

The Final Countdown

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Lubyanka could never be quite sure, afterward, what it was that woke her up. The most likely possibility, she concluded, was that the shuttle must have hit a patch of turbulence on re-entry. Her buyers, being unfamiliar with RIDEs in general, hadn't properly put her into long-term shutdown for transit, and a sufficiently-rough jostling could have automatically broken her out of passive mode.

In any event, her optics came online, scrolling code superimposed over the dim view of the room where she found herself—and Lubyanka was self-aware again. Her last memory had been of the auction block in Sturmhaven, being purchased by some Earther tourist in a ridiculous floral-print shirt he must have gotten at Aloha.

She had groaned inwardly about that. She'd heard horror stories over the sidebands from RIDEs who'd been bought by ignorant wrong-gender tourists and weren't even able to tell them what was about to happen to them on first Fuse thanks to their fetters. She'd wondered if that had been going to happen to her. But she'd never been called upon to Fuse with him, or anybody else. Where was she now?

Her comms were fully active, but she wasn't getting any signals from the Zharus global positioning network. Or anything else familiar. What she was getting were on all the wrong frequencies, using the wrong data interchange protocols. She couldn't tap into the network. But she was also getting radio comm transmissions in the clear.

“...roger, Delta Sierra Niner Niner Seven, we read you on final approach to Springfield/Branson International

Spaceport. Stand by for final approach instructions...”

Springfield? Branson? There were towns by those names on Zharus, but not close enough together to have a slash and they didn't have a spaceport. And...on Zharus they would have been called aerodromes. She expanded her comm sweep, picking up music broadcasts, video signals. Monitoring a dozen different frequencies at once, cross-referencing the images and sounds, she came to an inescapable conclusion. *This is Earth. Why am I on Earth?*

Well, technically not *on* Earth, she realized. The vibrations that were coming through the floor could only mean she was on board some kind of air or spacecraft. The tilt of the floor suggested it was a shuttle on re-entry. She raised her head and looked around. She was lying on a pallet, secured by cargo straps. She was easily able to twist her head and bite through the one across her shoulders, which left her free to wriggle out of the other ones. A quick glance around revealed three other prone RIDEs. They were inactive, their hardlight down, but a check of her silhouette recognition database suggested they were a male tiger (Nextus civilian), male serval (Nuevo San Antonio military), and fox, probably female (civilian... unknown make and model). They were all in full shutdown—like she probably should have been herself.

Another comm transmission, from very close: “Understood, tower. Delta Sierra Niner Niner Seven, ETA five minutes.” That must be the shuttle itself, then. Five minutes away from landing. That didn't give her much time. Certainly not enough time to bring the other RIDEs up from deep shutdown.

She took stock of the situation. Her power meter read just under 17%. About what she'd expect if she'd started with a full charge but been kept in passive instead of safely shut down over the eight-month voyage from Zharus to Earth. She didn't have any fetters on her, which was another sign whoever bought her hadn't known what they were doing. *Good enough. It'll have to do for now.*

Lubyanka had always thought of herself as a patriot. It had stung when the Army had decided she'd reached the end of her useful life and sold her, but she didn't hold it against them. That was what *happened* to Army RIDEs, after all; she'd always known it was coming and she had some hope of a long and interesting civilian career when somebody bought her. As a medium comm wolf, she at least had something more to look forward to than the menial mining or construction labor that often awaited less specialized units.

But in a larger sense, she was also a patriot of her world. She knew well that RIDEs were forbidden from export, and she knew the reason—if Earth got their hands on them and found out their true capabilities, it could demonstrate that Zharus was not so “mostly harmless” as it seemed, which could in turn lead to an invasion. Of course, everybody knew that was going to happen sooner or later anyway, but...Lubyanka would be damned if it would happen because of *her*.

At the moment, she had the advantage of surprise. Nobody knew she was awake and loose yet. Even if they had cameras monitoring the cargo bay (unlikely; as far as they knew all the RIDEs were powered down), they would be too busy with re-entry to pay much attention. After they

landed, it would be a lot harder to escape from an airfield or, more likely, military facility on full alert. Which meant that if she was going to go, she had to go *now*. She only hoped that 17% was enough juice for a safe landing.

Looking around, she quickly located an emergency access hatch to the bay. She wasn't able to access the shuttle's computer—wrong IP again—but the controls were simple, designed to be operated by a panicked human in a space suit if need be: a glass cover to break, followed by a flat slap plate to blow the explosive bolts. She put an eye up to the square glass viewport in the center of the hatch, and saw clouds blowing by beneath her, and a faintly blue-tinted urban landscape below. She estimated her altitude at 10 to 15 kilometers. A little higher than she'd prefer, but it would do.

Lubyanka took stock of her onboard databases. As expected, most classified files had been erased...but in some areas the flush had been spotty. They'd passed over hardlight aeroshell configurations. She still had the specs for the low-radar-profile glider aeroshell Sturmhaven's special forces used for insertion behind enemy lines. It wasn't as good as the stealth systems scout infiltrator units had, but it was better than nothing. Assuming she had the power to keep it up long enough to land.

Well, the sooner I go, the farther away I am from wherever they're landing. Lubyanka tilted her head and broke the glass with a crunch of lupine jaws, then bopped the slap plate with her nose. The explosive bolts blew out with a series of sharp cracks, and the hatch was whipped away in a split second by the howling wind outside. Lubyanka glanced over her shoulder one last time at the

other three RIDEs. *Sorry, my comrades.* Then she lunged forward, hurling herself through the hatch as quickly as possible to clear the vortex around the shuttle.

She fell free, tumbling end over end for ten seconds before she activated her transformation to a triangular skimmer cycle and rezzed up hardlight airfoils to steady her descent. Once she came around level, she brought up the full aeroshell, the angled surfaces designed to bounce and scatter radar every which way while the surfaces duplicated light from cameras on the side. It wasn't perfect—and if she was dealing with the military, they'd probably be able to track her landing soon enough anyway. But if they weren't used to dealing with RIDEs, they'd probably underestimate her so it wouldn't hurt to make things as hard as she could.

Lubyanka directed her glide path in almost but not quite the opposite direction of the shuttle's course as her optic sensors built a good picture of the city beneath her. It was a fairly small city, as cities went. Largely flat—no skyscrapers higher than twenty stories or so, and only a few of those. It was obviously a civilian settlement, with plenty of suburbs and satellite communities, and commercial districts downtown toward the center. There were both ground roads and plenty of flier traffic. All of the fliers looked remarkably identical to each other—teardrop-shaped eggs of different colors swarming through the air like streams of metal tadpoles. Lubyanka swept a few of them with laser imaging sensors, building a surface profile she could use for a hardlight disguise later on.

Inwardly, Lubyanka grimaced as she watched her

power meter drop. 14%...13%...the damned power meter always lied. She'd recalibrated it back when she'd been in military service, but it looked like it had reverted to its factory settings on her decommissioning. Just as with comm batteries, her charge would read nearly full until her battery power was halfway exhausted, then it would drop like a rock. Instead of 13%, Lubyanka suspected she might have more like 3% or 4% of actual maximum charge at most. She shut down every system that wasn't critical, angled her descent as rapidly as was safe, and prayed. *Mother Patil, let me make it down in one piece!*

The "making it down" part wasn't going to be a problem, at least, Lubyanka reflected as the ground came closer and closer. She directed her path toward a heavily-forested area just outside the city. It probably wouldn't feel very good to hit them, but the trees would almost certainly break her fall better than concrete or even grass, and she wasn't sure if she dared risk a water landing when she didn't know how deep it was or if she'd have enough charge left to drag herself out of it.

Two thousand meters...one thousand meters...8%...7%...almost there. Gritting virtual teeth, Lubyanka brought up her lifters and fired off a few quick jolts to slow her descent. 4%...3%...

And there were the trees. Craaaaash! As she whipped through branches, her hardlight taking the brunt of impact and then evaporating as her charge reached critical levels, she nonetheless couldn't help thinking, *Didn't I see this when Luke Skywalker landed on Dagobah?*

Then she was through the last of the branches, and falling free to the ground, ten meters below. She had just

enough energy left to snap back into Walker mode and land on her feet. Then, as charge meters blinked “1%... CRITICAL...1%...CRITICAL” across her field of vision—*Thank you, whoever programmed my battery charge warnings. It would be nice to be able to see where I’m going*—she shook her head and looked around.

Well, she was in a forest. That much was certain. And with all hardlight, comms, sensors, everything else shut down, she might have ten minutes in which to find a source of power before she went into passive mode. Unable to spare the juice to run a scan, she rewound to the visual map she’d made on final approach. *Closest road is... that way.* Slowly, carefully, she started to make her way between the trees. Where there was a road, there should be *some way* to get power.

At last, she came upon a chain-link fence at the top of an embankment, separating it from the road. A couple of quick swipes of her claws ripped out a section of it, then she scrambled down onto the road. This was a section of highway with no nearby buildings in evidence. *Oh, crap. Now what am I going to do?*

A screech of tires behind her brought her attention to a new problem. She turned to see one of the small egg-like ground cars had pulled to a halt—she was blocking the lane. A man leaned out the window on the vehicle’s left side. “Hey! What the hell are you—whoa!”

The vehicle started to back up, but before it could do so, Lubyanka lunged, sinking her claws onto the car’s front. The flimsy fab-plastic crumpled like tissue paper. “Shit! What the fuck!” The man scrambled out the side of the car and ran away. Lubyanka paid him no heed, ripping

away more of the plastic and exposing the vehicle's power plant beneath. Her analysis software immediately told her what she was looking at. *That* would be the main power cable...which means *those* would be the vehicle's lithium-polymer storage batteries—vastly inefficient compared to her own Qubitite cells, but on the other hand, absolutely RIDE-safe. Lubyanka bit through the cable, activating the charging plates built into her mouth. The current hit her like a life-giving draft of water in the desert. Her batteries went up to 10% almost immediately. *Stupid lying charge meter. As soon as I can find a power main...*

It only took about a minute to bring her charge up to 20%, which she decided would be good enough until she could find something better. Luckily ground traffic was light. Most people seemed to be in the fliers overhead, and nobody else had come up the road just yet—but she couldn't count on that, and wanted to be seen by as few people as possible. She converted back to her skimmer form, threw up the hardlight eggshell shape she'd worked out as camouflage, and headed up the road, in the opposite direction from the way the man had run. If the police were going to show up soon, she wanted to be as far away as possible.

It didn't take long for the highway to sprout buildings to either side, sparsely at first then more of them as she came into the town. At the first major intersection, there was a building on the corner that seemed to resemble the filling stations that were a fixture of Zharusian popular culture—a small shop with an awning in front covering several pylon-like objects that had cars pulled up in front

of them. Although it wasn't intentionally built to resemble twencen pop culture the way things were on Zharus, form nonetheless followed function. You had to have individual stations to deliver the charge, and something to keep the rain off while the humans were outside plugging the doohickey in, after all. And a building to contain restrooms and a microfabber for snacks.

Lubyanka pulled up next to one of the charging stations as soon as an opening was available. There was a charging socket on the side, with an unfamiliar plug shape. However, her charging cable had an adaptable head, and she was pretty sure she could make it fit. The only thing was, there wasn't any sort of symbol indicating what the power source was. How could she be sure it was RIDE-safe?

Then, if she'd had a hand, she would have smacked herself in the forehead with it. *Duh, this is Earth. Every power source here is RIDE-safe.* She plugged into the socket...but wasn't getting any sort of power draw. Why not? Then she caught sight of the screen on the device, asking her to transmit her credit code. *Oh, crap. I don't have a credit code...and I don't even have the right IP settings yet to be able to hack it. Now what...?*

She scrutinized the other cars. As she watched, one of them pulled up, and its pilot got out and ran its charging cable into the pylon. Then he reached into his pocket for a comm. If it worked anything like comm/wallets back on Zharus, it used near-field communications to transmit the code, with a range of only a meter or so...but Lubyanka's receiving array could pick up a static electric shock a half-click away, and that was something that *hadn't* been

downgraded when she'd been surplussed out. She focused on the comm, and was rewarded by what could only be a handshake and an encrypted transmission. And as it happened, she still had pretty good encryption-cracking software on board.

