave. I’m just...equipment.”

“Maybe things have changed in the last two hundred years, but when I grew up we sort of frowned on the idea of calling things that could think and talk ‘equipment.’” I thought for a moment. “Of course, we didn’t have anything that *could* think and talk except us humans back then. So I guess maybe things changed.”

“Two hundred, huh?” Fiona said skeptically. “Here and ye don’t seem after bein’ a day over a hundred and

forty.”

“We McClarens just happen to age well,” I said.

“Chuck, by the way.”

“Pleased t’be meetin’ ye, Chuck,” she said. “Tell ye what. How about ye just be after holdin’ onto me until ye find some nice girl t’sell me to? I saw your wallet’s display when ye paid for me and I’m pretty sure I represent a good 95% of your assets about now.”

“You’re not an ‘asset,’” I said hotly.

“Well, I hope I’m not after bein’ a liability, then!” she teased.

I shook my head. “This is amazing. You even have a sense of humor. I don’t care what the jerks who live in this era say. You’re a *person*, dammit.”

She was silent for so long that I thought I’d offended her. Then she chuckled. “Ye really are after bein’ from another age, aren’t ye? Ye must be the one they thawed out in Laurasia last week, then. Vanished from the hospital without so much as a by-your-leave. They still haven’t been giving out your name, but there’s a ‘Charles McClaren’ on the ‘missing, presumed dead’ list from the original colony records. That would be after bein’ you, then?”

“You’re smart, too,” I said, impressed.

“Or else you’re after runnin’ some kind of elaborate con,” Fiona continued. “But nobody would go to that much trouble to con a cheap rustbucket RIDE, and your biometrics suggest you’re after tellin’ the truth.” She chuckled. “Well, well. The iceman cometh.”

“Clever fox,” I said. “You’re certainly one up on me.”

“And what would you be doin’ in Nextus, Mr.

Iceman?” Fiona asked.

“That’s kind of a long story,” I said. “Or maybe not so long as all that,” I added a moment later, after thinking about it.

“So why don’t ye be tryin’ me?” she suggested.

I nodded, organizing my thoughts.

For the next couple of days after I woke up, I stayed in the hospital room and rested. It’s a little strange to say, that after sleeping 200 years I needed *more* rest, but as Dr. Hilner explained, my system had been through a lot in the rebuilding process, and they wanted to be sure I was fully recovered before they saw to adjusting my body clock to the new 30 hour days.

The hospital kept me insulated from all the reporters who wanted my story, but unfortunately there was little they could do about the official types who wanted to see me and express how very happy they were to meet me, a genuine dinosaur from the dawn of colony history. Well, okay, they didn’t really say *dinosaur*, or fossil either, but they might as well have.

One of them had the bright idea to bring along the custodian who’d unearthed my cryo coffin. Name was Jim Harrell. Looked like he was in his sixties, which probably meant he could have been anywhere from 100 to 120 with the new anti-agathics. We didn’t really say much to each other, but I kind of liked him—he looked about as unhappy about the whole parade as I was.

In between these visits, they brought me all the stuff that had been packed with me when I went into cold storage. My old data tablet, which was completely

incompatible with the current wireless standard. A bunch of clothes that had gone into and out of fashion again about six times while I'd been sleeping. They were coming "in" again, lucky me. My old leather wallet, which had confused a few people. "Wallets" now were specialized palmtop computers and chip folios; almost nobody used paper money anymore.

They gave me a wallet of the new kind, too, with 5,000 Laurasian dollars on it, as a tide-me-over until I got the paperwork in for my larger stipend. (They still call it "paperwork," though there is no actual "paper" involved anymore.) They loaded that into the wallet, too, and gave me a new tablet to surf the net with.

The new tablet wasn't appreciably faster than my old one—CPU speeds had maxed out before I was born, and hadn't changed much in the last two hundred years—but it was lighter, with a better interface. Once I'd gotten used to the idiosyncrasies of the new network, I was able to get around on it. Naturally, I gravitated to the old colonial records and immediately looked up Kathleen Heidelberg.

Married Gary Seaford in the first year AL. Had one son; no other children. Served on the colony board. Endowed various libraries and schools, et cetera, et cetera. Died 103 AL, over fifty years ago, surrounded by great-great grandkids.

There were photos, too, and holograms, and video. I paged through them all and watched Kathleen grow old before my eyes. She didn't seem to smile a lot in any of the photos—or maybe she did but it didn't reach her eyes. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking on my part. Nobody wants to think that the love of their life was able to just

forget them and move on with things.

But watching her age like that brought it all home to me again, and I had another good cry in the imaginary privacy of my room. I was moving on through the stages of grief, and I supposed acceptance wasn't too far away.

I also looked up her descendants. By now there were quite a few of them. Some were here in Laurasia, where they had built on the foundations started by Kathleen's father and Gary the also-ran. They weren't quite "Steaders"—the sort of "royal family" of the colonies, like twencen Earth's "Rockefellers" or "Hearsts" or "Murdochs"—but they moved in similar circles. They didn't really interest me, for all that they had my beloved Kathleen's genes. They also had her not-so-beloved father's wealth, and I was fairly well soured on that.

But a number of them—mostly the later descendants who hadn't inherited much—had left for the "new" continent of Gondwana. Curious, I wiki-walked over to some files about the place. Inhospitable desert surrounded by a fertile ring, with mysterious but highly-desirable mineral deposits that were allegedly responsible for the first revolution in "true" AI. (Yeah, I'd believe that when I saw it.) A thriving frontier, not all tamed like this old place. Something about that appealed to me. And there was a Seaford in the town of Uplift, which looked like an interesting place to visit. Most of the commercial "suborbital" shuttle flights to the continent went through Nextus, however.

I'd just finished checking the suborb schedule out of curiosity when Dr. Hilner came back in. "Bad news. They're going to check you out of here tomorrow."

I blinked. “And that’s bad?”

“It is if you want to avoid the three-ring circus the press is putting together for you.” He smiled wryly. “And we’re expected to cooperate like good little boys in plastering your whole life across the front pages and top five minutes of every newscast.”

I winced. “Ugh. Doc, isn’t there any way I can sneak out of here?”

Hilner glanced at the tablet on my bed, which was still showing the suborbital schedule. “Have a destination in mind?”

“Well, I was thinking that Uplift looked like an interesting place to visit,” I admitted.

“I think we could possibly work out a way to get you onto a flight to Gondwana,” Dr. Hilner said. “If we’re a little sneaky about it. I have a spare lab coat I could put you in to get you out of the building. They gave you the paperwork for the stipend, right?”

“Yeah, it’s in this newfangled so-called ‘wallet.’ Never gonna get used to that.”

“Good. You can file that from anywhere on the planet thanks to the data network. The money will reach you wherever you are. And if you’re serious about hiring an attorney to fight for your compounded interest, you can do that from there, too.” He frowned. “I’m a little worried about turning you loose on the world like this. There are so many new things out there that are completely outside your old experience.”

I grinned. “Well, hey, Doc, I’m a big boy. I’m sure I can deal with whatever comes up.”

He shook his head. “You know, they used to call that

‘invoking Murphy.’ Oh well. On your own head be it. Now I’m going to get that spare lab coat...I think you’ve got a plane to catch.”

The suborbital was sleeker and smaller than the bird that had taken me away from earth, and the new inertial compensator thingies took away a lot of the pressure from takeoff. I was able to look down on the city of First Landing as it dwindled away and reflect on how similar it was to my last sight of Earth. The continents were shaped wrong, but when you couldn’t make out the individual buildings most cities looked the same from up here.

All in all, the flight was fun, especially the few minutes of weightlessness we got at the top of the arc. Then down we went.

“And then we landed, and here I am,” I finished.

“And here *we* are,” Fiona said, as we pulled into the parking lot at the RIDER’s Rest Motel, a small crumbling strip of building about a half-dozen clicks away from the aerodrome. It looked as if someone had converted a self-storage strip into a motel by welding the garage doors shut and cutting human-sized doors in them.

“Wow,” I said. “I can already tell this is exactly within my budget range.”

“If ye want, darlin’, I can be curlin’ up in a corner and you can sleep on me,” Fiona offered. “I’m probably softer than their mattress. Fewer fleas, too.”

I keyed the unfamiliar wallet to unlock a room. “I just might have to take you up on that,” I said. “Not like it really matters if I lose a night, though. I slept 200 years already.”

She followed me into the room. “I’d be askin’ what that was like...but I’m already havin’ a fair idea how it is to go to sleep and wake up to find you’re not havin’ a life anymore. And you’re probably sick’v it anyhow.”

That sounded personal. I glanced at her, but she didn’t offer anymore. And considering how I felt when the politicians asked me what it was like waking up in a “brave new world,” I knew better than to ask the same sort of question of her. She’d tell me if and when she felt like it. Instead, I slung my duffel onto the bed and sat down next to it.

The room betrayed its self-storage origins. Apart from the bed, there were just a couple of flimsy flat-pack chairs and a wobbly table in the room, and nothing else. No computer or media gear of any kind, or even a comm. It was just a place to sleep. But at least it had been cheap.

I pulled my old wallet out of the duffel, flipped it open, and took out the photo of Kathleen. I probably shouldn’t keep torturing myself with it, but at the same time it was something familiar to cling to in an unfamiliar world.

Fiona had come up behind me. “It’s pretty she was,” she said quietly. “A right fair *colleen*.”

I nodded, putting the picture away. “She was,” I agreed. I supposed Fiona already knew who Kathy was. Her image wouldn’t have been hard to search. So there wasn’t really much more to say about that.

I tested the mattress. I’d felt cardboard shipping pallets that were softer. Then I glanced over at the soft, furry Fiona. “I think you offered to curl up in a corner?”

“’Twould be my right pleasure,” the fluffy fox said.

“The memory of you decking Wilkins will be keepin’ me warm many a night. Seems only fair for me to be returnin’ the favor.” She curled up, nose into tail, and I lay down across the circle formed by her curled up body. She covered me up with that fluffy tail, and the jet lag from my cross-planetary flight put me right to sleep.

I awoke to a washcloth-sized tongue slurping the side of my face. “Top o’ the mornin’ to ye!” Fiona said brightly. “Any plans for the day, then?”

I blinked my eyes open. “Well, I was thinking about heading down to Uplift. Fellow down there I’d like to meet.” I’d been thinking it over, and figured I might as well go and see this Roger Seaford person, as he was probably one of the closest things to a relative I had in the world. (Well, actually I had thousands of them if you counted anyone with the last name of “Seaford,” but he was the one that was available.) I’d try not to hold it against him that his last name was that of my hated rival. He was still a living link of sorts to my past.

“Sounds good to me,” Fiona said. “Uplift’s a place I’m likin’ more and more, the more I stay in Nextus. I never see this bloody place again, it will be a day too soon.”

So I got up, grabbed my duffel, and we stepped out of the motel. Fiona turned back into a foxy hovercycle, and I mounted up. Then, as we pulled out of the parking lot, I heard an unfamiliar thumping whine, and Fiona suddenly swerved sharply. Something took a big chunk out of the street next to us. “What the hell?”

“That’s a pulse cannon!” Fiona gasped. “Oh, bloody... *Wilkins!*” She kicked in a burst of speed as another round

exploded just behind us. I risked a glance over my shoulder and sure enough, there he was—the same Mohawked and tusked man I’d bought Fiona from and then clobbered, hunched low over the handlebars of a heavier armored skimmer cycle with cannons mounted to either side, by his legs. They fired again, and this time the shells burst to either side of us.

“He seems a little angry!” I yelled over the noise of the engines.

“He’s a bully and a bastard who can’t bear to be bested!” she called back. “I should have known he’d try something like this!” She swerved again to avoid more shells.

“Where are the cops? Aren’t there supposed to be cops?”

“Look ‘round ye!” she called back. “You thinkin’ there’ll be cops in this part of town?” We were in a decrepit neighborhood of decaying tenements, far from the shining center of the city. “Hold on to your booties!” she yelled, and suddenly veered around a corner into an alley between two of the tenements. The clearance was so tight she had to drop the aerodynamic shields, and she boosted to clear a dumpster, then dropped to duck under a fire escape. We finally made it out the other side to another street. “Ha! No way he’ll be fitting through that!” Fiona smirked triumphantly.

Then another shell exploded right under her front lifter, throwing her onto her side and sending me flying through the air.

I must only have been out for a few seconds. I’d landed mostly in a pile of full garbage bags, so the only

thing really hurt was my pride. Fiona lay turned over in front of me, and as I watched she contracted back into her fox form, hardlight fur flickering in patches before coming on solid again.

And then a man-shaped metallic tusked boar jumped down from the roof of the building behind us, and touched down in the street on antigravity lifters. He was toting a cannon in each hand, rifle-style, which he raised to point at me as he strode forward, ignoring the prone Fiona. “End of the line, asshole,” he grunted in a metallic raspy tone. I heard the whine as the cannons started to charge up...

“Nooooo!” Fiona howled, surging forward past him. She lunged and leaped directly at me. Then things got a little confusing.

In mid-leap, Fiona’s fur vanished, giving me the momentary impression of a metal fox flying through the air on an imminent collision course. But as she landed on me, she *melted*, and a feeling of sudden warmth suffused my entire body.

Then I was rolling lightning-fast out of the way as the cannon blasts splattered the garbage where I’d been lying all over the street—and all over the boar. “Euugh!” the boar yelled, shaking his arms ineffectually. Then he seemed to come back to his senses, and he brought the cannons to bear again, still firing.

I kept moving—my body not under my control—dropping into a crouch and then lunging forward, toward him, before he could swing the cannons all the way around. There was a red glowing sword in my right hand, and I was already swinging it, slicing one of the cannons in half as I passed. I landed and gathered myself for another

swing.

But the boar had kicked in his antigravity and was flying backward, firing wildly at us with his remaining gun as he flew through the air. But I was—*we* were—no longer where he was shooting.

I raised my left arm and fired a stream of some kind of energy disks from my wrist. They tore up the ground around him, but the last one struck his arm a glancing blow that knocked the other cannon from his hand. I leaped forward, my own lifters propelling me toward him—but he shot skyward, ending up on top of the tenement building across the street and then pulling back from the edge. His voice came from out of sight.

“You know, I *was* gonna kill you. But this—this is even better. So I think I’ll just let you live with that instead, for now. Enjoy yourselves...*bitches!*”

We picked up the cannon he’d dropped and worked the action, holding it like we knew what to do with it and aiming it up at the roof until we were sure he had gone. We knew better than to follow him up there blind.

...we?

“I am so, so sorry,” Fiona said from all around me, and through my mouth. “I guess I *was* after bein’ a liability after all.”

“What...just happened?” I said. My voice sounded strange in my ears, then I realized it was Fiona’s voice, but without the Irish accent. I looked down at myself. My body was red and furry, and I could see a vulpine muzzle poking forward below my eyes. There was a fluffy tail hanging behind me—Fiona’s tail. And directly in front of me, I had...breasts. Rather large ones, in fact. “I’m...wearing

you?” Hesitantly I reached up with the hand not holding the gun and felt one of the breasts. It felt entirely real—both to the hand, and to the touch from the hand.

“You’re...Fused with me,” Fiona said. “Ye...aren’t after knowing anything at all about RIDEs, are ye?”

“Apart from you being ‘real’ AI at last, and turning into flying motorcycles, no.” Talking in her voice was really starting to weird me out a little. “Listen, can you, um, let me out now.”

“Not quite yet, darlin’, sorry,” Fiona said regretfully. “You’re not done ‘cooking’ yet.”

“‘Cooking’?” I wasn’t sure I liked the sound of that.

She took control of the body, lifting us into the air and moving us slowly up the street, cannon held at the ready, head sweeping back and forth to check for threats all around. “Well, ye need t’ understand, one a’ the things about us RIDEs is that to be usin’ us in Fuser form, certain things ‘bout your body need to be matchin’ ours. And we’re set up so that if they don’t, we can be after...remedying it.”

I *really* wasn’t starting to like where this was going, and I was starting to become aware of really strange feelings on my chest, my scalp, and between my legs. “So that means...”

“Look, I’m really sorry about all of this,” Fiona said, sounding miserable. “Ye saved me from Wilkins, and here I’ve gone and done a thing to ye...I just didn’t want that bastard to kill ye.”

We had emerged from the tenement neighborhood, and the buildings were low and distant enough that we had a good view around us. There seemed to be no further nearby threats.

Then Fiona peeled away from my body, reconstituting herself as the skimmer cycle underneath me, this time with the pulse cannon mounted on the right down by my leg, as it had been mounted on Wilkins's hog. And I looked down at myself...and still saw breasts. Not fur-covered this time, but regular skin, peeking out from below the collar of the jacket that now fit me rather differently. Snugly, I might say. As I looked down, my hair fell forward past my face—it was now fairly long, and more of a red in color.

My ears felt weird, too. Reaching up to them, I found them human no longer, but instead furry and pointed, poking up through my hair like a fox's. And my butt felt funny, too. Looking back I found I also had a bushy fox tail, just like Fiona's, poking through a hole in my trousers.

“All right,” I said. “What the *fox*?”

It made a sort of sense when she explained it to me, about how my body had to be the same shape as hers so our senses of balance wouldn't be fighting each other. Or at least the bits I heard did. I was kind of in shock at the time. Good thing she could drive herself or we'd probably have had a wreck. When I looked in Fiona's rear-view display, a friendly-if-rather-stunned-looking pretty girl with fox ears looked back out at me. All my old male features were softened into femininity. I wondered what Kathleen would have thought.

“I'm sorry,” Fiona said again, her distress making her accent much lighter. “He was going to kill you. I couldn't see anything else I could do. If I'd Fused in Passive mode you wouldn't have been changed—well, excepting the ears and tail—but I'd have been asleep and you wouldn't have

known enough to dodge out of the way, and couldn't have moved fast enough to keep away from him."

"Can I...change back?" I asked, gingerly feeling one of my new breasts.

"The good news is, yes...eventually," Fiona said. "The not-as-good news is it'll be three years 'fore your body is safe to do so. 'Til then, I'm a-feared it's Charlene you'll be."

"I wanted to break with the past, start over with a clean breast, but this is ridiculous," It was still hard getting used to my new voice, about an octave higher than the old one.

"I'm sorry—" Fiona began again.

I sighed. "It's all right. All things considered, I'd rather be 'Charlene McClaren' than 'Charles McClaren, parentheses, deceased.'" Then I laughed as a thought struck me. "At least this could make it harder for those reporters to track me down."

"I s'pose there's no cloud that's not after having a silver lining," Fiona sighed. "Well, at least this means we don't have to worry about ye finding me a nice girl. We're fully compatible now, and I'll stay with ye so long's you want me."

"I still don't think I have the right to own another person," I said.

"If it's makin' ye feel better, just be thinkin' of me as a fellow traveler without anythin' better t'do with herself than to go in whatever direction ye are at the time," Fiona said. "There are after bein' advantages for me of havin' a human about, too. Opposable thumbs, for instance."

"Well, if you *want* to tag along, that's another matter," I said. "I'll be happy to have a guide who knows more

about this world than I do. Not to mention free transportation...” I glanced down at the pulse cannon. “... and self-defense.”

“So, it’s to Uplift you’re going, then?” Fiona said after a moment.

“Well, I have an almost-relative there I’m wanting to meet,” I said. “Roger Seaford. Distant descendant of my ex-fiancee.”

“Well, I’m sure we can be finding him togeth—wait, did you say *Roger Seaford*?”

“Yeah, why?” I brushed my hair back out of my face. I was going to need to learn how to braid it, I supposed.

“Oh...nothin’, darlin’.” Fiona actually giggled. “Just I think you may find you’re having more in common with your friend than you’re thinking now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked. But she just giggled more, and didn’t say anything else.

“So would you be wanting to do some shoppin’ for female necessities before we leave town, then?” Fiona asked.

I shook my head. “Rather not meet Wilkins again and find he’s changed his mind about killing us. Let’s just hit the road, we can shop in Uplift.”

“A fine idea! Hold on tight!” She put on a burst of speed, and we emerged onto the main highway out of town. A few minutes later we were past the customs booths and out on the highway along the desert rim. As we left the city behind, I got my first real view of the wide open spaces I’d seen on the way down in the shuttle.

“What’s with the horizon? It’s...too flat.”

“Lots of tourists say that. It’s because Zharus is after

being a bigger world than the one you came from. The horizon's that much farther away, and it changes the angles. You'll get used to it."

"Yeah, I guess." I looked at my hands. Now not only did I have all ten fingertips, but they all had immaculately-manicured red-enamelled nails. "I guess I'll get used to nail polish, too. When did that happen?"

"My Fuser nanites, darlin'," Fiona explained. "They're after having some biosculpt options built in. And I happen to *like* red nails. If I'm changing your whole body, might as well mind the small details, too. You'll have perfect nails after every Fuse, even if you chip them between. Great here, too."

"And a decent rack, too, I see." I didn't know how to estimate cup size, but I thought I might be bigger than Kathleen, and she'd been on the "C" side for her build.

"I will admit I was after designin' ye to my own tastes a touch," Fiona confessed. "I can tweak it next time we Fuse if you're wantin', but nothin' I can do will be makin' ye a man again."

"I guess I'd probably better get used to what I have before I start thinking about changing anything," I said. "This is just..." I looked down. "I need to get somewhere I can have a nice quiet freak-out, I think."

"We can find a hotel when we get to Uplift," Fiona said. "And who knows? Perhaps we'll be finding your *colleen's* ever-so-great grand can be helpin' you with it."