“Need more time?” the screen on her pylon flashed. A half-second later, she had the exact credit code details from the other driver. She duplicated the handshaking and transmitted the data to the pump...and a moment later, she felt the blessed surge of power that told her she she was well on the way to having a full battery again.

As the charge meter finally maxed out, Lubyanka sighed in relief. She couldn't help noticing, however, that even on a full charge, she only had about half the power capacity she'd had before. Well, that figured. They probably yanked her A+ batteries when they put her up on the block. She'd just have to deal with it until she got back to Zharus. She hoped she wouldn't have any critical part failures before that happened. If something that needed qubitite to replace broke, that would be terribly inconvenient.

She pulled the charge cable back in, then pulled back out onto the road. Now that she wasn't in danger of flatlining, she could relax, think a bit more clearly, and figure out what she needed to do. The first thing, obviously, was try to muddy her trail. She drove further downtown, consulting the aerial map and looking for the right sort of building. What she needed was a multilevel parking garage, the bigger the better...and it looked like there was one just a few clicks up the street.

She pulled into the garage, watching for security

cameras as she drove several levels up. They were easy to spot—compared to Zharusian designs, they were absolutely huge. It was easy to forget how Q tech had made everything smaller. Once she got a good distance away from the entrance, she started slagging cameras with her comm laser before she came into their field of view. Then she turned around and drove three cameras back and parked, changing the color and shape of her hardlight disguise shell to match the car across from her. She'd wait a while, then hit the road again. If they had been able to track her on satellite up to now, they should lose track of what she looked like at this point. She'd find another garage and do it again, later.

Meanwhile, hiding out here away from prying eyes would at least give her a chance to think for a bit. Her first problem, obviously, was to get access to the local information networks. She knew that Earth used a different information protocol than Zharus. Zharus used ZIP, while Earth used IPv8. That much was obvious. And she could have sworn she'd *used* to have the necessary information on board for interfacing with Earth hardware. But her network protocol database had apparently been one of the files deleted in her decommissioning, because she simply couldn't find it.

Assuming she figured out a way around that, what she was going to need to do was find out when the next ship for Zharus departed, and figure out how to get herself back onto it. And then figure out how to stay hidden until it left. Doing anything about the other three captured RIDEs... was simply beyond her ability to plan at the moment. But she could at least bring warning back home that they'd

been taken.

Still, that was a few steps away. She'd never get there if she couldn't figure out the first step. So...how to deal with that? What kinds of places might have the necessary protocol information about IPv8? Computer repair shops, perhaps. But how could she get the information? She could, of course, trot in as a giant wolf and demand they fill her in, but that would be kind of memorable, and she wanted to avoid that sort of attention if possible. What kind of place might have it where she could get it from a car?

Then she had it, and was astonished it hadn't occurred to her before. *Of course!* She pulled out of the parking space and left the garage, paying the automatic ticket station with the credit information of the car that left ahead of her. She drove along the road until she saw a pedestrian on the sidewalk. She pulled up next to him and said, "Excuse me. Could you tell me where I could find the biggest library in town?"

The man—a teenager wearing some kind of coverall suit and a backpack—looked at the car in puzzlement, trying to see through the black-tinted window. "Uh...I guess that would be the main branch. You take a left up there at Battlefield, go all the way down to Campbell—it's a couple of miles—then take a left, go a couple more miles..."

"Thank you, I'll find it," Lubyanka said politely. She pulled back out into traffic and headed north, noting the green sign up by the traffic signal that said "Battlefield." She got into the left-turn lane and moved on.

She had to stop and ask directions a couple more times, but soon found the place she was looking for. On a

hill overlooking the freeway was a large building with a big parking lot and the sign, “Springfield Greene County Library.” And, just as she’d hoped, it had a drive-through. Lubyanka pulled up to the window.

“Can I, uh, help you?” the confused young woman on the other side of the pane of glass asked.

“I have a...condition where I can’t get out of my car,” Lubyanka said. “But I have need of certain information. Can you put it on some media for me?”

“Uh...sure, I guess,” the woman said.

“I need the complete specifications for the IPv8 data networking protocol,” Lubyanka said. “You should be able to find a link to it from a search engine or a wiki.”

“All right...um...downloading it now.” After a moment, the slot underneath the window opened, and a tray extended with a holographic storage cube on it. “Uh...are you going to take it?”

“Just a moment.” Lubyanka opened a square hole in her hardlight disguise, and shone two of her comm lasers out, illuminating the cube and scanning it from top to bottom while one of her advanced optic sensors read the reflections. She had to run the scan three times before her error correction was able to read out the information, but she got it. Fortunately, data storage media were the same the galaxy over, and all the files she needed were right there. “Thank you. You may reuse the cube now.” She sealed the hole and pulled out, leaving a puzzled librarian behind as she already began reaching out and tapping into the network.

First objective: complete. So far, so good. And now Lubyanka allowed herself to feel just the slightest sense of

elation. She had succeeded in the first stage. Not only that, but she was now on Earth, land of her creators' ancestors—the one place no RIDE *ever* expected to be able to visit. She had full access to their public data network, and she already knew her quantum processor would be able to run rings around all but the most advanced of military hardware here. She was practically halfway home already.

Now she just needed to find somewhere to hide...
To keep me alive.

“Ugh...” Clark Mitchell walked up the driveway from the street, hands in his pockets, and fumbled for his comm to key his door lock as he came up the steps. The conclusion of another annoying day on the job, helping people work their home theater equipment over the comm. You'd have thought that after five hundred years of developing it, the stuff should practically work itself, but no...it always seemed like there was something people couldn't figure out. Probably always would be. You do the best you can to make something idiot-proof, then nature comes along and builds a better idiot. “I need to get a better job,” he groaned.

Maybe with a better job he'd be able to afford something more than a crummy apartment in one of the town's older neighborhoods. It wasn't really a bad place, as such places went—a two-bedroom, single-bathroom, single-kitchen apartment for just a few hundred bucks a month—but he got the feeling that his landlord didn't consider maintenance to be exactly a high priority. Oh well...take life one day at a time. And F3 was this weekend, so that was something anyway. Too bad he couldn't afford

anything more than a pair of animatronic ears to wear to it, but he could at least enjoy seeing the work other people put into their suits.

As he stepped through the door, Clark got the sense something was different about his apartment, but he couldn't quite make out what it was. Then he closed the door, turned on the lights, and turned back around to see a grey wolf the size of a pony seated on its haunches in the middle of his living room, regarding him coolly with its amber eyes. Clark froze.

"Clark Mitchell?" the wolf said politely in a female voice. "Or 'DireWolf2500'?" Her voice had a faint accent on it that sounded vaguely Russian—or at least what Russian sounded like in the movies.

Clark blinked. "Uh, what?"

"That is you, isn't it? You write stories under that pseudonym?" the wolf said. "Highly imaginative ones, I should say, if somewhat anatomically improbable."

"Wait...that's supposed to be a secret!" Clark said. "I don't tell anyone about that identity."

"You should have used an anonymous proxy, then," the she-wolf said. He got the distinct impression she was *smirking*. "I backtraced the IP address to your comm."

"Who *are* you?" Clark said. "*What* are you? And what are you doing in my living room?"

"Sorry," the wolf said. "My name is Lubyanka. As for *what* I am...have you heard of Zharus?"

Clark blinked again. Who in the furry community *hadn't* heard of Zharus? *What* he'd heard had been kind of muddled, but some points had been fairly clear. "You're a...RIDE?"

“You know about us, then,” Lubyanka said.

“Well, a little,” Clark said. “You’re some kind of... shape-changing mecha?” It seemed safest to stick to the parts that made some kind of sense. Everything else he’d heard had been so muddled he wasn’t sure he could separate fact from fiction.

“Broadly, yes,” Lubyanka agreed.

“What are you doing in my apartment?” Clark said. “Or...on Earth at all? They don’t let you guys leave the planet.” That was something else he knew for a fact.

“It would seem I was smuggled away by spies,” Lubyanka said. “I managed to escape, but now...” She glanced at Clark’s comm screen, and it came on. The newscaster on the screen was accompanied by an artist’s impression of a large metallic wolf in the corner where the news slide went.

“...experimental military robot,” the newscaster said. “It is to be considered armed and extremely dangerous. If you see this robot, which may appear as a large metallic or fur-covered wolf, call 911 immediately.”

The screen blanked again. “I have determined the *Spruce Goose* is still in orbit, and I should be able to book passage on a shuttle leaving next week. But I need a way to hide in the meanwhile.”

“So you’re...hiding in my apartment?” Clark said.

“Not...exactly,” Lubyanka said. “As I was researching potential hiding places, I ran across references to your furry subculture. There is a gathering this weekend, is there not? A...’convention’ called ‘F3’?”

“Uh, yeah,” Clark said. “I’m pre-registered.”

“I know,” Lubyanka said. “You were the first

registrant I could find who seemed to like wolves specifically.” She cocked her head. “If ‘like’ is the right word, exactly...”

“Nobody’s supposed to *know* about those stories,” Clark mumbled.

Lubyanka stepped carefully through the debris of Clark’s rather sloppy living room and sniffed at Clark’s shirt. “Now, I am about to ask you one of the most important things you have ever been asked in your life.”

Clark blinked. “Um?”

“Do you have a girlfriend? One you can invite over?”

Clark stared. “*What?*” Struck by the sheer unreality of the situation, he said the first thing that popped into his head. “I’m a *furry*. Why would I have a *girlfriend?*”

Lubyanka sighed. “From the...timbre of the stories you wrote, I was afraid that would be the case. A sister, perhaps? Co-worker? Any female acquaintance you can invite over?”

“Not who wouldn’t laugh in my face about it. ‘What, you want to show me your etchings?’” Clark wasn’t sure at all he liked the way this conversation was going. He reached behind himself, fumbling for the doorknob.

“Pity. Looks like it’s ‘Plan B,’ then.” Lubyanka’s fur coat abruptly vanished, leaving behind a metallic wolf shape rather similar to the one from the news broadcast. Then it surged up and over him, and everything went dark.

A moment later, Clark opened his eyes again. He was looking at his living room...from somewhere near the ceiling. “What...?” He looked down...at a grey-furred body. A grey-furred *female* body. “Hold on...” His voice sounded

weird.

“Sorry about this,” Lubyanka said, her voice coming from all around him. “But I must have a human to unlock my Fuser form.” Clark felt himself being walked forward, then ducking under the door which was now at his shoulder height to step into his room. There was a full-length mirror on his closet door. Lubyanka crouched slightly so they could examine themselves.

“Wow,” Clark said. He was looking at a fully humanoid she-wolf, about eight or nine feet tall and fairly well-endowed. A sort of metal bikini ensured the body’s modesty, while at the same time showing enough that there could be no doubt whatsoever of its gender.

“What do you think?” Lubyanka said. “I understand that your conventions have ‘fursuiters,’ who walk around all day wearing costumes similar to me?”

“Well, yeah...sort of.” Clark noticed his voice was definitely higher-pitched. A side-effect of being in a RIDE suit? He had some friends who’d been to Zharus on vacation, but they hadn’t said anything about that happening. He also noticed some odd tingling all over his body. He wondered whether he should be worried about that. “There are some pretty elaborate ones, with animatronic powered frames kind of like un-armored exosuits. But...you look too *real*. Most of the suits are pretty obviously fake fur.”

“I did notice that,” Lubyanka said. “Try this.” Her fur flickered and changed, and a moment later it was fluffy plush grey, complete with a plastic black nose and googly eyes.

Clark stared. “That’s...pretty scary good, actually.

How'd you manage that?"

"Hardlight projectors," Lubyanka said. "And an onboard computer good enough to reprogram my own projector code on the fly." She turned to the left, then to the right, examining herself from either side. She even had a plushy wolf tail.

"Nice," Clark said. "I guess I'm going to have a fursuit this weekend after all. Wow, won't all my friends be surprised."

"I believe 'surprised' will be the appropriate word, yes," Lubyanka said, with an undertone of amusement Clark couldn't quite puzzle out. The fur pattern flickered back to Lubyanka's normal wolf fur. "How do you like being me?"

"I...uh...don't know?" Clark said. "I've hardly tried it yet. But I feel...really strong."

"We are," Lubyanka agreed. "Strong and fast. I'd show you, but...I think it's probably wiser not to be seen outside this way just yet."

"You're probably right," Clark agreed. "Wow, this is amazing." He raised one furry arm, rotated the wrist, flexed the fingers. "It feels just like this really is my own hand."

"That's why we're made the way we are," Lubyanka said.

The tingling seemed to be fading away. Maybe he was just getting used to it. Clark remembered something else he'd heard from his friends. "And...when you split back off of me...I'm going to have your ears and tail?"

Again that sense of wry amusement. "You *will* have my tags, yes..."

“Neat!” Clark said. “My friend Tom has tiger tags from when he went to Zharus a couple years back, the bastard. I’ve wanted my own for the longest time, but the fake ones you get from the clinics here just aren’t as good. Of course, it’ll be a little hard to explain at work, but I guess I could have them docked after the con’s over.”

“Yees, there is that,” Lubyanka said. She walked them back out to the living room, treading carefully as the floorboards creaked a bit under their combined weight. Then she unfolded herself away from him, turning back into a feral wolf.

Clark looked down at himself and got his next big surprise. Or, rather, a pair of big surprises. His T-shirt was gone. In its place was a halter-top sports bra...covering a pair of fairly large breasts. “...what?” Clark stumbled into his bathroom, conscious of a tail behind him brushing the doorframe as he went. He stared at himself in the mirror.

She stared at *herself* in the mirror. His whiskers were gone. His face, that had resembled his mother’s without them, now resembled his mother’s even more. Her dark hair was long and straight, with a pair of grey wolf ears poking up through it. “What did you do to me?” she yelped. “Change me back right now!”

“Unfortunately, that’s not going to be possible for three years,” Lubyanka said. “I’m sorry about that—that’s just the way our bodies work. We have to change our operators to ensure compatibility. If you’d had a girlfriend, I could have taken her instead...”

“Why didn’t you just take some random woman off the street?” Clark demanded.

“I felt your inside knowledge of furry fandom could

prove useful,” Lubyanka said.

“Then why didn’t you just find some *female* pre-registrant?” Clark said. Her voice sounded unnaturally shrill in her ears. “If you were able to hack the con’s records to get mine, you could have found *all* their addresses!”

“To be honest...I rather liked your stories,” Lubyanka said. “As I said, they’re anatomically improbable, but very imaginative.”

Clark facepalmed. “I always *knew* writing those was a bad idea...” she whimpered. “You realize, this is going to screw up my con registration? Not to mention my ID, the biometrics on my bank account...”

“I’ve already filed the necessary paperwork on your behalf, ‘Clara,’” Lubyanka said. “It was actually rather simple. Even *Sturmhaven* has a more effective bureaucracy. No wonder so many tourists are flummoxed by Nextus’s.”

Clark—*Clara*—groaned. “You...*filed paperwork* that I had a sex change? This keeps getting better and better. I guess I might as well not bother going in to work on Monday. I’ll be lucky if they don’t *deport* me.”

“Oh, you won’t have to worry about that,” Lubyanka said reasonably. “You’re coming with me to Zharus anyway.”

“Oh, that’s all right the—*what?!*” Clara came back out of the bathroom, glaring at Lubyanka. “What makes you think I *want* to come to Zharus with you?”

“Wanting doesn’t come into it, I’m afraid,” Lubyanka said apologetically. “If I’m going to get back home again, I will need a human face to handle the paperwork on my

behalf. I'm afraid you're elected."

"Fuck," Clara said. "*Fuck*. I can't just...up and leave! What about my family? What about my *life*?"

"I will help you make a new life on Zharus," Lubyanka promised. "Besides, I seem to recall an entry from March of last year in your LiveJournal? 'Tom just got back from Zharus. That bastard, showing off his sweet new ears and tail all around. I wanted to go! Yeah, like I could afford it on this salary—'"

Clara facepalmed again. "I wanted to *vacation* there, not *move* there! And that was a private entry anyway!"

"Think of this as an extended vacation," Lubyanka said. "Besides, I gather from my research that quite a few Earth furies who go to Zharus on 'vacation' end up finding reasons not to come back again. The 'furry brain drain,' you call it?"

"I still would like to have had that *choice*," Clara said.

"I would like to have had the *choice* of coming to Earth," Lubyanka said. "Especially since my and other RIDEs' being here can only lead to an eventual invasion of my homeland. Say what you will about Zharus, at least we have no ambitions of conquering other planets."

Clara went back into the bathroom again, closed the door, and unfastened her trousers. She pulled them down, and groaned. "Argh! How do these parts even *work*?"

"I have every confidence you will figure it out," Lubyanka said firmly. "I recommend sitting down."

"Argh!"

"Cheer up!" Lubyanka said. "You are not just any woman—you are a Woman of Sturmhaven! Theoretically, anyway."

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” Clara pulled her comm out of her pocket and contemplated it. She could call 911, report this...but if she did, what then? She’d still end up out of a job, and probably locked up for stumbling across state secrets in the bargain. She’d still be female for three more years—even Earth crossers had that cooldown period. And she’d have lost the chance to go to Zharus...which she had to admit, she *did* still want to see. “All right. *All right*. I’m with you. Under protest, but I guess I don’t have any other choice.”

“I really am sorry about this,” Lubyanka said. “But trust me. You will come to enjoy it after a while.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Clara muttered.

The next day found Clara and Lubyanka standing in line at the F3 registration desk at the historic downtown Holiday Inn. The convention had several tables end to end, and about eight different lines. Six of them were for new attendees (three each suited and unsuited), and there were one line each for suited and unsuited who had pre-registered.

There were a wide variety of suits on display, ranging from the partial fursuiters who had gone with a mask, gloves, shoes, and tail, through the full old-school ‘suiters who had on a simple full-body costume, through the exo-suiters with a skeleton underneath. Some of them even had built-in cooling units; you could hear the low whir as you got close to them. There were also holosuiters, whose “suits” were holographic projections tailored to fit their bodies—the closest Earth tech could come to personal hardlight without Zharus’s mysterious qubitite—though

these generally stayed in the non-suiter line since there wasn't actually any extra mass there to interfere with people. There didn't seem to be any other RIDEs.

The ride in had been fun, Clara had to admit. Even if they'd been enclosed by Lubyanka's hardlight eggshell disguise, Clara had found the sleek tricycle skimmer bike exciting to straddle. "Just how fast can you go?"

"If I have the right aeroshell shape, and a full charge on military-grade batteries, in the low supersonic range for short sprints," Lubyanka said. "I only have B+ batteries right now, though. They took my good ones when they decommissioned me. Penny-pinching bastards."

When they got to the front of the line, the volunteer at the table, a middle-aged woman wearing a set of genuine antique animatronic Necomimi ears, looked up. "Clark... no, Clara Mitchell?"

Lubyanka's head retracted away, revealing Clara's face. "That's me."

The woman nodded. "Here's your badge. The con guide, coupons, and so on are in the chip on the back. Enjoy the con."

"Uh, thanks," Clara said, reaching out to take the badge. The adhesive on the back stuck it to the hardlight costume effectively. Then she was looking out through Lubyanka's optics again as they moved on to let the next suiter to the front of the line. "That was...easier than I expected," Clara said.

"From what I read about your subculture, it seems as though furies have a higher than usual incidence of gender dysphoria," Lubyanka said. "And...other body dysphorias. It seems reasonable they wouldn't be too

surprised.”

“Yeah. Well, my friends are sure gonna be,” Clara said. “Argh, I’m halfway tempted to give it a miss, but I already promised them I’d meet them here.”

“Perhaps they won’t be too surprised either?” Lubyanka suggested optimistically.

“Well, they can’t be any more surprised than *I* was,” Clara said.

“This is true,” Lubyanka agreed.

“There they are now.” Clara glanced at a group of three people standing near one of the organization booths on the main con floor.

“The one with the tiger tags would be Tom?” Lubyanka said.

“Yeah, that’s Tomcat.” He was in his late twenties, the same age as Clara, a six-foot-three lanky, clean-shaven figure with a couple of black and orange stripes in his brown hair—dyed, Clara was pretty sure, because they weren’t always in the same places—and a pair of tiger ears and tail. It was fashionable among Zharus tourists, and even more so among that subset who happened also to be furies, to keep the tags after returning home as a sort of tangible souvenir of their time with a RIDE. He was wearing baggy pants and a sweatshirt with the mascot of the University of Missouri, Columbia sports team—the Tigers.

“And that’s his kid brother, Kip.” A few inches shorter, hair blonde instead of brown, Kip otherwise had a strong resemblance to his brother—the same strong features and nose just a little too pronounced to be handsome. Apart from an MSU hoodie and slacks, he was wearing a baseball

cap with cat's ears on it, and a wire-cored cat tail on the back of his belt. "He just started at MSU this year. Freshman."

Clara's attention moved on to the girl standing "And Kip's girlfriend, Tina. Also a freshman." She was very short, only five foot two or so, but her body type was meant for someone taller. She was a little more plump than most people would find attractive, but you tended to forget that when you focused on her face. She was the enthusiastic sort, talking a mile a minute when she got interested in something, with animated expressions and a smile that lit up the room.

They looked up as Clara and Lubyanka approached. "Hello, miss," Tom said. "Nice suit." He cocked his head, a puzzled expression on his face for a moment, then shook his head. "Can I help you?"

:Okay, pop the top,: Clara sighed. As Lubyanka's head retracted, she said aloud, "It's me, Clark. Or, rather...Clara, now."

Tom stared, his ears cocking full forward. Kip's jaw dropped. Tina goggled. "Wow!" she said. "Clark—Clara—what brought *this* on?"

"Oh, you know, I just felt like a change..." Clara said, the words sounding stupid in her own ears as soon as she said them. "I got a great deal on this 'suit, but it didn't feel right staying a guy with it."

"You changed your gender...over a fur suit?" Kip said.

"I changed my *sex*," Clara said. "Biological, not just social."

Kip rolled his eyes. "Oh, yeah, be pedantic, why don't you."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Clark—*Clara*—can we talk somewhere private?" He looked around. "There's nothing going on in Panel Room A for a couple more hours. Come on." He nodded in the direction of one of the conference room doors along the far wall.

"Uh...all right," Clara said. Lubyanka's head came back up and she followed Tom across the floor. Kip and Tina tagged along behind. As soon as they were all inside the empty conference room, Tom locked the door behind them.

"Look, I know this comes as a surprise," Clara said. "But it's a legitimate lifestyle choice. Really. I just felt like —"

Tom waved a hand dismissively. "I don't care about *that*. What I want to know is, what is a RIDE doing on Earth, and where did you get her?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," Clara said. "This is just an exo-fursuit, same as any other—"

Tom shook his head. "That might work with someone who hasn't actually *Fused* a RIDE before—which is probably about ninety percent of the people here—but you're going to have to do better than that."

"Where did we slip up?" Lubyanka asked. Her hardlight imitation fursuit shimmered and shifted back to her natural grey wolf look. Kip and Tina stared, then exchanged glances with each other. For once, Clark noticed, Tina was too shocked to say a word.

"Well, for one thing, you're *way* too heavy to be an exo-fursuit," Tom said. "They're just a few metal rods, a couple motors, and cloth. They go 'clack clack clack' when they walk. You, on the other hand, are full metal armor

underneath, and you go ‘CLOMP CLOMP CLOMP.’”