"Well, I certainly don't have anything better to do." I settled myself back in her saddle and closed my eyes. "Suppose I might as well try to nap a little. Wake me when we get there."

And so we sped on up the highway together—a stranger in a strange body in a strange land, and her unlikely native guide. I had no idea what waited for me in Uplift, but it had to make more sense than what had happened in Nextus, right?

Part II: Slightly Foxed

I was in bed with Kathleen, making love for what might be the last time. It was the night before the launch, and I had no doubt at all that thousands of other colonists were just as busily engaged as we were, for exactly the same reasons. Who knew what might go wrong across 35 years of coldsleep?

We had just coupled for the third time, and were getting ready to go again, when Kathleen's face took on a puzzled expression. Her hand was on my chest, but it was being pushed away. As she lifted it off, I saw two lumps beginning to push out under the skin. Looking further down, I saw something else begin to dwindle and disappear. My hair was growing longer. My waist was shrinking. My face was changing. My fingernails were stretching. I stared up at the mirror above the bed and a woman stared back at me. Kathleen screamed.

I jerked awake. I was still in Fiona's saddle, lying against the back seat rest as she flew us down the coastal highway. The sun was higher in the sky—I'd slept for hours. And I was starving.

"Sorry for the dreams," Fiona said. "They're after bein' normal after a change like yours, though. They'll be passin' soon."

I rubbed my eyes. "You could tell what I was dreaming?"

"Got the sense'v it here and again. We have nano comm linkages now. If we'd been in Fuse I'd have gotten full sound an' color."

I glanced around. We were zooming at what must not have been far short of the speed of sound along a highway

several dozen meters in the air, marked out by floater buoys. There was other traffic, but it was sparse enough we could easily pass by any slower vehicles without any danger of collision. “Where are we?”

“About an hour out of Uplift,” Fiona said. “There’s a skimmer truck stop just ahead, if it’s food you’re wanting.”

“I think it is.” I yawned and stretched, trying to get used to the way my new bits of anatomy moved on my body. My stomach rumbled. “I’m starving.”

“Sure, and it figures ye would be,” Fiona said. “Those body changes don’t come for free. You’ll need to be takin’ on some calories now. Plenty of ‘em.”

“Ugh.” I looked down at myself. “I don’t know if I’m ready to be seen in public like this yet.”

“There’s after being a simple solution to that,” Fiona said. “Hold on tight, changes coming!” She began shifting around me again, sort of collapsing in on me as parts of her body liquified and others just slid around. Over the course of a couple of seconds, we went from a human woman riding an anti-gravity hovercycle to a furry fox-woman flying through the air on her own. The pulse cannon was racked into a storage mount on our back, leaving our hands free.

I looked up and saw what must have been the truck stop floating ahead of and above us. It was on the top of a huge hovering platform about five clicks ahead. It really was an amazing sight—a huge building floating in mid-air, with dozens of skimmers or fliers of all sizes lifting off or landing all around it. “Is anti-grav really *that* cheap?” I asked. “It can really stay up there all the time?”

“It’s after using tokamaks for the power, and has to

refuel every week, but yeah—antigravity’s very power-efficient for the size these days. It’s used in everything.”

Our body moving under Fiona’s control, we put on a burst of speed and rose toward the platform. I marveled at the sensations I was feeling: the wind in my—our—fur, the different body shape of her muzzle on my face, her tail swishing around, her ears—and her breasts, which were even larger in proportion to her body than mine. I guessed I should be thankful for small (relatively speaking) favors.

Fiona swept us deftly up to one of the smaller Fuser-sized landing platforms and touched down smoothly on both feet. “Ah, nice it is to be havin’ the use of a human body again,” Fiona sighed happily, dancing a few steps as we took the stairs down from the platform. “Most of the tourists didn’t want t’ Fuse, not carin’ to take ears and tail home as souvenirs.”

“And you don’t get to stand on two feet without one?” I asked.

“You’re after bein’ the missing piece that makes us whole, darlin’,” Fiona said as she walked us toward the doors. “There are some’v us who’re after kidnappin’ hapless humans an’ keeping ‘em all the time, just to be havin’ the use of opposable thumbs. Bodyjacking, they call it.”

“Ugh,” I said. “Still, kind of hard to blame them for not wanting to be stuck on four legs all the time.”

“Aye.” We entered the truckstop entry lock, and a tractor lifter plucked the cannon off our back and tucked it away into a storage locker. A small notice popped up in my field of view with a 5 *mu* storage fee, and I approved it.

Inside, the layout was similar to other truckstops I’d

seen back on earth, with a counter and a lot of tables where people could sit and eat, and a convenience-store section including places to purchase media chips and other entertainments. The only major difference was that I'd never seen so many furry people mingling with ordinary humans before.

The place was decently crowded, with humans, Fusers, and four-legged RIDEs—Walker form, Fiona told me—all sharing space. The humans and Fusers were eating and drinking at the tables or counter or shopping the store space, and most of the Walker RIDEs were plugged into power cables for charging up.

We spotted a vacant table and headed that way, but as we got halfway across the room a brown furry paw reached out to grip our arm. “Hey, pretty thing, you busy?” a trucker in a bear Fuser leered. “Got some champagne in the truck...”

Fiona smoothly extricated our arm from his grasp, patting the side of his arm with one hand. “Sorry, darlin’, but I’m not workin’ t’day. Maybe another time, ‘kay?” She blew him a kiss and we continued to our table.

“Okay, what was *that* about?” I muttered as we got farther away.

:Sorry, darlin’,: Fiona sent directly into my head. :It’s been so long, I forgot my default Fuser form looks just like a pleasure RIDE. Should’ve known better’n to come in a place like this lookin’ like that.:

:“Pleasure” RIDE?: I replied in kind as we got to the table and signaled a waitress. :Does that mean what I think it means?:

:One of the first uses of any new technology’s always

sex, isn't it?: Fiona asked lightly. :The BBV "Pleasure Support Armor" line was always very popular for that. I was meant t'be able to pass myself off as one of them—my line was even designed around a heavily modified BBV chassis.:

The waitress arrived, and Fiona ordered for us: a big platter of bacon, eggs, hash browns, biscuits and gravy, grits, corned beef hash, pancakes, waffles, French Toast, cereal, and milk. After the waitress left, she engaged the privacy field on the table so we could talk aloud. "Can I really eat all that?" I asked.

"Trust me, darlin'," she said out of our mouth. "Every mouthful, and you'll be wantin' to go back for more."

My stomach growled again. "I'm starting to believe you." I glanced back at her. "So why exactly were you *meant* to be able to pass yourself off as...well, some kind of porno power armor?"

"Um. Said too much, didn't I? Always my problem. When they were after givin' me this Irish accent, they slipped in the gift of gab with it," Fiona sighed. "S'pose ye might's well know. Not as if I can keep it from ye very long in Fuse anyway. My model number is after bein' FOX(f)-IMA-007Q. Fox, female, Intelligence Mobile Armor, special equipment version." She chuckled. "Yes, I'm a spy. Ex-spy, anyway. Or, more accurately, my partner was the spy and I was her equipment package. We worked for Nextus Intel up 'til about twelve years ago."

"Then how'd you end up with that pig Wilkins?" I asked.

"The hell of it is, I'm not really sure," Fiona admitted. "I'm after havin' 60 hours of blanked memory after the last

time I remember seein' her. All I know is that I came out of passive mode when the landlord opened her storage unit to sell the contents to cover the storage fees—including me. I was retitled, refettered, and resold—under the table, as it was one of those not-so-entirely-legal places they're after havin' out on the outskirts of Nextus where it's too far from central law and prettiness to be carin' much 'bout." She shrugged. "I 'spect that's why Nextus Intel never bothered t' find me. I fell off their radar somehow. Been passed from owner t' owner over th' least ten years. Done security guardin', prospectin' and minin', and th' tourist work ye took me from."

"So why'd you stay with Wilkins when he treated you like that?" I asked.

"Fetters, darlin'. They're like those Laws of Robotics that Isaac Asinine feller wrote about. One of 'em was keepin' me from doin' anything 'gainst the wishes of my master." I felt her wince mentally. "It's still there, actually, though lucky for you 'tis that I can override it in emergencies or I could never have Fused to save you."

"Ugh. I don't like the idea of these fetters," I said. "Can we take them off?"

"T'be safest, we should be havin' a qualified technician do it," Fiona said. "In fact, your *colleen's* great-great-grand could do it. He's after specializin' in that kind of work." There was a little frisson of amusement in her voice when she mentioned Roger.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing. Noooooothing 't'all, darlin'. You'll be seein' soon 'nuff." She actually giggled—clearly enjoying herself too much to want to give it all away. I didn't sense

any malice behind it, so figured I might as well let her have her fun.

“So, do you think maybe we should call Nextus Intel about you?” I asked. “Maybe you have information they need or something.”

Fiona shook her head. “Just as soon not, if it’s all the same to ye. If they’ve been after forgettin’ ‘bout me, I’d rather stay forgotten. If I’m goin’ back to them, they could be wipin’ my memory or worse. And they might consider *you* a security risk.”

“That doesn’t sound pleasant. But what if they find out you’re out and about again?” I asked.

“They never noticed while I was truckin’ tourists around their burg,” Fiona pointed out. “Includin’ the times I drove right through their administrative districts. How would they be learnin’ ‘bout me now I’m nowhere near their little town?”

I shrugged. “You never know. But I guess we’ll deal with it if it happens.” And then the waitress knocked on our privacy field, bringing the first of three large platters. I brought down the field so she could bring it in. “Oooh, that looks perfect! Just leave it here, thanks!”

After all the food was on the table and the privacy field was back up, I considered. “Do I need to, um...take you off so I can eat?” I asked.

“Not if you aren’t after wantin’ to, darlin’,” Fiona said. “We’re designed to be eaten through. Or I could even dissolve just the helmet, if you’re wantin’. Though I’d kinda like it if you’d eat some through me so I could taste it too.”

“That sounds kind of dirty, you know,” I pointed out,

snagging a strip of bacon and practically inhaling it. It was a little awkward eating with a muzzle, and chewing worked differently than I was used to, but I managed to figure it out.

“Oh, do hush yourself and be eating,” Fiona said.

To my surprise, Fiona was right. I ate every bit of food from all three of those platters—more than I’d ever eaten at a single sitting in my life. And even after I was done, I experienced the weird juxtaposition of feeling uncomfortably full and yet still a little hungry. “We’d better be lettin’ that settle a while, darlin’,” Fiona said at last. “We can top off again when we’re hittin’ Uplift.”

“Works for me.” I paid the check, uncomfortably watching my cash supplies dwindle a little more toward zero. But I still had the rest of my stipend waiting for me once I filled out the paperwork. Maybe I could get on that when we found a place in Uplift.

I was also uncomfortably aware that bits of me were... tingling again. Especially my chest. “Are you still...doing stuff to me?” I asked Fiona suspiciously.