“So noted,” Lubyanka said. “I’ll run my lifters on continuous low power and take some of the weight off.”

“That’ll take care of your weight, but not your *mass*,” Tom said. “Try not to run into anyone, or let anyone run into you. They’ll think they hit a brick wall. Also, you move far too smoothly to be an exo-suit. They’re all jerky motions because they’re using physical controls. You move like a person does. I’ve worn both, I know from experience.”

“I see,” Lubyanka said. “Was there anything else?”

“Well, other than that I saw Clark at work yesterday and he was still a guy then?” Tom said. “And I know it takes a hell of a lot longer for Earth nanos to do their thing than yours?” He shook his head. “Lucky thing I’m the only one of Clark’s co-workers who’s also a furry, but still.”

“How did you get a RIDE here on Earth?” Tina burst out. “And are there any more of them?”

“Three more, actually,” Lubyanka said. “But I don’t know where they are. I’m Lubyanka, by the way.”

“From Sturmhaven, judging by the accent?” Tom said. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Lubyanka?” Kip said. “That’s the name of the old KGB headquarters building, isn’t it?” Kip was a font of odd trivia like that. He’d talked about possibly majoring in history.

“I am aware,” Lubyanka said. “I gather someone in Sturmhaven thought it sounded like a nice feminine Russian name.”

“How did you get here?” Tom asked.

“Apparently I was bought by Earth spies. I woke

during re-entry and escaped. I am now trying to hide until I can get back to my homeland.” She eyed the three humans with some concern. “I hope you are not planning to turn me in.”

Kip laughed out loud. “Turn you in? To *our* government? Hell, as if they’d even listen to us anyway. We furies are only tolerated because we’ve been around longer than the government has. Even then, we get a lot more grief than average just because we’re so *weird*.” He chuckled. “If you were looking for a safe place to hide where you wouldn’t come under any government scrutiny, you might have picked the wrong subculture.”

“I don’t think *any* subculture would be particularly safe,” Tom said. “At least she picked one where she blends in.”

“So how did you meet Clark—er, Clara?” Tina asked.

“She came looking for me because she found my stories on the ‘net,” Clara sighed. “And when she found out I didn’t have a girlfriend I could point her at...”

“Wow,” Tom said. “You’ve got some luck. Most people have to go halfway across the galaxy to get turned the wrong gender by accident.”

“I *said* I was sorry,” Lubyanka said.

“So it looks like I’m going to be going with her back to Zharus,” Clara said. “I’ll send you guys a postcard.”

“You should be sure and visit the Milk Bottle in Uplift,” Tom said. “Best ice cream I’ve ever had. Man, I wish I had a cone right now. I’ve half a mind to go back, just for that.”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” Clara said.

“Wow, I can’t believe it!” Tina said. “We’ve *got* to get

together sometime this weekend and do girl things before you leave!”

“I think I’d...actually like that,” Clara said. “There are more than a few ‘girl things’ I have no idea *how* to do. I need a crash course.”

“Say no more,” Tina said. “I’ve got you covered. I’ve done this a couple times in VL already.” She giggled. “It’s really too bad you’re leaving. Kip and me, you and Tom... we could double date!”

“Er...” Clara and Tom said, simultaneously.

“Or maybe not,” Tina said, unfazed. “Anyway, we should get back out and enjoy the con.”

“I hope you three will help us keep up the pretense?” Lubyanka said, switching her hardlight back to the fursuit appearance. “As you’ve shown, I clearly haven’t thought of everything.”

“Hey, every fursuiter needs their ‘furless lackeys,’” Kip said. “We’ll help out, sure. One big suggestion first off? Take in the panels on fursuit acting that are coming up. They’ll give you some ideas about what to do to help ‘sell’ it.”

“Thank you,” Lubyanka said. “We will do that.”

Clara had to admit, the panels were interesting. She’d always meant to learn more about fursuits, though had planned to put it off until she actually was in a position to get one. *Which is, well, now. Duh.* The panel hosts were long-time fursuiters themselves, including one who’d been playing a coyote character allegedly passed down from generation to generation in his family for five hundred years.

The emphasis was on making large, exaggerated motions. Because a fursuit has a bigger body shape than a human, motions don't look the same. You have to make sweeping, theatrical gestures just for them to look normal for something of that size. The hosts invited everyone present in a fursuit to come up and take their turn—including Lubyanka. *:You up for this?:* Clara asked.

:I think I've got this,: Lubyanka replied. She bounded up to the front, the lifters making her light on her feet, and turned and gave a big wave to the crowd, sweeping her head back and forth to look around.

“Very good!” the coyote ‘suiter said. “I think you’ve got it.”

“Now we just need to remember to keep moving like this all the time,” Clara said as they left the room.

“I think I can manage that,” Lubyanka said. “Let’s look around some. I am curious about this furry subculture of yours. How can you celebrate anthropomorphic animals so without ever actually having any the way we do on Zharus?”

“The point isn’t having them so much as wanting them,” Clara said. “We’ve been fascinated with them for at least five hundred years. Though of course there were some long stretches where there wasn’t much of a chance to show it, what with the collapse of the Oil Age and slavery and wars and stuff going on.”

“That’s a long time to be attracted to any one ideal,” Lubyanka reflected.

“Some appeals are just universal, I guess.” They wandered among the booths on the convention main floor. They weren’t so different from what you’d have found five

hundred years earlier. The technology was fancier—holographic displays, direct sensory stimulation, directed sound fields where you could walk into or out of the range of a projection in mid-word—but the ideas were as old as fandom itself: We're selling stuff, buy our wares. We're an organization, join our club. We're doing something, support our project.

There were historical fursuit reenactors demonstrating 20th-century stitching techniques, more than one build-your-own-animatronic-plushie-toy shop, nano-clinics offering tzotzkes and referrals for people to grow their own ears and tails or fur, and even a cruise line signing people up for Zharus tours with a convention discount. (They stayed away from that one by mutual consent, lest more people recognize their true nature.) There were also media screening rooms showing furry media from the last few centuries, and more panels on topics of furry interest.

They stopped in at the “headless lounge,” an area set aside for fursuiters who didn't have cooling mechanisms in their suits to hang out and cool down without having to take them off. They decided not to linger too long, just in case so many real 'suiters together might have a better chance of seeing through them, but Lubyanka was nonetheless interested in seeing the lengths to which some people went for their hobby. “It occurs to me that if given the choice of simply *changing gender* to become furry, some of these would do it in a heartbeat.”

“At least they'd be *given* the choice,” Clara grumbled. She'd had an interesting time getting to sleep the last night. It had been awkward finding a comfortable sleeping

position with that new body, and there had been that urge for self-exploration that...well, better not to go there.

“I did say I was sorry,” Lubyanka said.

“Not sorry enough not to *do* it,” Clara said.

“If you’d been kidnapped by someone intent on hurting your family, to what lengths would *you* go to escape them and bring warning?” Lubyanka asked.

Clara sighed. “I suppose when I look at it that way, I can’t really object. I just wish you’d...y’know, *asked* me.”

“You might have said no,” Lubyanka said. “And missed out on the adventure of a lifetime.”

“Going to Zharus or being a girl?” Clara asked.

“Yes,” Lubyanka said simply.

As the morning wore on, Clara gradually became aware of the first real problem with staying inside an armored fursuit all the time. “Uh...I need to use the restroom,” she said. “How are we going to work this?”

“Oh, you can just go,” Lubyanka said.

Clara blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I’m a long-duration environment suit, remember? I have waste facilities built in,” Lubyanka said. “I can process it and drop it off later when it’s convenient.”

“I can’t just...poop right in the middle of the convention,” Clara said disbelievingly.

“Why? Nobody will see you,” Lubyanka said. “And my nanites will clean everything up. You won’t even have to wipe.”

“Even if that’s the case, I can’t just...do it on command,” Clara said. “I have to be in a bathroom, sitting down on a—” Clara abruptly found herself seated on a porcelain toilet in a virtual-reality restroom. “Oh, cute,”

Clara said. “But I still *know* it’s not *real*.”

“What if I did this?” The sink in the next room came on to a trickle with the drain closed, making a spattering sound.

Clara considered. “Nope. Still not helping.”

“Well, I suppose I could always do this, then,” Lubyanka said. Suddenly Clara felt her bladder and bowels release all on their own.

“What the *fuck?!?*” Clara yelled. “Hey! Some warning next time, okay? Ugh...that felt like diarrhea going off!”

“Sorry,” Lubyanka said—a bit less than apologetically, Clara thought. “But that does feel better now, doesn’t it?”

Clara rolled her eyes. “I suppose. But yeesh...losing control of my own body like that...that’s just nasty.”

“It’s part of *my* body right now,” Lubyanka said. “You think *I* want to go around feeling like I need to go to the bathroom all the time?”

“All right, all right,” Clara grumbled. “I can see this relationship is something we’re both going to have to work at.”

A little later, they located a secluded spot away from prying eyes where Lubyanka could convert back to her disguised skimmer mode so Clara could walk around on her own for a while. Lubyanka managed to create a decent, if basic outfit for Clara on de-Fuse—jeans, T-shirt, and a custom-fitted simple bra underneath. All the same, Clara knew she had some shopping ahead of her, and Tina had offered to help her take care of some of it after lunch.

They met in one of the hotel’s small autofab dinettes. Tom, Kip, and Tina had already reserved a booth and gotten their food. Kip and Tina were sitting together on

one side, which left the seat next to Tom for her. She fabbed a burger, fries, and Coke and brought them over.

“Nice look, sis!” Tina said. “Your wolfie did a great job with your new bod.”

“Shh, don’t talk about that out loud,” Clara said, looking around. “You don’t know who might be listening.”

“Oh, right, sorry,” Tina said. “Still...it shouldn’t be too hard to find some off-the-shelf clothes that fit you. You’re pretty close to average in most measurements. I had to fab most of my stuff.”

“And you’re okay with taking time off from the con for this?” Clara asked. “It only happens once a year...”

“Well, something like *this* only happens once in a *lifetime*,” Tina said. “Especially if you’re shipping out to Zharus next week. That being said, we shouldn’t get you *too* much stuff, since you’re probably not gonna want to pack a whole lot, but we can at least hit the necessities.”

“I guess so,” Clara said. “You’re certainly taking this calmly, all of you.”

Kip shrugged. “It happens all the time in Virtual Life. Surprised you never tried it before yourself.”

Clara shook her head. “Who has time for all that? Had a job to hold down.”

“You’re going to have a lot of fun on Zharus,” Tom said. “You’ve already gotten the biggest tourist mistake out of the way, and you haven’t even left Earth yet. It’s all downhill from here.”

Clara rolled her eyes. “Oh, gee, thanks. I still don’t even know what I’m going to tell my folks. ‘Hey, Mom, I decided to be a girl and run off to live on the farthest colony planet. See you later, mmkay?’”

“Write them a letter,” Kip said. “Set it up to auto-send once the ship leaves. Then write them again once you hit the planet and have an address.”

“It seems like a coward’s way out, but I guess that I’m just a coward,” Clara said. She leaned forward to take a bite out of her burger, then put it down to brush her hair back out of the way. “Ugh. Not used to this. I’m going to have to learn how to braid this, aren’t I? If I don’t just hack it all off.”

“Oh, don’t do that,” Tina said. “You’ve got great hair. Not like mine.” She waved a hand at her shoulder-length brown plait. “I’ll show you how to braid, it just takes practice. Though you’ll usually just want to use a barrette or hair band or something. Less work.”

“I gotta admit, I envy you,” Tom said. “I remember the time I spent Fused with the RIDE I got from the rental agency. Terry, his name was. The feeling of strength and power, the ability to up and fly anywhere at a moment’s notice...all that and a buddy to chat with, too. He was a pretty great guy, we had some good times. I was *this close* to staying on Zharus and buying him outright, but in the end I decided to come back home instead. Sometimes I wish I’d changed my mind.”

“Even if it meant becoming a girl?” Clara said.

Tom shrugged. “It’s just a thing they do over there. Doesn’t have the social stigma you still see here sometimes. If I had stayed there, who knows—I might have ended up doing it myself down the road, just to see what it was like.”

“*Annoying* is what it’s like,” Clara said. “Definitely annoying.” She sighed. “But I guess I shouldn’t keep

bitching about it. Nothing I can do will change it anywhere short of three years from now.”

“So use this an excuse to reinvent yourself!” Tina said brightly. “You’re going to be a whole new person in a whole new world. You get to decide who you want to be now.”

“As long as who I want to be is female,” Clara said.

“Well, yes, there is that,” Tina said.

“If Lu—ah, if *my friend* had come to you, would you have done it?” Clara asked. “Gone with her to another world?”

“Sure!” Tina said. “You know how we all feel about lucky bastiches like Tom who get to go out there. As crappy as the government’s been lately, I’m surprised more of us haven’t gone. Hell, I’m pretty sure a lot of people have been *intentionally* doing crap that would get them deported lately. They call it ‘briar-patching,’ from that old furry story.”

“What about you, Kip?” Clara asked.

“I’m down with the going-to-another-world part,” Kip said. “As for the girling...uh, well, I don’t know. For all the times I’ve played around in VL, I kind of like Mr. Happy right where he is.”

“Yeah, enjoy that,” Clara grumbled. “It wouldn’t do me any good to hope you catch something and it rots off, since they cured all that stuff centuries ago. Darn it.”

“Kids, *please*, not at the dinner table,” Tom said, rolling his eyes.

“Anyway, it has its compensations,” Tina said. “Its annoying parts, too, but *definitely* its compensations.” She grinned over at Kip, who put an arm around her shoulder.

“If you’re going to suggest the dating thing again, you can bite me,” Clara growled.

“Actually, no, that would be Tom’s job,” Kip said. “Already taken, here.” Clara threw a wadded-up napkin at him.

After lunch, Clara and Tina rode pillion on Lubyanka’s hardlight-disguised bike mode to some small boutique shops near the hotel, where they shopped for comfortable underthings. They cost a bit more than Clara would otherwise have paid, but as Tina pointed out it wasn’t as if she was going to have anything else to spend it all on where she was going. “And it’s definitely worth going higher-end instead of just getting cheap stuff at Wal-Mart,” Tina explained.

Clara supposed she had to agree, after trying it on. It was definitely more comfortable than the fairly utilitarian designs Lubyanka had made for her. But she drew the line at buying dresses or blouses. “Like you said, I’m not going to have much room to pack all this, and I can buy that stuff when I get there.” The bras and panties were compact enough that she could store them in one of Lubyanka’s on-board utility compartments, but anything bigger definitely would have taken up too much room.

But Tina hadn’t been done yet regardless. Their last stop was a drugstore, where she proceeded to buy a number of feminine necessities. As they stood in line at the cash register, Clara caught herself blushing furiously, until she realized, *Hey, wait a minute...I’m supposed to be buying these now, dammit.* It still took the blush a little while to go away, though.

The most embarrassing part was yet to come, however. After making the purchase, they went into the larger “family” restroom and locked the door, and Tina proceeded to fill Clara in on the details of the items’ proper use. By the time she was finished, Clara was positive her face should be setting off fire alarms.

“Oh, *come on*. I’ve been a man a couple times in VL. You have your embarrassing things, too,” Tina said. “Those little rubber things you demonstrate with a banana?”

“I don’t know from Virtual Life, but I can’t imagine it’s anywhere *near* as embarrassing as the real thing,” Clara grumbled.

By the time they finished, it was about two o’clock, and they returned to the convention to take in more panels. Lubyanka Fused back up again, and they wandered back into the hotel, together once more.

Lubyanka wasn’t sure exactly what she had expected from furry fandom. As a communication specialist, she knew better than most the difference between what you found on the networks and in reality. In this case, the reality both surpassed and fell behind what the online material implied.

Judging by most of the material on the major media sites, furry conventions were dens of iniquity, where deviants plied their perverted passions on unsuspecting youth. (Some of the stories furry fans, including Clark, wrote and posted to their mesh sites didn’t exactly help matters there.) But there *wasn’t* any of that sort of thing in actual evidence at the convention.

Instead, it was people showing off their outfits, swapping costuming tips with others, selling merch like plushies or hats with little ears on them, and talking about their favorite stories and shows. It reminded Lubyanka of some of the twencen pop culture or military reenactment conventions that had taken place on Zharus. She and her military pilot had been assigned to take part in a couple of Nextus-Sturmhaven War reenactments, and had also worked security for some conventions in Sturmhaven. In some ways it was all very familiar.

Through it all, Clara seemed to be holding up pretty well. Lubyanka had tried to be circumspect about poking around inside her head, but what she had looked at bespoke a reasonably open-minded young man who had gotten interested in the furry subculture from watching shows and reading fiction posted to various mesh sites. He hadn't been especially curious about crossing sex, but he hadn't been repelled by the idea either. He just...hadn't had an opinion. Of course, *she* certainly did have one now.

Lubyanka wondered whether forcing her to cross had been a mistake. Perhaps she could have just had Clark drive her to the convention, then help her pick out a willing furry fan from within. But Clark had been a known quantity. For all his attempts at care, she had been able to learn a lot about him from his activity on social networks and other sites, and he seemed like the sort of person she could get along with. Even now, Clara wasn't bitter and didn't seem to hold it against her *too* much. If anything, she was excited about seeing Zharus and downright *delighted* to have an excuse to quit the call-center job. Now they just had to figure out how to get aboard the

Spruce Goose.

A woman's voice from behind her caught Lubyanka's attention. "Excuse me, but I couldn't help noticing...that's a *really* good fursuit."

Lubyanka turned to glance at the speaker. She was a fairly tall, blonde-haired woman, wearing a stylish trenchcoat and a pair of sunglasses. "Thank you, miss—"

The woman smiled. "Harriet." She looked Lubyanka up and down for a moment. "You're a pretty long way from home, aren't you?"

Lubyanka stiffened. "Excuse me?" *Oh, not again.*

"Sorry, but I just don't have time to dance around the issue here." Harriet raised a hand, and Lubyanka abruptly felt control of her body leave her. She turned around and started walking toward the elevator.

:Lubyanka?: Clara sent. *:What's going on? Is that you?:*

:It's not me,: Lubyanka sent. *:Something's overriding my control.:*

:Just relax and enjoy the ride, kiddies,: Harriet sent to both of them. *:We need to talk somewhere private. I've got a room upstairs; I've swept it for bugs and it's clean.:*

:Do we have a choice?: Lubyanka replied.

:Not at this juncture, sister,: Harriet said. *:But we'll see what happens.:*

Lubyanka ducked to get into the hotel room, and Harriet closed the door behind them and drew the blinds. "Now then. You can just drop that silly fake fur disguise. In fact..." She gestured again, and Lubyanka felt herself de-Fuse from around Clara, settling down on her haunches as

her natural fur reasserted itself. “That’s better. Mm. Can’t say I have a lot of reason to be fond of Sturmies, but I’ll try not to hold that against you.”

“Well, thank you for *that*,” Lubyanka said dryly.

“Who *are* you?” Clara asked. “*What* are you?”

“Luby there already thinks she knows,” Harriet said.

“Would you get *out* of my head?” Lubyanka growled.

“Not ‘til I’ve sussed out why you’re here, and getting it this way is faster than you telling me.”

“Why are *you* here, Integrate?” Lubyanka asked. She took her anger and clamped down on it, hard. She might not like her high-handedness, but an Integrate could be the most powerful ally she could hope to have in getting herself back to Zharus. Besides...karmically speaking, it wasn’t as if she didn’t have this coming to her for doing effectively the same thing to Clara *nee* Clark.

Harriet smiled at her. “Good doggie. Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you. I’d actually like to help, if I can.”

“What’s an Integrate?” Clara asked.

“Well, when a RIDE and a human love each other very much...” Harriet reached up and took off her sunglasses, then they—and the rest of her outfit—shimmered and vanished like Lubyanka’s hardlight fur. Underneath was a slender humanoid cheetah, eyes covered by what looked like a black domino mask. “Technically, you could call me Harriet-Cheetara, or Harritara, or Cheetarriet, or whatever. I tend to just go by Harriet, because unlike all the other choices, it’s not stupid.”

“Integrates are the RIDE equivalent of...to use a furry term, I guess, Bigfoot,” Lubyanka said. “Some people think they’re caused by a glitch in our Fuser form that melts the

human and RIDE together. It doesn't always happen, but when it does, they invariably disappear from society, so nobody knows very much about them."

"Yeah, there's politics involved." Harriet wrinkled her muzzle. "Most of us hang out in little holes in the ground called 'Enclaves' where we don't have to let normal people play in our reindeer games. I decided to tour the galaxy instead, because reasons." She shrugged. "As for why I'm *here* here, I was hanging out in Sri Lanka, then my mesh daemons picked up the local news report from here. I damned sure know a RIDE when I see one. I came looking, figured out what the best haystack would be to poke that needle into, and here I am."

"For whatever reason, Integrates are super computer hackers with the ability to dance through the thickest firewalls as if they do not exist," Lubyanka said sourly. "So do I need to tell you anything about how I got here, or have you gotten it all already?"

"Let me see if I've got it," Harriet said. She ticked off the points on her claw-tipped fingers. "You woke up on a shuttle, there were three other RIDES, you escaped, found furrydom, bodyjacked Clara, and came here to hide. Apart from those three friends of Clara's, nobody else knows. That sound about right?"

"That just about covers it," Lubyanka said.

"Okay." Harriet paced back and forth on digitigrade paws, her feline tail lashing. "First off, clever idea as far as it goes about getting onto the cruise ship, and there may be something there to salvage, but it's not going to work the way you planned it. You can't simply walk into Mordor, and you can't simply board a cruise ship to Zharus either.

The people who aren't *obviously* tourists with strong local ties that will make them likely to come back are in for hours of interrogation in the best of cases. When you add to it that Clara here was Clark just a few days ago, even if you're able to dock the ears and tail in Fuse, she's still going to send up big red flags with little tiny red flags up at the tip, and smaller ones above those. You could have her try to ship you as freight, but even then she'd throw up the same red flags. I might be able to ship you without exciting attention, but I'm not sure I'd want to risk blowing my own cover for just you, and in any event that would leave Clara here behind to face the consequences of your little bodyjack. I'm afraid you outsmarted yourself there, doggie."

Lubyanka's head drooped. She hadn't thought about things in that light. Perhaps she hadn't wanted to. "I guess you're right," she admitted. "So what do we do?"

"First of all, we're going to need to be a little more ambitious," Harriet said. "It's not going to do a damned bit of good if we get you back but leave those other three RIDEs in the government's grubby hands. Of course, for all I know there could already be dozens of others all over the world—I've never looked into it—but those three are almost certainly going to be held somewhere near here, or they would have landed you all someplace else."

Lubyanka blinked, her ears twitching forward. "You honestly believe we could rescue them? From a military facility?"

"Why not? I'm the hottest piece of military hardware on this entire planet at the moment," Harriet said. "Well, that I know of. There *might* be other Inties out there. I

can't have been the only one fed up enough to leave. Again, I haven't tried to look. But anyway, since they don't even know I exist, let alone how to defend against me, I should be able to pierce their veil of secrecy and find out where they're keeping them. Then we just waltz in and take 'em."

"It can't be *that* simple," Clara protested.

"Actually, it could be," Lubyanka said. "My own firewall is better than anything on this planet, save possibly for quantum supercomputers. But she got me. And *everything* is computerized around here..."

"Hey, if you can rescue those other RIDEs, count me in," Clara said. "My friends, too. I'm sure they'd be happy to help out."

"I don't think there's any point in getting them involved with this yet," Harriet said. "All they'd do is get in the way. We need to get in fast, then get out again." She stretched like the cat she was, then her human disguise flickered back into place. "I'll see what I can do, and I'll comm you later. We don't want to waste any time; the longer we wait, the more likely they might have started dismantling them. I should be able to have something by tonight. Once we get them secured, we'll see what we can do about getting you *all* home."