“Oh. Um...well, yes,” Fiona admitted. “I didn’t quite get all the little tweaks I wanted in the first time. Ye weren’t havin’ enough stored energy reserves. But now ye do, so I’m after finishin’ the job.”

“Um...okay.” I frowned a little. Looking down, I had a sneaking suspicion what one of those “little tweaks” might be.

“I just want to be sure that, if ye have to be female, ye have the best body ye can,” Fiona said.

“So you’re turning me into a gorgeous female

superspy?” I asked.

I’d meant it as a joke, but Fiona’s response was an embarrassed, “I can’t really help it, I s’pose. It’s how I’m programmed.”

“Oh, great.” I rolled my eyes. “Well, I guess there are worse things than looking like a Bond girl. Let’s get on the road.” We snagged the pulse cannon back from the locker on the way out, then Fiona unfolded back into her skimmer-cycle form and we took to the air.

And I took stock of the changes. My hair had lengthened again and filled out a little more, and as expected my upper body proportions were a little closer to hers. “Oh, come *on*,” I grumbled.

“Don’t worry, ye’ve got plenty of support,” Fiona assured me. “And I reinforced your spine to compensate.”

“And if I insisted you reduce them?” I asked.

“Well...” She sounded uncomfortable. “The thing’s it is, the closer a match ye are fer me in all things, the better we’re able to synchronize and work together.”

It sounded like an excuse to me, but there wasn’t much I could do about it. “I guess I’ll keep it...for now.” I wondered, not for the first time, what Kathleen would think.

As we drove on, our route took us closer and closer to the mountains to the west, and then I saw a great gaping hole in the side of the hills. The horizon thing was still making it a little difficult to judge scale, and as we got closer the hole kept right on getting bigger...and bigger... and still *bigger*. By the time we got there, I could see that it must have been a hundred and fifty meters tall and the same amount wide, with multiple lanes in multiple layers

of traffic passing through it. The vast height made it possible to spread the lanes out enough to give plenty of avoidance room.

“How long did it take for them to even make this?” I wondered, my own problems forgotten in awe at the scale of the structure before me.

“Years, I reckon,” Fiona said. “Fore my time, though.”

“Yeah, but well after mine.” We zoomed into the tunnel at mid-height, keeping to a clearly delineated lane marked off by buoys. It seemed to go on forever. “This goes all the way under the whole mountain range?”

“Sure an’ it does!” Fiona replied.

“Damn.” I sat back on the skimmer and stared up at it. My own small little problems—hell, my whole *life*—seemed so tiny by comparison. How had something this huge ever been built?

The bottom of the tunnel had one or two access lanes along it for wheeled vehicles, but most of it was taken up by parking spaces for businesses, rest stops, skimmer stops—even a few houses. But more of those were up along terraces on the tunnel side, where I supposed things would be less likely to fall onto them. Sometimes the buildings clustered together into the density of small towns. There were even some parks, mostly spaced under the huge shafts of light from skylights and flier exits cored into the rock above.

“Once we’re out of the tunnel, we’ll be at Uplift,” Fiona said. “Tis a place I think ye’ll be after likin’.”

“Yeah.” I watched the other fliers around us. Another flying DeLorean passed by, the fourth one I’d seen just since leaving the truck stop. “Hey, Fiona? Why is

everything I see around here modeled after 20th century kitsch?”

“It’s fad, darlin’,” she said. “The current bunch o’ Steaders are twencen nuts. Real fans of the past. And since they’re after settin’ the fashions on this benighted world...”

“I get the picture.” I shook my head. “Leave it to me to sleep two hundred years and wake up three centuries before I dozed off.”

“At least more things’ll look familiar to ye than strange,” Fiona pointed out. “If only from th’ history books.”

“If that’s really a compensation,” I agreed.

The tunnel seemed to go on forever. I started to doze off—and then I was thrown on my side and falling. No—actually I wasn’t falling, because I was glued tight to Fiona’s seat rest. She was diving. “What the—” Then I saw the bolts of energy splash against the wall across from us.

:We’re under attack!: Fiona spoke in my head.

:EMPs! Hold tight!: Her accent was much lighter and her circumlocutory way of speaking was gone. I glanced over my shoulder, trying to see who was shooting at us, but it was all too shaky to see anything. Fiona contracted around me, and I was wearing her fox-body again with the pulse cannon firmly in our grip before we touched down on the back of a skimmer cargo truck in a lane below us.

Fiona spun us around, bringing the cannon up, and targeting reticles appeared over a sleek black skimmer car that was also diving. A series of crosshairs appeared in front of the car, projecting its path, and Fiona aimed at one and triggered the gun. The front right corner of the car blew out with a flash, then we were in the air again as

Fiona triggered our lifters. I caught a glimpse of the car half-falling out of the sky in a controlled descent toward one of the parks. It looked like it was going to land in a small lake. I hoped there weren't any boaters there.

Something whizzed by our right ear, and we jinked to the left. *:They've got RIDEs on us too! That was a capture net.:* We touched down on the roof of another flying DeLorean, and steadied ourself against one of the nonfunctional ornamental doo-dads this one had along the back to complement its appearance from some old movie.

Then we jumped high again, shoving the DeLorean down toward the next lane of traffic with the force of our jump, and then we were tumbling over backward as Fiona flipped us over in the air to come down behind our mysterious adversary. Rather than the pulse cannon, Fiona tracked this with her left arm gun, firing an arc of energy discs that met its course in mid-flight. It looked like at least three of them hit. I saw a hardlight shield flicker and collapse, then a humanoid shape tumbling out of the sky with smoke streaming from its shoulder.

Fiona goosed her lifters and darted forward, closing on the tumbling form—a jaguar Fuser, it seemed. But as she reached out to catch it, it suddenly steadied and whipped its arm around, a set of glowing claws slashing down. But Fiona had anticipated this, and caught them on a hardlight shield on her left arm, as she shoved the muzzle of the pulse cannon into the jag's chest and pulled the trigger. Its back blew out in a cloud of reddish-silver mist. I wanted to vomit, but it was more of an intellectual desire—after a flicker of nausea, it vanished. I guessed Fiona was blocking it out.

We were only a few meters up by now, and Fiona grabbed the jaguar by one arm and lowered it to the ground. She reached down and put a hand on its head. I could sense she was scouring its computers for any data she could get. Then, still looking around for other attackers, she lifted us off again, shooting straight up for a sky exit overhead. As we boosted up and out, we heard sirens in the distance, coming closer.

We didn't wait around, putting on a burst of speed and heading west over the rugged surface of the mountain. I still wanted to puke—in the sense that I wished I could, or felt like I *ought* to. I still wasn't nauseous. "Sorry 'bout that, darlin,'" Fiona said at last. "If it's after bein' any consolation to ye, the RIDE's nanomedical systems mean there's a fair chance the pilot'll be survivin' if an ambulance gets there in time."

"You just...blew his guts out," I said, horrified.

"Ye saw what he an' his pals tried t'do to us, right?" Fiona asked. She sighed. "An' it's as I feared. I got from the jaggie that the bastards're from Nextus Intel. They found out somehow I'm on th' move again, an' they're after me." She growled. "Didn't even try t'*talk* to me. Just shoot an' capture. Bastards."

We were nearing the next skylight entrance to the tunnel. This one had a railing around it, and a small resort hotel built on the surface nearby. We touched down just out of view, and I felt my skin crawl—or Fiona's skin, anyway—as she suddenly started to shift again, all around me. "This's gonna be after feelin' weird an' wrong t'ye," Fiona admitted. "It's an example a' why Fusers're s'posed t' match their rider's body in all particulars." As she spoke,

she finished changing. And as far as I could tell, we were now a palomino horse Fuser, with an orange cowboy hat and an “I (heart) Cascadia” T-shirt. Our body felt off kilter and out of balance, but Fiona moved it as if it was our natural form. We stepped out from behind some rocks and headed over to the hotel, where we took an elevator down to the tunnel interior.

Back to the east, we could see a congregation of flashing lights in the distance as emergency vehicles arrived. “Why are they after you?” I asked. “Is there something you know that you shouldn’t?”

Fiona shook our head. “I’ve racked me brains, an’... nothing’. ‘Less it’s n that missing 60 hours. An’ if it weren’t them that erased it, they might not know it was missing.”

“Great. Well, what do we do now?”

“I’m not sure I know.” Fiona shrugged. “It’d be safer fer ye if ye were after leavin’ me t’my fate an’ goin’ on with yer own life. But since I’m tethered to ye, I can’t leave ye for your own safety.”

“Hey. You’re not leaving me, for my own safety or otherwise,” I said. “Not after turning me into...this, you’re not.” I shrugged. “Besides, I’m sure they’d find me sooner or later anyway, as the one who bought you, and I don’t know if they’d believe *I* didn’t know anything. I figure my chances are better with you than without.”

“I do suppose there is that,” Fiona admitted. “Well... seems none of the heat’s lookin’ this way yet. So let’s get on to Uplift and be decidin’ what t’ do from there.” She converted back to skimmer form, though using her hardlight projectors to paint it a different color and slightly alter its shape. We lifted off, and headed onward to

the west, with Fiona's senses on full alert.

We made it the rest of the way through the tunnel without incident. After twenty more minutes or so of travel, a general lightening suggested we were coming to the end. "Behold!" Fiona declared. "The proverbial light at the end of the tunnel!"

"What with you being Irish and all, couldn't you show me the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the rainbow instead?" I teased.

"Och! Are ye after me Lucky Charms?" Fiona gasped in mock horror.

The tunnel mouth was approaching, and it was every bit as huge as the other entrance. The sun seemed a lot brighter after all that time underground, and the climate was a lot more arid. And spread out before us like a collection of snow globes was the domed city of Uplift.

It was pretty, and sloppy, and all the things Nextus hadn't been. I don't know if I could say I fell in love at first sight, but I certainly fell in *like*. A domed oasis in the middle of the desert? Not bad. I couldn't wait to see how it looked on the inside.

"Ah, yeah. Too long it's been since I've been in the fair city of Uplift," Fiona lilted happily. "As I'm recallin', they mostly ken how t'treat RIDEs *right* here."

"So, what, we find a hotel first?" I wondered.

"Actually, your Roger's garage is after bein' just a few blocks from the entrance gate," Fiona said. "So I was thinkin' we might be wantin' t'pay him a wee call first." She was giggling again. Well, whatever it was I supposed the sooner I met Roger, the sooner I'd find out what was so

all-fired funny.

“All right, so let’s go see the man,” I said. That set her off again. “What *are* you laughing about?”

Instead of answering, she pulled us in through the gates and then turned onto a little side road into a cluttered but prosperous neighborhood along the outer dome wall. “This is a nice-looking neighborhood,” I reflected. “Cozy.”

“An’ here we are, then!” She pulled up outside an untidy cluster of modular buildings centered around a more permanent concrete structure. A sign on the wall of the structure read “Freeriders Garage”.

“Looks like they’re doing a land office business,” I said, climbing off the skimmer. Fiona folded back up into her fox form, and we headed for the door to the module with an “Office” sign over the door. There was a counter inside, and a cute young girl behind the counter who didn’t really *look* old enough to work there. A pair of cat ears poked out through her blonde hair, and the ocelot RIDE presumably responsible for them was sitting on its haunches next to her and peering curiously over the counter at us.

“I’m looking for Roger Seaford,” I said.

The girl smiled, dimpling. “Oh! I’ll go and get he—him!” She ducked back through a door behind her into one of the larger garage bay structures. I took a seat on a bench, while Fiona sat nearby and giggled to herself more.

After a couple of moments, one of the most gorgeous women I’d ever seen in my life sauntered, or slunk, or poured herself through the door. She had long, flowing white hair that seemed to move around her in the breeze,

even though there wasn't one. Her body build was a little on the tall and slim side, but nowhere near anorexic, and she was amply endowed in the upper body (though not to *my* extent, I noted sourly). White cat ears and a grey and white fluffy tail behind her revealed she'd Fused a RIDE at least once. And her body language was...inviting.

All of this was so distracting that it was perhaps ten seconds before I noticed her facial features and my heart just about stopped. They weren't *completely* identical to my beloved Kathleen, but they were so close that I didn't realize I'd spoken her name aloud until the woman said, "Rochelle, actually. You wanted to see me?"

"I wanted to see Roger Seaford," I began. Then my brain caught up to the name Rochelle, and the fact that Fiona had been giggling about him all morning, and put two and two together. "But I already *am*, aren't I?"

The girl grinned, her smile seeming to lighten up the room by about three shades, and her tail swished in a friendly sort of way. "I'm afraid so."

I turned to look at Fiona, who was by now literally rolling on the floor with laughter. "Sorry 'bout that!" she said between giggles. "Your information must've been outta date—sometimes Gondwanan data can be slow gettin' shifted over to Laurasia. I found the record when I googled it this mornin' an' it was too *good* not t'keep for a surprise."

"Anyway, how can I help you?" Rochelle asked patiently.

"Well, this is going to sound weird," I said, "but I very nearly married your great-great-great-great grandmother, so I thought I'd come and meet you to see how her

descendants turned out.”

Rochelle blinked. “I have to admit, you’re right,” she said. “That does, indeed, sound weird.”

“My name is—well, was until *this morning*—” I turned to look at Fiona again. “—Chuck McClaren.”

Rochelle tilted her head. “Oh, man! I’ve been there—as you just now found out. I’m so sorry! You must still be in shock over it.”

“Well, I kind of am,” I admitted. “Though if it hadn’t been for Fiona’s quick thinking in Fusing me, I’d be dead right now, so I guess it’s not all bad. But anyway, the reason I’m here is...well, did you see a news story about a long sleeper being found at First Landing a couple weeks back?”

Rochelle blinked, then blinked again. “You’re saying... that was you?”

Wordlessly, I pulled out my old leather wallet and flipped it open to show her my driver’s license, complete with my birthdate. And the photo of Kathleen fell out and onto the counter. Rochelle picked it up, looked at it, looked at the driver’s license, then looked at me. “Um...wow. I think you two should come inside.”

I sat on a chair in Rochelle’s private section of the garage, as near as I could make out in the permanent part of the structure I’d seen from outside. Fiona sat on the floor next to me. Rochelle was across from me, behind a desk with multiple screen displays floating in the air above it, along with a *huge* snow-leopard RIDE she said was named Uncia.

I’d just finished telling them the story of how I’d

gotten unfrozen late, then met and fused with Fiona. I left out the story of the attack in the tunnels for now. It wasn't relevant.

“So here I am, alone in the future, no family, no money, and not even the right damned *gender* anymore,” I said. “Without anywhere else to really go, I guess I just sort of picked you out of a hat as maybe an interesting place to visit. Now that I'm here, I'm not even sure what to *do*.” I could feel hysteria rising, somewhere in the back of my mind.

Apparently so could Fiona, since she leaned over to put her head in my lap. This would have been cute on a normal-sized fox, but with her it had the effect of filling my entire lap. And Rochelle reached out a hand to take mine. “Listen, I know you're in shock, but we can help with that. We've got experience in these things. And we can help with your situation, too. Hell, Rhianna's gonna *freak* when she hears about this. She's from Earth herself—though a little later than you were.”

“You're still getting ships in from earth?” I asked, seizing on any conversational gambit to save myself from feeling adrift.

“Oh, yes. They've gotten the travel time down to about ten months now,” Rochelle said.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “It sounded like you just said it only takes ten months to get from Earth out to here.”

“Um, yeah,” Rochelle said. “They made some FTL breakthroughs about a hundred years or so ago. You... hadn't heard?”

I shrugged. “Well, even if I had, I don't know what it matters. Unless I can time travel with it, FTL doesn't make

much difference in my life right now. I certainly wouldn't have anything waiting for me back on Earth. I'm sure it would be just as weird to me now as this place." I was starting to feel strangely disconnected from things.

"We probably ought to get you some rest," Rochelle said. "You're probably still used to the old 24 hour clock. Nanomedical body clock adjustments take some time to kick in, and the changes your body's been through have probably tired you out, too. I just...wow." She called up the picture of Kathleen from my wallet on one of her displays. "I really look just like my great-to-the-fourth grandmother?"

"I *swear* it's coincidence," Uncia said. "Or a freak of genetics. I sure didn't google your ancestors and pick one to make you look like when I Fused you."

"I know. I mean, I had basically the same features as a guy. But still—damn. It's not every day you meet the person who could have been your great-to-the-fourth grandfather."

"Um, yes. About that." Uncia sounded almost embarrassed. "I've been researching this woman *now*, and there's something I need to check. Fiona, I'm sending you a data request..."

Fiona blinked as she got it. "An' what would ye be wantin' somethin' like *that* for?" But she nodded. "All righty, then. Sendin' to ye."

"Thanks." Uncia cocked her head, then nodded. "Shelley, there's kind of a funny thing about your family history I didn't notice 'til now 'cuz I never looked into it before. I think it's been kinda suppressed over the years, but some bits of it are a matter of public record."

“Yeah?” Rochelle asked, feline ears perking forward.

“A little over three Zharus months after Landing, Kathleen Heidelberg married Gary Seaford,” Uncia said. “They had a son, Joey Charles Seaford, just about *four* Zharus months after that.” Medical records appeared across several of Rochelle’s screens. “They tried to pass him off as ‘premature’ but that’s not what the medical files say. Joey was born hale and healthy.”

I blinked. “Joey *Charles*?”

“And I just ran a genetic comparison on you two,” Uncia said. “Shelley, I’d like to introduce you to, with 99.99% positive genetic match, your genetic great-great-great-great grandfather, Mr. Charles McClaren. Well, formerly, anyway.”

My jaw felt like it had fallen to the floor. “I’m *what*?”

Rochelle stared at me as if she had never seen me before. “But...how?”

“We were sleeping together before we left,” I said.

“The night before lift we went...well, a lot. I guess...if those genetics are right...she must have been pregnant when she was frozen. Maybe she didn’t even know, then.”

“And if she loved you that much, she’d have insisted on keeping the baby if she couldn’t find the father,” Rochelle said.

I snorted. “Knowing her, she probably made it a condition of agreeing to the marriage.”

“And she never had any other children,” Rochelle said wonderingly. “Which means...you’re the direct ancestor of any person born a Seaford on this entire *planet*,” she added. “By rights, we should all be named McClaren.”

“Well, how ‘bout that, then?” Fiona asked. “Ye’ve gone

from not having a family t' having a family of *thousands*."

"It's certainly going to make Seaford family reunions more interesting," Rochelle reflected.

I did about the only thing I could at that point. I passed out.

I dreamed that Kathleen and I were in the kitchen of the house we'd fantasized about building together after we arrived on the new world. It would have all the homely little fixtures we'd always wanted—gas stove, big refrigerator, one of those kitsch kitty clocks with the moving tail and eyeballs that seemed to regenerate like flatworms year after year...

We were making dinner together. Just being domestic. She was saying something funny and I was laughing. She washed the dishes and I dried them as we waited for the timer to go off. At last the food was done, and we took the casserole out of the oven and carried it with pot-holders into the dining room.

The dining room was just as cozy as we'd imagined the kitchen being, with pastel wall paper, shelves for knick-knacks and bric-a-brac, a fireplace, and a finished wood table. Rochelle sat by the head of the table, plate in front of her, silverware in hand. Someone else was across from her, and other people were just down the table from her...and further down, and further down...in fact, the table seemed to stretch into infinity, with hundreds or

thousands of people sitting along it, each with a plate and knife and fork at the ready.

We began serving out the casserole. The pan didn't seem to get any less full with each dollop we put onto someone's plate. We kept right on serving, and serving, and serving, and serving, and serving...

I gasped and woke up. I tried to jerk upright in bed, but my chest was heavier than I remembered it and I just flopped back down again. "Gah!"

Something warm and wet swiped my face. A washcloth? ...no, a fox tongue. I glanced over at Fiona, who was standing next to my bed. "Are ye all right then? Ye just passed out, an' ye been asleep for hours."

"Ugh." I shook my head, trying to clear it, and looked around. I was in someone's bed. It was a comfortable twin bed, with a wooden chest of drawers across from it. There was a desk with a computer on it, a bookshelf, a few posters. It looked like a man's room, though I couldn't be sure. Hell, I couldn't even be sure of my *own* gender anymore. Which was a cheerful thought.

"Someone's after wantin' t' talk t'ye," Fiona continued. "I think it'll do ye some good. An' anyway, it's her bed you're sleepin' in."

Her bed. See? Told you! part of my mind seemed to say to me. "Uh, sure, send her in. I guess I'm decent." The blanket covered my chest. It rose up like mountains in front of me, in fact. "Ugh."

The woman who came in was a bit shorter than I was, and built about like I was now—though a bit fuller curves in general, and her chest a little better proportioned than

mine. She had tufted lynx ears poking up through her hair, and long tawny hair to the shoulders. She also had a distinctly feline *nose* that made her look awfully cute. She dragged a straight-backed chair up next to the bed and straddled it backward, resting her arms on the seat back. “Hello, Charlene. I’m Rhianna Stonegate. We’ve got a couple of things in common.”

“Let me guess, you used to be a...” What male name was close to Rhianna? “...Ryan?” I hazarded.

She actually grinned at that. “Good guess! Yeah, I *was* Ryan ‘til just a few weeks ago.”

I sighed and closed my eyes. “I hate being right all the time.”

“But the big one I was thinking of is that we both grew up on Earth,” she continued. “So I kind of have a little sense of what you’re going through.” She held up a hand. “Though just a *little* one, I’ll admit. I didn’t sleep two hundred years on the way. Didn’t sleep at all, except for overnights.”

I shook my head. “Rochelle said they have FTL now, and it just takes ten months to get here.”