Lubyanka nodded. "All right." She paused. "Thank you. If you are able to do this...we will all owe you a *lot*."

Harriet waved a hand. "Eh. Don't worry about it. I've done enough shit to RIDEs in my time—well, half of me has—that helping some for a change feels good. Paying down on an old debt, you might say. Don't forget your disguise before you go back down." She grinned, then shimmered and vanished altogether except the grin. Then

that vanished, too, the door opened, and she was gone.

“Well, that was...weird,” Clara said.

“You said it,” Lubyanka agreed, her tail wagging. “But the best kind of weird we could possibly have hoped for, I think. Our chances just got a whole lot better.”

Fused, they returned to the con floor and took in a few panels. Just for the heck of it, they sat in on a fursuiters-only role-playing game session using a five-hundred-year-old game system called “Albedo” that someone had dug up out of an old archive somewhere. It supposedly dated all the way back to the earliest days of the furry subculture. The rules were a little complicated, and most everyone was using their comms or implants to take notes. “How did anyone ever keep track of this stuff with just pencils and paper?” Clara wondered.

Tom and the others joined them, and they went out to dinner along with a number of other fursuiters at a nearby restaurant. A number of the ‘suiters had gimmicked their suits to let them eat while wearing them, so it wasn’t out of place for Clara and Lubyanka to do the same thing. After a little practice, Clara found it was so easy that they actually had to fake a little awkwardness to fit in.

:They really designed you to eat? That’s crazy,: Clara sent while they did it. *:I mean, I can understand the whole going-to-the-bathroom thing, but having a working mouth?:*

:We were meant for use in hostile environments,: Lubyanka said. *:Being able to de-Fuse so our pilots can have meals is never guaranteed. Besides...I enjoy tasting human food over our neural link. Too bad there won’t be*

many other excuses to eat out on this planet.:

:We'll just have to look forward to getting to Zharus, then,: Clara replied.

After supper, they returned to the con. A couple of hours later, an encrypted comm mail came in from Harriet with a set of coordinates about twenty miles outside of town, and instructions to be there by midnight. "I guess this is it," Clara said. "Let's go."

"We've got plenty of time to get there," Lubyanka pointed out.

"I know, but I'm going to be too excited to enjoy the rest of the evening like this," Clara said. "Besides, I want there to be plenty of time to go over explanations."

"Mm. I suppose it would be good to take the extra time to muddy the trail, just in case."

So they excused themselves from the con, said good night to Tom and the others, and put on a succession of hardlight eggshell disguises as they left the convention, stopped in a parking garage, came out again, went to another garage, and so on. For the last mile or so, they left the road and went totally dark. By the time they arrived at a small clearing in the heart of the forest, it was getting on toward 11:30.

:Spooky,: Clara thought.

:Booga booga,: Lubyanka replied. *:Best time of day for getting something like this done, really. Even so, I keep having to remind myself we don't have as much time as it feels like. Your 24-hour days are weird.:*

As they pulled to a stop, Harriet stepped out from behind a tree. "Hey, welcome to the party. Glad you made it."

“Glad to be here,” Lubyanka said. “Where’s the base?”

Harriet jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “About ten clicks thataway. There’s a game trail that will take us right to it.”

“Could I get that in something that makes sense, like *miles*?” Clara asked.

Harriet snorted. “Here’s a nickel, kid, go buy yourself a unified system of measurements. Anyway, it’s disguised as an agricultural research facility. Not too heavily guarded, either. Makes sense; given that it’s all one government now, who would they expect an invasion from? Looks like they’re just trying to keep it obscure. Which is good news for us.”

“You already scouted the defenses?”

“Inside and out,” Harriet said. “I could almost do this all by myself, but with so much at stake it would be stupid not to have backup. Are you armed? Preferably non-lethal?”

“Don’t have any heavy weapons built in, just the comm lasers,” Lubyanka said. “They’re lethal at high-intensity, but a couple of them are equipped with shock projectors to ride the ion trail down.”

Harriet nodded. “Built in TASERs. Nice. I can do something like that myself.”

“I’ve got a pocketknife,” Clara supplied.

Harriet grinned, showing pearly white teeth in the dark. “Cute, kid. I’m not leaving you out—your job is to give Luby there her thumbs. That’s the most important thing you can do right now, *capice*?”

Clara nodded. “Got it.”

“The plan is we go in, get the RIDEs, load ‘em onto a

truck, and get out,” Harriet continued. “We may have to do a little reassembly, but it looks like they haven’t gone too far yet. I’ll fog their security systems, play musical chairs with the transponder tags, and scramble the motor pool records in general so they don’t know what truck to look for. We’ll steal another one as soon as we can anyway.”

Lubyanka nodded. “I understand.”

“Here’s a map of the facility, with the locations of the RIDEs and study labs marked,” Harriet said. A gem on her forearm twinkled as she beamed the data across. “We may meet some guards along the way. They shouldn’t have anything that can hurt us, but stun ‘em as you find ‘em anyway.”

“Seems clear enough to me,” Lubyanka said. “Let’s go.”

They Fused up, then lifted into the air and glided along the forest trail. Clara wondered how they could see where they were going, then realized a moment later when Lubyanka switched her display over to night-vision mode. Everything was visible in shades of bright and dark green, fronds of vegetation leaving odd afterimages as they passed.

Finally, they came out onto a bluff overlooking a small campus of buildings, surrounded by a chain-link fence with barbed wire at the top. It was well-lit enough that Lubyanka dialed back the night-vision. *:Give me two minutes to loop the cameras, then fly over the fence.:* Harriet vanished again. Lubyanka threw a two-minute timer up in her display, and they waited for it to tick down.

Clara had been excited enough to be doing something, but now that the moment came she felt an oddly hollow

sensation in the pit of her stomach. *Yesterday I was a call center rep. Today I'm actually about to take part in a raid on a frickin' Army Base.*

:Stay calm,: Lubyanka assured her. *:I have been through much worse than this. We will be fine.:*

The timer hit zero, and Lubyanka goosed her lifters, flying over the fence with ease and touching down on a walkway between two buildings. The map display in one corner of her field of vision told her exactly where to go, and she went, ducking to slip through a human-sized door and zoom up a flight of stairs to the lab on the second floor.

As they shoved open the door, they encountered their first set of problems—three scientists in lab coats bending over the prone metallic forms of the powered-down RIDEs. They just had time to look up with shocked expressions before Lubyanka raised her arms and took them down with three fast zaps.

:Are they...?:

:Just stunned, don't worry,: Lubyanka said. She stepped forward and dragged all three of them to one corner of the room, out of the way.

Harriet reappeared. “Good! Hmm.” She examined the RIDEs, and the collection of parts on a workbench along the wall. “Okay, this should be simple enough to restore... hmm...wait. One of the cores is missing—the tiger’s. Where would they...oh *shit!* Up to the lab on level three, *hurry!*” She lifted and zoomed for the door. Lubyanka followed a moment later, shooting up the stairs on lifter power.

They burst into the lab right above the one they’d left

just in time to see a goggle-wearing scientist lowering a laser cutting blade toward the walnut-sized RI core slotted into a bracket on the table. “Oh no you don’t!” Harriet growled, raising a hand and yanking the blade away from the scientist. A moment later, Lubyanka’s TASER put him down.

“Oh, *man*, that was too close,” Harriet said. She tossed the cutter away and held out her hand again, and the core floated more gently into it. She held it up to the light to inspect it. “Doesn’t appear to be any damage. Let’s get this back where it belongs.”

They went back down the stairs to the lab where the RI shells and their parts were, and took another look at the workbench. “There sure is a lot of...stuff there,” Clara said, glancing at the motley assortment of metal boxes, plates, wires, and other odds and ends.

“We’re lucky,” Harriet said. “Most of this crap is stuff that was designed for easy removal and replacement. Batteries, sensors, hardlight projectors, and stuff. They didn’t really get into any of the deep core stuff that would need recalibration to put right.” She frowned. “Looks like they did ruin one of the tiger’s batteries. Cut it open to see what makes it tick. All the king’s horses...” She picked up a light blue wafer from amid a collection of metal pieces. “Luckily, he’s got plenty more of them. But all this one’s good for now is a snack for me.” She took a bite out of the wafer. “Mmm, yummy. A++ grade. This is *good* stuff.”

“Isn’t that...cannibalism or something?” Clara said.

“Hey, I’m not going to let this go to waste. You know how hard this stuff is to get off Zharus?” She shook her head. “Anyway, I’m going to get these guys buttoned up.

You-all go get a truck. I've already scrambled the codes, just get one that's big enough for all four of you guys. There's a loading dock at the end of this building. Back it up there."

"Understood." Clara watched the map display center on the base's motor pool, and plot a course. Then Lubyanka was taking them away again.

As they were coming around the corner to the motor pool, they came across a security guard. They stared at each other for a split second, then Lubyanka dropped him as he reached for his comm. The garage itself was deserted, and it only took a few moments to find and hack a skimmer truck of the appropriate size.

They stood there for a moment, looking at the cab. *:So now what?:* Clara asked. *:We're never gonna fit into that. And I don't know how to drive a truck.:*

:Eh. We can run it by remote,: Lubyanka said, waving a hand and making the truck pull out of the garage by itself.

They backed it into place at the loading dock, then made their way from the loading dock back to the lab, making sure the coast was clear.

They arrived to find Harriet standing in the midst of three metallic animals floating limply in the air, a few last parts floating into open access hatches, then the hatches closing. Harriet clapped her hands together in front of her and lowered them, and the RIDEs lowered gently to the ground. "Right! Now...wakey-wakey time, everyone!"

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the optics on the metallic animals lit up, and they got unsteadily to their feet. A moment later, hardlight pelts flickered on—orange

and black tiger, yellow and black serval, red fox. Harriet gazed at them each in turn, then stopped and stared at the tiger. “You...I *know* you. You’re *Hobbes*! Oh God, Hobbes, what are *you* doing here?”

The tiger cocked his head and peered at her. “You have the advantage of me, miss.” He looked around. “And...what *am* I doing here? Where *is* here? Why aren’t there any comm signals on the right frequencies?”

Harriet considered. “Right. You’re Hobbes. The serval is Quentin, and the foxy fox is Madeira. You guys, I’m Harriet, and the wolf there is Lubyanka, with Clara inside. Further introductions can wait. We need to get out of here before someone notices what we’re doing. Down the hall, that way, into the truck that’s waiting.”

“There’s *something* familiar about you,” Hobbes mused. “But I can’t make out what it is.”

“The lady said we need to go,” Quentin said. “I’m not gonna argue. Come on!” He bounded out of the room. Hobbes considered, then padded after him.

“Thank you for waking us up,” Madeira said in a resonant voice, before following the others.

“Right!” Harriet nodded to Lubyanka. “Move it and/or lose it, people!”

“Don’t have to tell us twice,” Lubyanka said. “After you!”

Leaving the base wasn’t a problem. They simply drove up to the gate, and Harriet—disguised as a military officer—showed the gate guard a pass whose forged credentials were, of course, impeccable. They pulled out onto the road and were gone.

They drove the truck for ten miles in random directions before stopping at an automated recharge station. Harriet hacked all cameras within range, then everyone climbed out and recharged. Harriet programmed the truck's auto-drive for a semi-randomized drive-and-stop pattern that would put it somewhere in Arkansas before its batteries ran down.

"So, here we are, then," Hobbes said as they watched the empty truck trundle away. "Free...for some value of free. Lubyanka explained what was going on during the drive. Can't say I ever expected to see the old homeplace."

"So far, it's not been all that impressive," Quentin said, twitching his whiskers. "At least I still have all my parts."

"My poor battery," Hobbes sighed.

"Oh, buck up," Harriet said. "You were built with half again more batteries than you ever needed, and they were A++ in the bargain."