“Took a whole year when Rufia and I—well, she was Rufus then—came over seven years ago.”

I exploded. “Is *everyone* on this damned planet a woman who used to be a man? Is that some sort of immigration requirement now? How is it even *possible*? What the hell happened to me? It’s supposed to take *months* of surgery and hormone therapy, and I got these in, like, *two minutes!* And I can’t go back for *three years!*”

She smiled sort of sadly at me, as a tufted lynx with ears like hers padded in to sit beside her. “Well, therein

lies a tale,” Rhianna said.

I looked over at the lynx. “Kind of a short and stumpy one?”

Rhianna chuckled. “This is Kaylee, my partner.”

“And the reason you’re not Ryan anymore, right?” I said.

“Got it in one. You see, to operate a RIDE—”

I waved a hand. “I know, Fiona already filled in that bit. But how is it even *possible*?”

“Like most of the crazy stuff in this world, it’s nanotech,” Rhianna said. “We’ve had true working nano for about sixty years now. And thanks to sarium batteries, which we’ve had for about forty, the nanos can pack a huge wallop. They basically rebuild your body from the inside out in just a couple of minutes.” She chuckled. “Though you might be interested to know even someone from Earth *today* would still be amazed. They don’t have sarium, so their gender-change nanites take *hours* to work.”

“Someone from Earth today...” I mused. “So you were on Earth seven years ago. What’s it like now?”

“It’s hard to describe, really,” Rhianna said, after a moment. “In a lot of ways, it’s not too different from when you left. Not so much fighting anymore—they had the last big war when I was only about three—but living conditions not a whole lot better. Everyone has cyber-implants now—it looks like some bad old twencen cyberpunk movie, all the people with metal arms, or legs, or glowing eyes, or whatever.”

“Huh. They had a lot of medical implants when I left, but nobody replacing their arms or whatever who didn’t have to,” I said.

“They improved the technology a lot over two hundred years,” Rhianna reflected. “I’ve even got some chips in my brain, myself. You see some of that kind of stuff out here, but it’s not as common. It’s like people were crazy about it on Earth because it distracted them from how crummy the world’s situation was getting.”

“Crummy, huh?” I asked.

“The planet was emptying out, pretty much. Everyone was leaving. Including Rufus and me, when we could scrape together enough money for starliner fare. I gather they’re almost down to 4 billion people now. There were whole cities standing empty when we left—Detroits breaking out all over. Some people were even talking about ‘terraforming’ the planet.”

I blinked. “How do you ‘terraform’...Terra?”

She shrugged. “Beats me. Bulldoze the cities and let them return to the wilderness? I kind of stopped caring when we left the place.” She shifted position on the chair. “Anyway, I came from New Boston—it would still have been Old Boston when you left; it got pasted with a few nukes some time after that and they built New Boston when the rubble stopped glowing. Were you from anywhere near there?”

I shook my head. “Midwest. The Ozarks. Never got that far northeast.” I shook my head. “If I did go back, is there even anything there I’d recognize anymore?”

“We’ve got an Earth’pedia refresh from last year on the network, so you could look it up and see,” Rhianna said. “I did travel in the area some, before we left, though I don’t know what it was like when you were there. Branson is still there, though it’s just a suburb of Silver Dollar City

now.”

“I might just have to do that. When I left, Silver Dollar City was just an amusement park outside of town.” I sighed and looked down at my chest. “What am I even supposed to *do* now? Wrong planet, wrong era, wrong fricking *gender*...”

“This...is going to be hard for you,” Rhianna said. “They’ve had the technology here for thirty-odd years, and most people our age who were born here grew up with rampant gender-changing being, well, ‘normal.’ Even on other planets, they have the slow version of the tech so it’s more common than it was in your day.”

“I come from a time when men were *real* men and women were *real* women...because they didn’t have gender-change nanos yet,” I joked feebly.

“It wasn’t easy for me, either, but I at least had some time to get used to the idea. You...got hit with it on your first day back in the ‘real’ world, Fiona tells me. After getting shot at. While dealing with orbit lag.”

“I had a busy day,” I said. “Who knows what tomorrow’s gonna be like?”

“So anyway, if you want to stay here for a day or so, we can put you up on the couch. Or we can find you a decently cheap hotel room. Fiona’s gone ahead and filled out your paperwork for the long-sleeper stipend, and looked into some lawyers you could contact about suing for your Share.”

“And meanwhile, I get used to being a woman,” I said flatly.

“You don’t really have much choice, there,” Rhianna said. “Whether you get used to it or not, you are one. We’ll

do our best to help you with it, but there are some parts you're going to have to figure out for yourself."

I sighed and pushed back the covers. "Well, I guess we'd best get started, then."

Rhianna grinned, suddenly looking distinctly adorable. "All right. Shower's through that door. Go get used to your new body. I'll have some clothes for you when you're done. I think my stuff will just about fit you, more or less, and we can launder what you have on."

"Thanks." I was still wearing my clothes under the covers as it turned out, so I didn't need to worry about someone else looking at my new body naked. It looked like I was about to have my first crack at that.

In the bathroom, I unbuttoned my shirt, trying not to notice the way it was stretched tight over new anatomical features. I slid out of my pants, pulled off my briefs and socks (closing my eyes not to look at was, or wasn't, down there as I did), then opened the door a crack and shoved the heap of clothing out with my foot. Then I turned to face myself in the mirror.

I'll admit it. If I'd been a guy and presented with the body in front of me...wow. Of course, I'd have been pretty creeped out that the body was wearing what was still recognizably *my* face. But still.

My hair was now long and red, falling in waves to the small of my back. My body was all lush feminine curves, especially in the vicinity of my upper chest. I turned from side to side, taking in the angles in the mirror in fascination, cupping a breast in my hand to feel the weight of it. This...was me for the next three years.

I sighed and entered the shower, thankful that at least some things hadn't changed over the centuries. Or...maybe they *had* changed and then changed back thanks to the Steaders and their stupid nostalgia. Well...maybe not so stupid if it meant that showers had just had a hot knob, a cold knob, and a head with holes in it, rather than using sonic waves or cryogenic suspension or who knows what else to get a body clean.

I felt better with the familiar sensations of hot water running down my body, even if it did feel weird where the spray struck my chest, and to have so much hair plastered to my back. I lathered up and rinsed off, trying to ignore the *squishiness* in my chest. Then I got to where I usually soaped up and washed my lower parts.

How can I even describe it? If it hasn't happened to you, there's no way you can even *visualize* what it feels like to reach down where something is supposed to be dangling and find...well. Let's just say it was disturbing in some ways, and *interesting* in others. But I guessed that I could get used to it. After all, I'm human, right? We're supposed to be adaptable—it's what makes us better than the apes.

I finally was no longer able to allow myself to stay in the shower and keep using up all of Rhianna's hot water (if using up hot water was even a problem anymore—who knows, maybe it was flash-heated the instant I needed it). So I climbed out and dried myself off with a thick fluffy towel. I looked around for some suitably 26th-century answer to the problem of wet hair, but all I found was a bulky 20th-century radar-gun-style blow-drier. I sighed and flipped it on, and it made that annoyingly loud whirr—and then it proceeded to evaporate water from wherever I

pointed it *instantaneously*.

It was pretty clever, really. I couldn't begin to guess how it worked. Some sort of specialized hardlight or lifter tech? Lasers? Nanotech? *Magic*? Whatever it was, it sure did work a charm. It even seemed to add a little extra body to my hair so it poofed out a bit. (As I put it down, I noticed the intensity selector switch on the side was set to "1980s". Well, that explained that.)

After I finished, I became aware of another bodily need, and I looked over at the dumpy porcelain chair squatting between the sink and the shower. Another artifact dating back to centuries before my youth. In my day, toilets had by and large been more after the Japanese model, with buttons you could push to do everything except wipe your nose for you. This one just had a flush lever. Of course, for all I knew it probably had nanotech bowl cleaning and a hardlight bidet, but the controls for such things were safely tucked away, and I wouldn't be exploring for them.

All I will say is, it's good that *something* about the experience seemed normal, because the rest of it sure wasn't. But I guessed I could get used to this, too. It was kind of academic whether I thought I could or not, as it was clear I was darned well going to have to.

I came out of the bathroom wrapped in that towel to find a set of clothes laid out on the bed. Rhianna, Kaylee, and Fiona were absent, leaving me in privacy. The clothes were basically slacks and T-shirt—nothing especially "girly" except for the panties and bra that accompanied them. These I considered distastefully, but there wasn't really any way around them. I had the equipment, so I

needed the accessories.

I figured out how to put the bra on, then pulled on the rest of the clothes, finishing with a pair of socks and my old shoes that I'd left by the bathroom door. The clothes fit pretty well, and were loose enough that the differences in our body shapes wasn't uncomfortable. The T-shirt had "Hard Rock Cafe: Sturmhaven" on it—the familiar yellow-circle logo reminding me of home. I appreciated that.

Fully dressed, I found my way downstairs to the garage, where Fiona, Rochelle and Uncia, and Rhianna and Kaylee were waiting for me—along with someone new, a tall, muscular woman accompanied by a female elk. "Heeeeey, sweet thing!" the new woman leered. "Doing anything tonight?"

"Er..." I said, uncertain of how to respond.

"Hey!" Rochelle protested. "Stop hitting on my great-great-great-great grandfather!"

"Aww, c'mon, I...what?" She stared at Rochelle, then back at me.

Uncia giggled. "Rufia likes 'em *ooooold!*"

Rufia stared at Uncia now. "No, really...*what?*" Fiona was rolling on her back, all four paws in the air, laughing.

"I'm glad *someone* finds this amusing," I grumbled.

"Sorry, darlin'," Fiona said, chuckling as she got back to her feet. "But the look on her face..."

"Rufia, Yvonne—" she nodded to the elk "—this is Charlene McClaren," Rhiana said. "Until last week, she was catching Zs in a 200-year-old cryo capsule. Until *this morning*, she was a 'Charles.' She's...got a few issues to work through."

I rolled my eyes. "Issues? I've got *lifetime*

subscriptions.”

Rufia’s eyes widened. “Whoa. That’s rough.” She blinked. “Wait—you’re that longsleeper from the news last week? One of the original colonists?”

“I was apparently hidden very well by an angry father,” I said. “After I unknowingly got his daughter pregnant with *her* great-great-great grandfather.” I jerked my thumb at Rochelle.

Rufia shook her head. “Damn, it’s even more like a soap opera than usual around here today. Rhianna, girly, what *are* you putting in the water?”

“And this morning, just after I met Fiona, we had a little...accident,” I said, slumping into a vacant chair. “This all still seems so unreal.”

“She’s not from a time that offered easy gender switching,” Rhianna said. “She’s having even more trouble dealing than I did.”

“*You* didn’t deal, you just delayed.” Rufia shook her head. “Man, to go from 24th century Terran attitudes right into a crossride? That is *rough*.” She offered me her hand. “Sorry about the pass. I didn’t know.”