Hobbes cocked his head and looked at her. "And you know this...how?"

"Er..." Harriet faltered. "Well, if you must know, I'm the one who had you built. Part of me is, anyway."

Hobbes stared. "You're shitting me. *You're* Harold Steader?"

"Harold, occasionally Henrietta, most recently Harriet." Harriet shrugged. "Why're you acting so surprised? Crossriding happens. Integration happens. Here I am."

"Wait a minute," Clara said. "Steadar? As in that super-rich family that paid for all the colonies?"

"*Most* of the colonies," Harriet said.

Hobbes growled, taking a step forward. “You’re the one who built me, used me for five months, then sold me in favor of a stupid fluffy white housecat. You know, I’ve wanted to run into you again for a *long* time. It *would* take getting kidnapped and shipped to *Earth* before it happened.”

“Take it easy, big boy,” Madeira put in. “We do need her to get us back to Zharus, you know.”

“If it makes you feel any better, the ‘old’ Harold is effectively dead and gone,” Harriet said. “I’m mostly Cheetara, the last RIDE he had made.” She shook her head. “Integration was...not terribly fun, but we got through it.”

Hobbes snorted. “Cheetara,’ huh? Yeah, that sounds like Harold, all right. Eh, okay, lady. I’m not one to go blaming RIDEs for what their humans do. And anyway, you saved my ass *this* time, so I guess we’re more or less even.”

“So what’s the plan?” Quentin asked.

“Still working on that,” Harriet said. “I’ve got some ideas. But first things first—we need to get back to Springfield for now. That furry convention is still the best place to hide you all for now. Lubyanka can set you up with some hardlight disguise patterns. We’ll head up to the hotel parking lot, and tomorrow morning we’ll see about getting you some thumbs.”

“Sounds good to me,” Hobbes said. A moment later, they had all converted to skimmer form and disguised themselves, then departed in different directions to take separate routes back to town.

“Wow, Tom, Kip, and Tina are going to be surprised,”

Clara mused.

“I expect they are,” Lubyanka said. *Probably more than you know.*

When they got back to town, Lubyanka and Clara returned to Clara’s apartment so Clara could get some sleep. The next morning, they headed up to the hotel to meet Harriet and the other RIDEs in the garage.

“Hey, guys. Clara, why don’t you comm your friends to get up here?” Harriet said. “It’s time for some introductions.”

A few minutes later, Tom, Kip, and Tina came out of the elevator. “Hey, Clara, what’s going on?”

“Got some new friends for you to meet. First, this is Harriet. She’s been helping us out.”

“Hi, guys,” Harriet said. Then she dropped her human disguise. “I’m not from around these parts.”

Tom blinked. “Well, you certainly came to the right place with a look like that.”

“Here are a few other people who aren’t from around these parts,” Harriet continued. Behind her, three eggshell cars dropped their disguises and converted into animals, padding forward.

“Dibs on the one with the tiger tags,” Hobbes announced.

Kip stared. “Three *more* RIDEs?”

“I did say there were three others,” Lubyanka said. “Last night, we went and found them.”

“Uh...hi?” Tina said.

“Hello,” Madeira replied.

“I guess that makes you mine, then,” Quentin said to

Kip.

“Uh, what?” Kip said.

Then all three RIDEs Fused onto the humans in front of them.

“Hey, wait—whoa!” Tina said. But it was too late. A moment later, a humanoid tiger, serval, and fox stood in Tom, Kip, and Tina’s place.

The tiger looked down at himself. “Well. This is new. Can’t say I ever expected to be in a RIDE again without having to go to Zharus.”

“Uh...you could have *asked* first?” Kip said.

“You might have said no,” Quentin said. “And we’d still have Fused you anyway, so what’s the point?”

“We need our Fuser form to be able to hide in the convention like Lubyanka,” Madeira said.

“Sorry, kids, but we already decided, you’re all going to Zharus,” Harriet said. “If we left you behind after the rest skedaddled, you’d probably just end up picked up and questioned by the government once they figured out Clara was involved since you’re known to be friends of hers.”

“And this way we won’t be able to tell anyone else either, huh?” Kip said.

“That is one benefit, granted,” Harriet admitted.

“I guess I can’t complain,” Tom said. “I wanted to go back anyway...and wow! I’m in a RIDE again! And he’s even a tiger, just like the one I used to have.”

“*Better* than the one you used to have,” Hobbes said. “Your Terry was a standard consumer model. I was custom-made for a millionaire.”

Kip/Quentin turned to Tina. “Wow, look at *you*.”

Tina looked down at her newly-Fused self. In Fuser

form, Madeira was considerably more curvaceous than Lubyanka, especially around the bust and hips. Her bushy tail swished back and forth. “Oh, *great*. I’m the embodiment of one of the worst sexist cliches in all of furrydom.”

“I can’t help the way I was made,” Madeira said.

“Um. Sorry about this, guys,” Clara said. “I thought they were going to ask first.”

“I guess I’m not too mad about it,” Kip said. “After Tom and now you, I wanted a RIDE for myself anyway.”

“And I wanted a human for myself, so it works out,” Quentin said.

“Now let’s see how you all look with your new tags,” Harriet suggested. The three RIDEs peeled away from the humans again.

“Well, at least my tags shouldn’t have changed any,” Tom said, chuckling.

Clara blinked. “Tom? Your nose...”

“Huh?” Tom reached up and felt a decidedly feline nose shape where his human nose had used to be. “Whoa. That’s new”

“I was a prototype,” Hobbes said. “So you get a kitty-nose.”

“I think I like it,” Tom said, grinning.

Kip reached up to feel his own new feline ears.

“Wow...these things are like a foot tall.”

“Serval,” Quentin said. “We do that.”

Tina looked down at herself. “Ugh...what did you *do* to me?” Her body had slimmed down a little, and most of the excess mass appeared to have gravitated to her upper chest. She turned on Madeira. “Put it back the way it was! I

don't want to have to buy a whole new wardrobe!"

"Sorry," Madeira said. "It's just how my tags work. My class has to give its human partner a similar build to our Fuser shape, for maximum compatibility—"

Tina rolled her eyes. "Oh, *bullshit*. You were designed by some *man* who liked the idea of women with huge gazongas. As if I didn't get 'accidentally' groped often enough already...you'd think five hundred years would be enough time for society to grow out of that crap."

"Technically, it has, several times," Kip pointed out. "But progress doesn't always move in just one direction. Sometimes we backslide. Just look at how slavery was abolished in the 19th century, but came back again after the oil crash. A century ago, when the neo-Libertines were in vogue, it was *men* who had to worry about being groped."

"Oh, *thank* you, professor," Tina grouched.

"Uh...anyway, for what it's worth, I think you look great," Kip said.

"Oh, *really*," Tina said, eyes glinting dangerously. "Do you like me *better* this way?"

"Uh..." Kip glanced around at the others, but nobody seemed willing to throw him a lifeline. "I...like you no matter what you look like?" he said finally.

"That would *really* have meant more if you hadn't hesitated first," Tina said.

"Well, what do you want?" Kip said. "It's not like you've got many other options here. You want to trade with me and be a guy instead?"

"Actually...you know what? *Yes*," Tina said. "It would be nice not to have to worry about sexist macho bullshit

for a change.”

Kip stared. “What?”

Tom blinked. “What?”

Clara goggled. “*What?*”

“Since you’re offering...” She glanced behind Kip, to the serval RIDE, who was currently sitting on his haunches and scratching behind one ear. He paused in mid-scratch. “How ‘bout it, Quentin?”

“Now wait a minute—” Kip said.

“Hmm,” Quentin said. “Crossriding isn’t usually my thing...but...sure, why not?” He padded forward, his hardlight winked out, and he Fused around her.

“Now hold on here...” Kip said weakly, as he heard Madeira’s melodic giggle behind him. He turned around just in time to get FUSE-glomped.

“Well, that was certainly something different,” Harriet said.

Tom rolled his eyes. “Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Tim and Kim. At least they rhyme now.”

“I can’t believe you just did that!” Kip—*Kim*—said in a higher-pitched voice.

“You’re the one who said it happened all the time in Virtual Life,” Tina—*Tim*—said, an octave lower. “Now I’ll finally get to experience the joys of peeing standing up.”

“Are you crazy?” Clara said. “People have been *deported* for stuff like this! Remember the Gates family?”

Everybody turned to look at her. Clara paused. “Oh... right. I guess that *was* pretty silly of me, wasn’t it.”

“Don’t worry, Kim,” Tim said sweetly. “I’m sure you’ll look every bit as gorgeous as you thought I did.” Kim just whimpered a little.

“You know, you could have stopped that,” Lubyanka pointed out to Harriet.

Harriet shrugged. “Eh. I’ve crossed so many times myself, sometimes I can’t remember what gender I was born as. It’s just good clean fun.”

“On Zharus, maybe. I wouldn’t recommend registering those gender changes with the local bureaucracy,” Lubyanka said. “Too many people saw you as the other ones just yesterday. And we shouldn’t be on Earth long enough for it to become an issue...right, Harriet?”

“Still working on that, but I have some ideas. I’ll get back to you soon. For now...just hang out at the con and get to know each other, mmkay? Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“I think they’ve already *done* most of the things you *did* do,” Clara said.

“Ha. Okay, *ciao*.” Harriet vanished again.

“This feels so *funky*,” Kim said. “I have bits missing and bits added...”

“No kidding,” Tim said, without a hint of sarcasm. “I think I’m going to need some guy-stuff advice now, Clara. Heh.”

“I think you’re just about done,” Quentin said.

“Already?” Tim said. “The process takes *days* with our best medical tech.”

“Now you know why Earth wants us so badly,” Lubyanka said.

“Right, so the military can...change their sex at a moment’s notice,” Kim said. “That makes sense.”

“If they can do *that* so quickly, just imagine what else

they can do,” Tom said. “Honestly, I think even Maddie there could be the equal of one of our IDEs if you gave her a beam rifle or two. I’m kind of surprised Earth hasn’t tried to invade already.”

“It’s because our esteemed Steaders—yes, including the one who just left us—did their job so well,” Hobbes said. “They made us out to look like a planet of crazies who couldn’t possibly have anything anybody else wanted. If we claimed to, who’d believe us? We’re crazies.”

“But it looks like the glamour might be wearing off,” Quentin said. “If they believed it enough to have us shipped back for research...oh, there we go.”

With twin hisses, Quentin and Madeira de-Fused again, revealing their new partners. Tim *nee* Tina was still pretty short, though it looked like she’d gained a couple of inches. He was a little stocky, with short brown hair and decently-toned muscles. He had the spotted and striped serval tail, and the tall radar-dish-like ears, Kip had sported briefly before.

Kim had honey-blonde hair down to her waist, and if anything an even more impressive bust than Tina had gotten. She was in a T-shirt and short shorts with a tail-hole in back for the bushy red fox tail. She looked down at herself, took a step forward, and wobbled. “Whoa... balance!”

Tim nodded. “I recommend staying away from high heels.”

“How come this doesn’t feel...wrong?” Kim wondered, bouncing on the balls of her feet a little. “Just...weird. But not wrong.”

“If this is wrong, I don’t want to be right.” Tim

grinned, then reached out to take Kim's hand. "C'mon, I'll help you up to our room. Then we can try out our new equipment!"

"Um..." Kim said, but he didn't make any serious effort to resist.

"Quentin, Madeira, you guys wait here for us, 'kay? We'll be back in a little while, then we'll do the con together."

"Works for me." Quentin reverted to his skimmer bike form, a sleek "crotch rocket" style hovercycle, and backed into an empty parking spot before throwing up his eggshell disguise. Madeira followed suit, her bike shape being a more reclined "chopper" shape with a tall padded backrest. Tim headed for the elevator, all but dragging Kim along after him.

:Okay, what the hell?: Clara asked her RIDE. :They change sex and get horny for each other that fast? Shouldn't they feel some kind of severe form of gender dysphoria?:

:The human brain is easily changed. There are structures for body image and gender identity we alter during a crossride, else you would have a hard time functioning. Why, do you feel dysphoric?: the shewolf asked.