“That’s all right,” I said, taking it and enduring her womanful attempt to pulverize my finger bones.

She grinned an improbably broad grin at me. “So *you* let me know when you think it’s safe for me to make another one, ‘kay?”

So help me, I actually laughed. It was impossible not to like this woman. “If that day ever comes, I promise you’ll be the first to know.”

“It’s a deal.” She released my hand, and I surreptitiously checked to see how many individual fingers

I still had.

“So you...really used to be a ‘Rufus’?” I asked.

She nodded. “Grew up that way, yeah.”

I shook my head. “How do you people *deal* with this?”

She grinned again. “Practice! Well, seriously, some of us have an easier time than others. Me, I was always curious from the get-go, and had, I guess you’d say, *less discriminating tastes* ‘bout the he-ness or she-ness of who I slept with. You could say I was right in the middle of the spectrum already, so when I flipped not much changed but the plumbing.”

I shook my head. “The plumbing’s a big enough change already. I’m not ready to figure out who or what I want to sleep with yet.”

“And no one’s gonna ask you to.” She considered.

“Well, ‘less you go out much. Damn, girl, your body’s almost as good as Shelley’s and that’s without her nanos.”

“Ruuuufia...” Rhianna said warningly.

Rufia raised her hands. “Sorry, sorry, I’ll be good!” But she winked at me. And I...almost chuckled. Weird as it was, and alien as my new body was, Rufia’s compliment still actually felt kind of good.

“So what am I supposed to do now? That stipend money isn’t going to go very far, and I don’t exactly have any marketable skills.”

Rhianna fielded this question. “Just take some time, relax, get your bearings. The stipend will last long enough for that. And speaking of marketable skills, if you want I’ll show you some nuts and bolts about how RIDES or skimmers work.”

“Huh.” I considered that offer. I’d done a little fiddling

with ground cars back on Earth, so I knew at least a little about mechanics. And if I was going to be saddled with (and on) a RIDE, it might be good to know a thing or three about how they worked. But still...

“You do realize I’m a couple of centuries behind the tech curve, right?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Apart from lifters, hardlight, nano, and qubitite, most tech hasn’t really advanced that much in the last two hundred years. And I teach apprentices on this stuff, so I know how to start from zero. But no pressure. Shelley and I can download you some reading material so you’ll have a place to start. Oh, and there’s also this.” She picked up a tablet, tapped something on it, and handed it over, displaying a community college brochure. “The only requirements are passing some math and writing tests—and those *definitely* haven’t changed in the last two hundred years.”

“Huh. I’ll think about it.”

“And if you *really* have trouble meeting living expenses ‘til you’re on your feet, there’s a friend of ours who’s rich and likes to hand out money all over,” Rhianna said. “*Too much money,*” she added darkly. “It can get really annoying...but since you’re in a position where you could really use it, well, whether you ask is up to you.”

“I’ll keep my options open,” I said.

“And...there’s one more thing we need to do.” Rhianna glanced at Rochelle, then at Rufia. And in one swift motion, all three of them had Fused with their RIDEs—and were standing around Fiona, covering her with outstretched arms with various bits glowing.

Fiona crouched, belly against the floor, tail low. “An’

what's this now?" she sputtered.

"Charlene," Rhianna said, not taking her eyes off of Fiona, "are you aware of Fiona's true nature? I can tell you right now, she's *not* a BBV."

Fiona's eyes widened. "But...how did you—?"

"We're RIDE mechanics, and pretty damned good ones," Rochelle said. "Give us some credit."

"And two of us are ex-Nextus military RIDEs ourselves," another voice said from Rufia's Fuser body—that must have been Yvonne. "Think we don't know when someone 'is a fox'?"

"FOX(f)-ISA-007Q, right?" Rhianna asked conversationally. "The jewel in the crown of Nextus military RIDEs. Problem is, you never can tell whether that jewel is real or made of paste."

"Um...guys? I mean, gals?" Only after I said it did I realize it was technically correct either way. "She *did* tell me that on the way here," I said hastily. "That she was actually a spy RIDE. She ended up sold under the table after her partner disappeared, leaving a 60-hour blank in her memories."

Rufia snorted. "Has she tried to sell you the Alohan Elevator yet? Only *slightly* used."

"I don't know what you're thinkin', but it's th' truth, I swear!" Fiona said, looking scared now.

"Maybe you're telling the truth," Rhianna said. "Maybe you even *think* you are. But come on! Right after a long sleeper who just *happens* to be my partner's ancestor steps off the sub, you show up, scoop him up, Fuse and gender-change him, and come *right here* with him?"

When she put it that way, it did kind of look

suspicious. “But we were attacked on the way over, in the tunnel,” I pointed out. “By a car and a Fuser she ID’d as Nextus Intel. She even—” I felt a spasm of nausea again but controlled it. “—blew the Fuser’s guts out.”

“The whole thing could have been a set-up,” Rochelle said. “The blown-out guts could have been simulated in hardlight.”

“And the hell of it is, she wouldn’t even know it,” Kaylee put in. “It’s why IMAs—’specially Nextus IMAs—are so dangerous. Their neural nets are created with secret subnets, some of which even *they* don’t get to know about. They’re quantum-encrypted and hidden so well you can’t get to ‘em without killing or wiping the RI.”

“They mean that the RIDE can conceal anything she wants to from her rider, even in full memory-sharing Fuse,” Rochelle put in. “And—the really dangerous part—the RIDE’s bosses can conceal anything *they* want to from the RIDE.”

Fiona’s eyes were wider. “They couldn’t! They wouldn’t!”

Rhianna sighed. “They could and they would. Of course, they wouldn’t tell *you* about it. It’s not exactly something they shout from the heavens in general. But when you’re on the right grapevines, it’s amazing what you can find out.”

“Are you *really* missing 60 hours?” Rufia asked. “If you are, I’ll bet you fifty *mu* they’re stuck inside your head somewhere you can’t get at.”

“Do you even *have* fifty *mu*?” Yvonne asked. “If so, how about paying me back some of the 200 you borrowed from me last week?”

Rufia rolled their shared eyes. “It’s an *expression*, silly elk.”

“Then how about *expressing* me my 200 *mu*?”

“They’re the ultimate sleeper agents, these RIDEs,” Rochelle said. “Especially the ones who’re just intel RI cores stuck in regular DE bodies. Don’t even know they’re spies. Until one day, the conditions are right, and boom.” She shook her head. “Luckily spy-RIs are insanely expensive and devilishly hard to make, or we’d be up to our armpits in them. Can you imagine if *every* RI were a potential turncoat?”

Fiona’s ears drooped, and she whined deep in her throat. “Then it’s true. I could be programmed an’ not even know it. I could’ve been planted with Wilkins, with phony memories, and the whole attack could all have been an act, for makin’ me regender Chuck—so I’d get t’ hang ‘round here with her while ye get her back on her feet again.”

“Or it could have been completely true,” I said. “You can’t *know* she’s some kind of a double-agent!” I was feeling much the same sympathy for Fiona now that I’d felt when Wilkins had been torturing her—except that a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach also told me that what Rhianna and the others were saying sounded far too plausible.

“But we can’t know she *isn’t*, either,” Rochelle pointed out.

“So what’re ye gonna be doin’ with me, then?” Fiona asked. “Kill me? Wipe me? Pull my core and put it in a little box?”

Rhianna sighed, and lowered her arm. “I don’t know. If you’re being manipulated, I can’t blame you for it. And I

sure can't punish you for it."

Fiona looked to Rochelle. "You're supposed to be hot stuff with code. I want you t' vacuum me out. Look at ev'ry mem'ry I have. See if you can find *anything* that suggests I'm planted."

Rochelle nodded. "I'll try, but even if you're as open with me as you can be, I still won't find any time-bombs."

"Then after that, I want ye to do somethin' else for me." Fiona said. "I want ye t'put a tether on *my personality core itself*."

Rochelle gasped, lowering her arm in surprise. "But that's...insane! Nobody *ever* tethers that deep. If I do it wrong, I could really screw you up!"

"I'll trust ye," Fiona said quietly. "The most important thing is makin' sure I don't *ever* hurt Charlene. An' anything you do to me down there should be deeper than anything they could have stuck in those hidden subnets."

I felt choked up. "Fiona, you don't have to do that for me—"

She shook her head. "Don't ye get it? I might have Fused ye for *no reason* because my programmin' told me to. What might I do to ye the next time?" She shook her head. "Rochelle, do it. Wake me up when yer done." The lights in her eyes went out, and her hardlight skin vanished, leaving a metal fox shape behind.

"Huh." Rufia lowered her own arm. "Well, that was unexpected."

"Poor thing," Kaylee said. "Either she's putting on a really good act, or she had no idea."

"I hate intel RIs," Rhianna growled. "The people who make and use them ought to be *shot*."

“I’ll buy the bullets,” Rochelle agreed. “So what do we do about this one?”

Rhianna shrugged, and glanced at me. “What she told us to. It’s her choice.”

“You’re not going to...hurt her, are you?” I asked.

Rochelle de-Fused from Uncia. “We’ll do the best we can not to. And that’s a promise.”

“I don’t get it. What could anyone even want from conning *me*?”

“I can think of a couple reasons Nextus Intel might want to keep an eye on us,” Rhianna said grimly. “Which isn’t to say they are. She *could* be telling the truth.”

“I don’t like to think about her tethered at all,” I said. “Especially if it’s that risky.”

“Shelley’ll do it right,” Rhianna said. “And it’s *her* choice. If she finds she doesn’t have a real one in the long run, well, at least we honored the ones she *could* make.”

“So if I’m here so she can spy on you...maybe I should just go. Find some other city to live in,” I said. “I appreciate your help, but...I don’t want to cause trouble for you.”

Rhianna shrugged. “If they really want to spy on us, they’ll find some way. Maybe they were already. At least if we have her where we can see her we can keep an eye on her. Anyway, c’mon.” She lifted the unconscious fox over one shoulder and carried her to a maintenance cradle.

“Let’s get this done. I’ll give you your first lessons in RIDE maintenance while we’re at it.”

So I watched while Rhianna and Rochelle did their work. Rochelle and Uncia did a bunch of computer stuff I

didn't understand, but Rhianna told me they could teach me about it in the "advanced" courses. Meanwhile, I watched as Rhianna partly disassembled Fiona's shell and added various devices. "These are monitor implants," she explained. "We'll have our RIDEs share off keeping an eye on you through them to make sure Fiona doesn't do anything against her own will." She paused. "Of course, this means you're not exactly going to have any privacy for a while, at least as long as you're with her."

I considered that. "If she actually is a spy, it's probably best that way. And if nothing else, your RIDEs will be able to see any time I run into trouble whether it's related to her or not."

"That's true." Rhianna considered. "Now I need you to leave the room for a bit, if you don't mind. I want to add some other devices, and I need Fiona not to be able to see what they are through your memories."

"Ah, okay, understood." I didn't take offense. Considering what we might be dealing with, I could understand her need to take precautions. So I headed out into another bay, where Rufia and Yvonne were waiting—and arguing.

"You know, *legally* you belong to me," Rufia was saying. "That means your money is legally mine, too."

"Oh yeah? Just try and take it," Yvonne sniffed. "Hope you're good at factoring quantum primes with a stylus and e-paper."

"Uh, hi. Am I interrupting something?" I asked.

"Nah, just an old argument." Rufia grinned. "And we're not serious, anyway. It just passes the time."

I sat down on a bench across from them. "So what do

you guys do, anyway?”

“We’re hotshots for hire,” Rufia said. “Yvonne’s a comm-tech armor, which is valuable out in the Dry Ocean where interference from all the solar storms makes keeping in touch with civilization tricky unless you can punch a laser through to satellites.”

“I can see how that would be a problem,” I said.

“We work a lot with salvage and rescue crews and prospectors. Also, since I know both the ins and outs of this world *and* the way people *not* from this world think, a couple times a year when the liners come in we get a lot of business as ‘native guides’ for the tourists who want to see what the world is like but need to be protected from doing something dumb, like Fusi—um, something dumb,” Rufia said.

“Like Fusing with the wrong gender of RIDE, you were about to say?” I said wryly.

“Well, yeah, but I didn’t mean it that way,” Rufia said. “You didn’t ‘zackly have a choice.’”

I nodded. “So tell me something. How is it that thinking creatures get treated as property around here and nobody seems to mind?”

“If you ever figure that out, tell *me*,” Yvonne said. “I mean, really. I spend my days ferrying this big lunkette around when I could be doing something productive, like revolutionizing quantum physics or inventing world peace.”

Rufia snorted. “You wouldn’t know a quantum physic if it bit you on the butt.”

“Well, sure. But if I had the *time*, I could study them!”

I chuckled. “But seriously...”

“Seriously? Well, probably has to do with how they were invented,” Rufia said. “As military equipment for a war between Nextus and Sturmhaven, about thirty years back. After the war they passed into civilian applications, and a lot of people just took it for granted they were property.”

“Especially over in Nextus,” Yvonne said. “They don’t have a lot of imagination over there, or empathy either. If you’re a machine, you’re a tool.” She sniffed. “They’re *all* tools over there.”

“There’s still lots of people who feel differently about it, though. Especially here in Uplift,” Rufia said. “A lot of folks like me and Rhi and Shelley, who think of their RIDEs as their friends, not their property.” She shot Yvonne an annoyed look. “Except in certain financial matters...”

Yvonne smirked. “She’s just annoyed because I always have more money than she does.”

“Just because you don’t have to buy food, or booze, or clothing, or shelter!” Rufia said. “You don’t even have to buy your own damn power! I should start billing you for the electricity you suck up.”

“You mean the average of about five *mu* and thirty-seven penny-units per month I draw down? I suppose I *could* start paying you for that. Can’t see as it would make much difference to your finances, though.”

Rufia rolled her eyes. “It’s the *principle* of the thing!”

Yvonne chuckled. “Any time someone says it’s not about the money but the principle? It’s about the money.” She leaned forward and stage-whispered to me, “She just knows that someday she’s going to spend just a teensy bit

too much and go into debt. Then I'll buy that debt, and she'll have to do what *I* say."

Rufia crossed her arms. "Never gonna happen."

"Hope you're looking forward to taking orders from your elk!" Yvonne said happily. "Things are gonna be different around here when *I'm* in charge."

"Yeah, just keep telling yourself that," Rufia grumbled. "Though, seriously, there are some people who *do* let their RIDEs boss them around. I think they're weird, myself, but then I'm a transgendered bisexual who rides an elk, so who am I to judge anyone else?"

"You'll be joining them soon, so you can find out for yourself!" Yvonne said.

"Will not!" Rufia growled.

"You *will* be mine," Yvonne cackled. "Oh yes, you *will* be mine."

I laughed out loud. They both looked quizzically at me, then chuckled a bit themselves. "I guess we are kind of funny, aren't we?" Rufia grinned. "Yeah, if it came right down to it, I suppose I wouldn't *really* have a problem taking orders from Yvonne. God knows she bosses me around half the time already."

"You *need* a keeper," Yvonne said. "Without me I don't think you'd even be able to find a matched pair of socks in the mornings."

"That's why I buy them all the same color!" Rufia insisted.

"I don't exactly have any money myself," I said. "If I did, I'd love to hire you. I think I need a good native guide myself. I've got Fiona, of course, but if she can't even trust her own mind..."

“Hey, I’d be happy to guide you anywhere you wanted to for free, hon!” Rufia said cheerfully.

“As long as there was a bed at the end of it,” Yvonne added.

I shook my head. “Noooo thanks. I still don’t want to think about that sort of thing for a while.”

“Hey, you still don’t have a place to stay, right?” Rufia said. “I’ve got a spare room in my pad. Why don’t you come stay with me for a while, just ‘til you’re back on your feet?”

I blinked at that. “Seriously? I don’t want to sleep with you, so you’re inviting me to live with you?”

Rufia raised her hands. “Hey. I may flirt, I may tease, but it’s all in fun. I’ll respect your boundaries. No pressure.” She grinned. “Besides, those ‘Is A Fox’ specials like yours are pretty capable little machines. *Very* good sensor package. If you want to partner up with me for a while—in the *business* sense, not the other way!—we could do some freelancing together and pick up some living cash for you while you learn ‘bout the world. I’d cut you in 70-30...”

“Ruuuuufia...” Yvonne said.

“60-40?” Rufia tried. The elk shook her head.

“All right, all right, 50-50.” Rufia grinned. “How ‘bout it? You got anything better to do?”

I thought about that. Apart from the passes Rufia kept making, it sounded like a reasonable offer. And I got the sense she could be trusted to keep her distance.

Furthermore, if the appeal of teaming up was Fiona’s equipment, which she already knew how to operate for herself, that meant I could skate along on her abilities

until I learned better for myself. “Huh. Well, we could give it a shot, anyway. If nothing else, it’ll be something to do.”

“Great! Put ‘er there!” And Rufia attempted to crush my hand again.

As she was finishing, Rhianna poked her head in from the workshop. “All right, we’re all done in here. Come on in and we’ll wake her back up again.”

As we trouped back in, Rochelle nodded to me, then tapped a big red button on a hardlight display screen in front of her. Fiona’s eyes flickered to life, followed by her furry pelt, and she raised herself to all fours atop the repair cradle. “The fetter is in place,” she said. “So’s a big headache, but I ‘spect that’ll pass. Thank ye kindly.”

She jumped down to the floor, tail swishing. “I ‘spect ye were after puttin’ monitorin’ hardware in me while I was down. Ah yes...I can detect some’v it. And there’ll be other that I’ll never find, right? Good.” Her bushy tail swished happily.

“You’re remarkably happy about being fitted out for other people to be able to spy on you at all times,” I remarked.

“I’m after hopin’ that if they know I’m bein’ watched, my lords an’ masters in Nextus Intel won’t be tryin’ t’ pull anything.”

“Do you think they’re watching us through you even now?” I wondered.

“I didn’t find anything on the scan suggesting they should be,” Rochelle said. “Of course, that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Spy hardware, duh. But I wouldn’t think they’d want to risk something that

transmitted detectably. Any time bombs set to go off will probably be triggered by events, not remote control.”

“And isn’t *that* just a lovely thought,” Fiona muttered. “Either way, Uncia just directed me to a page on ZharusLeaks hostin’ what claims to be an official Nextus Intel doc on the intel RIDE program. The document’s naming scheme and file codes are in the right format for NIA, and the contents jive with what ye told me.” She sighed. “I’m compromised from the inside. I could be a liability to ye all. So thanks for bein’ after keepin’ me ‘round, rather than shutting me down.”

“That’s what we do,” Rhianna said. “You’re a person, and people are worth the risks.”

“Fiona, Rufia’s made me an offer I’m thinking of taking her up on, if you think it might be a good idea.” I briefly explained Rufia’s proposal of a freelance partnership.

“Well, sure an’ it’s a good idea!” Fiona said delightedly. “It’ll be makin’ ye a little money, lettin’ me be useful, havin’ Rufia and Yvonne near t’ keep an eye on me, and keepin’ me away from the garage, which is seemin’ more an’ more likely as what they’re wantin’ me to be spyin’ on. Some time out in the desert strikes me as just what the doctor ordered.”

“Then it’s settled!” Rufia said. “Grab your things and meet us out back. We’ll show you to our bachelorette pad.”

“Hope Fiona’s got good GPS,” Rhianna murmured. “You’ll need it to find your way through her living room.”

Rufia waggled her elk ears. “Hey! I heard that!”

“Well, it’s true!” Rhianna said.

“Never said it wasn’t!” Rufia said. “Anyway, see you

soon!” She and Yvonne headed out the way we’d come in.

“Well, greats-grandpa, it’s been cool meeting you,” Rochelle said. “Drop by the garage any time.”

“Yeah,” Rhianna said. “After you feel like you’re on your feet again, I’ll be happy to continue your training in RIDE tech, if you’re still interested.”

“It could come in handy, yeah,” I said. “But right now, I think I want to see the world a little more. And going on a job with Rufia sounds like just the way to do it.”

“We’ll be keeping an eye on things for you,” Kaylee said.

“And by ‘things,’ we mean Fiona!” Uncia added. Kaylee swatted her with a paw.

“Thanks ever so,” Fiona said dryly.

“You’re welcome!” Uncia replied.

We headed back out of the garage. I didn’t really have a lot of “things” to gather—my old clothes were still being laundered, and Rhianna promised she’d send them along to Rufia’s place when they were done. In the meantime, she made up a small bundle of her old clothes “to get me started,” which I could keep or send back when I had some of my own.

Rufia was waiting outside on a great big skimmer cycle covered with panniers and other storage compartments, which had to be Yvonne’s alternate form. Fiona converted to join her, and I climbed aboard. “This is gonna be awesome!” Rufia said happily. “Two hot chicks against the world!”

“I don’t know if I’m ready to be a hot chick yet,” I said.

“It’s not a matter of being ready or not, you just are one!” she said. “But you’ll get used to it, sooner or later.

It's just part of the adventure."

I actually hoped she was right. Goodness knows I had enough on my plate to deal with, all at once. The sooner I could get over any part of it, the less I'd have to deal with from then on. "Then let's get a move on," I said.

"See if you can keep up! Giddyap, elkie!" Rufia twisted the throttle and zoomed away, and Fiona and I quickly followed.

Maybe this wasn't all that I'd hoped for in a new life when I'd gone into cryosleep what was, for me, barely a week before. But it was the new life I had, and I had to make the best of it. Even if everything about my life *had* been turned topsy-turvy, at least I had friends, and even relatives (sort of).

Could a woman ask for any more than that?