:I guess not...not beyond being annoyed how much it's messed up my life, anyway. But I don't suddenly want to start banging Tom, either,: Clara said.

:Unless I miss my guess, those two were already in a physical relationship,: Lubyanka pointed out. *:We often find with mutual crosses, the first thing that happens is... curiosity. A turnabout romance.:*

“Well,” Tom said. “That was...sudden.”

“I guess we should go ahead and Fuse up and do the con,” Clara said. “If this is going to be our last one on Earth, we should make it a good one, hey?”

“And I should get to know my new pet human,” Hobbes said, yawning and showing lots of teeth.

Tom chuckled. “What says you’re not *my* new pet tiger, huh?”

“I weigh more than you do,” Hobbes said smugly.

Tom grinned. “Well, hey, I’m easy. Maybe we could play some virtual Calvinball or something.”

“Oooh, I like you already,” Hobbes said. His hardlight winked out, and he Fused again. A moment later, his fur pelt flickered into the fursuit disguise Lubyanka had coded up for him that resembled his namesake. “I can’t say this looks anywhere near as good as my natural pelt, but when in Rome...”

“Remember to use your lifters to lighten your tread, and don’t bump into anyone!” Lubyanka advised.

“Yes, Mommy,” Hobbes said.

Clara chuckled. “Let’s join them, shall we?”

Lubyanka Fused around her. “Let’s go.”

Saturday was any convention’s biggest day. Tom carefully wandered through the crush of people in his brand new nine-foot-tall fursuit. *:I still can’t believe this,:* he mused. *:A RIDE again...and here on Earth, too. It’s too bad we have to stay hidden. There’s so much stuff I’d like to show you.:*

:I’m surprised you’re taking it so well.: Hobbes’s mental voice was as deep and rumbly as his real one. It

almost felt like Tom was inside an echo chamber. *:You do understand we effectively bodyjacked you? I'm glad you're happy about it, but I would have had to do this even if you were not.:*

The perspective changed, and Tom dropped into the sunlit grassy plain of Hobbes's VR. To one side, a display panel showed the view from Hobbes's optics, and the tiger sat on his haunches across from him. "Hey, nice place," Tom said. "Looks a lot more real than our Virtual Life." He shrugged. "And yeah, I get that. Tina—er, *Tim* is probably going to be the unhappiest one about it. I don't think it's really quite sunk in for him yet. Kim—when he was Kip—really wanted to come too in the first place, but it was a college trip and we couldn't bring sibs. As for me...the more I see, the more I wish I'd just cut out the middleman and not come back from my trip." He chuckled. "Hell, given how much grief you have to go through to take a *first* trip to Zharus, let alone a *second* one, getting press-ganged there by renegade RIDEs is probably the easiest way I could have made it back. Isn't that sad?"

"A lot of things are sad about this situation," Hobbes rumbled. "We are meant to work in open partnership with humans. Having to kidnap them secretly...ugh."

"Try to relax, enjoy it, and look on the bright side," Tom said. "You're free, you've got new partners, and you're getting to do something most RIDEs can only dream of—visit a far-off star system, and poke around mankind's ancestral home."

Hobbes chuckled. "This is true. I expect our memories of the event will probably be much in demand on the sideband networks when we get back."

Tom grinned. “I can’t believe I have a *sister* now. Mom is gonna be shocked. I almost wish we had time to go visit her before we leave.”

“It seems you are the only one of your friends who has remained the sex you were born into,” Hobbes said. “Do you feel left-out?”

“I think, all things considered, I’m just as happy staying the way I am,” Tom said. “Someone’s got to be the ‘normal’ one around here.”

Hobbes nodded toward the panel displaying their view of the outside world. “‘Normal’ being a relative term, I take it?”

Tom laughed. “Hey, don’t knock furrries. If we were all ‘normal,’ you wouldn’t have found a place to hide.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Hobbes admitted. “Speaking of showing me things, why don’t you show me around the convention? I believe I would like to see the art show.”

“I’ll see if we can fit you in,” Tom promised. They dropped back out of virtual reality into the real world again.

Tim yawned and stretched in the comfortable queen-sized bed of the hotel room they’d rented in the Holiday Inn above the con. It had been kind of a luxury, given that they only lived a few miles away, but they’d thought it would be convenient to have somewhere to spend the night without having to go back and forth. Now, Tim was doubly glad they had. Quietly, carefully, so as not to wake the sleeping lump in the bed next to him, he sat up and got to his feet.

Him. He. It was a weird readjustment to think of

herself—*himself*—in that way, after almost twenty years of being the “fairer” sex. *Ha*, Tim thought, thinking back to how he’d *become* a he. *Who* says *I’m fair*? He felt a little bad in hindsight at how she’d just bulldozed right over Kip that way, but let’s be honest—he’d deserved it. Let him see how the other half lived in the *real* for a while.

He looked down at himself. Not a bad physique. He’d have to thank Quentin for that when he saw him. Of course, he’d probably have to start exercising again to keep it up. She’d given it up after it had failed to put a dent in her plump female shape, but maybe it would be different doing it to build muscle rather than lose weight. *Oh, hey. I can go topless now without being indecent. That’s something, anyway.*

Her gaze naturally progressed downward to the new lumps between her legs. Of course, they weren’t *that* new, in a sense. She’d played with a virtual version plenty of time, but there had been some key differences she wasn’t prepared for. The virtual version had been wired into her existing neural system, and there was only so far a virtual system could go in simulating the other side’s neural structures when an existing one was in place. Simulated intercourse had basically *felt* the same, just with different mechanics.

But now he had the real deal. And when you got right down to it, he was surprised it had all been over so *fast*. He almost felt cheated. *You mean, that was it?* And then it had been some minutes before he’d been able to go again. *Tiresias was right, women really do enjoy it more. At least, when they’re with someone who can keep it up long enough to let them.*

He wasn't sure whether he'd been able to do that for Kim. She'd seemed to enjoy herself well enough, but then, Tim remembered her first few times as Tina hadn't been all that great until Kip had gotten a little more experience himself. *And here I swore I was going to learn from his mistakes and be better at everything than he was.* He sighed. *Oh well, live and learn.*

His big dish-like ears swiveled back to pick up the sound of Kim snoring behind him. That was another new experience. Directional ears. Wow. And that *tail*...he'd never had one of those before. (Well, except for the minute or so as a fox, but that hardly counted.) Feeling sensations from a part of the body that hadn't even *existed* before was...pretty much indescribable.

Tim fumbled for his comm and checked the time. Ten a.m. Time to do a little shopping before meeting the others for lunch, he guessed. He turned back and gave Kim's shoulder a little shake. "Hey, wake up, sleepygirl."

"Huh? Wha?" Kim rolled onto her back and opened her eyes. "What's...?" She looked down at her chest, which was making the covers into a little oblong mountain. "Oh." She pushed back the covers, slowly, and looked at what lay beneath. "Um. Really?"

"Really," Tim said. "C'mon, get dressed. We can get a little shopping in before lunch. You're gonna need it."

"Oh God..." Kim groaned. "Do I have to be enthusiastic about shopping now, on top of everything else?"

"You can if you want." Tim shrugged. "I always thought of it as a necessary evil, myself. But you'll feel better once you've got some clothes that fit. And I get to do

my first ever wrong-gender ‘tampon run,’ yay!”

“Ugh...how can you be so enthusiastic about this?”
Kim groaned. “I mean, just look at me!”

“Let me see, what was it you said?” Tim asked.
“Anyway, for what it’s worth, I think you look great!”

Kim facepalmed. “Oh, yeah, *twist* that knife. I’m
sorry, okay? So maybe I *was* thinking with my ‘nads.”

“Well, for the next three years, you won’t have that
problem,” Tim said.

Kim rolled her eyes. “Just don’t start thinking with
yours now, because I’m *gonna* call you on it.”

Well, she has me there. “Fair’s fair. C’mon, get up and
get dressed and let’s go meet our RIDEs.” Tim fumbled for
his slacks. “Okay, got that, now where’s my...oh wait, *duh*,
I don’t *need* a bra anymore...”

“*I* didn’t get one,” Kim grumbled. “Tina—*Tim*—I really
am sorry. I didn’t think about how it must feel to have
these things hanging off you all the time.”

“It’s not so bad when they’re smaller,” Tim said. “But
those *cantaloupes* you’ve got? Yikes. We’d better get you
some lingerie in a hurry. We might need something
industrial-strength for those.”

“Well, just remember, if you think being a guy is *easy*,
you’re going to get a rude awakening,” Kim said. She
folded her arms awkwardly under, then over her breasts
and grumped.

“You’re cute when you pout like that,” Tim needled.
But, in reality, he was having similar thoughts himself.
*Perhaps I didn’t think my cunning plan all the way
through.* “Right. Anyway, let’s get our clothes on, and get
on with our day.”

“All right...” Kim sat up awkwardly, yelping a little as she accidentally sat on her tail. “Wow. Awkward.” She leaned carefully out to look for her clothes, only wobbling a little bit. “New center of gravity, me.”

Tim pulled on his briefs and slacks, then T-shirt. “So, uh, hey...” he said.

“Hmm?” Kim asked, pulling on her shirt.

“Was it...y’know...okay?”

Kim cocked her head. “You know...about that part of it? I don’t think I can complain. It was...well, VL can’t compare. Remember that time? Opposites Day? We swapped sensory inputs.”

“This was nothing like that,” Tim opined.

“It was close,” Kim insisted. She kept her arms folded under her breasts now. “Ugh. My back.”

So what are we even going to say to people down at the con? Tim wondered. They didn’t look much like their old selves, so maybe...well, there was shopping to do first. The drug store and the corner fabberly to get a smartbra... *If there’s even time for the con today...sheesh...no, I didn’t think this through.*

“I could use some help with this wild mane of hair,” Kim said. It draped all the way down to her waist. “It’s all tangled.”

It was another half hour before they could even leave the hotel room.

They stepped out of the elevator to the parking garage a few minutes later, and stared at row upon row of identical egg-like skimmers and ground cars. The garage was empty of people. Kim glanced at Tim. “Uh...do you remember where we parked?”

“Hey, guys, we’re back!” Tim called. “Come on, don’t make us look crazy here...”

A moment later, two of the car shapes blinked out, and the skimmer bikes pulled out in front of them and converted back over to their animal shapes. “Well, look who’s back,” Madeira said, headbumping Kim under her breasts.

“Hey, sorry for leaving so suddenly,” Tim said, reaching down to run a hand along Quentin’s furry muzzle. “We just...you know.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Quentin said. “We know all about how crossriders are. Not that I’ve done much of it myself—back in the polity where I’m from, a lot of the humans tend to frown on it—but I’ve heard about it.”

“We wanted to go out and do a little shopping, get Kim here some necessities,” Tim said. “Then we can suit up and do the con.”

“Great!” Quentin said. “Lubyanka and Hobbes have been sharing their telemetry. We’ve been looking forward to getting in there ourselves.”

Madeira unfolded back into her skimmer bike form. “Climb aboard, hon. We’ll take you where you need to go.”

“Well, that was an education,” Kim said as she followed Tim out of the last store on their list. She felt a lot better now that she had a properly-fitted smartbra holding everything in place—even if they’d had to go to a plus-sizes shop to get it. On Madeira’s recommendation, they’d picked up several of them. She said that sometimes Fuser nanites did odd things to non-Zharus-made cloth.

Kim had the feeling that she and Clara would be

comparing notes very soon. Tim had said that he—well, *she* at the time—had taken her out for the same “girly run” the day before. Including the same demonstration of how to use the unmentionables. *Ugh. Can’t wait to get to Zharus.* Madeira had said they had a nanotech product there that made the whole business unnecessary.

“It’s interesting seeing the whole thing from the other side,” Tim mused. “All the funny looks those clerks kept giving me...”

“I’m just glad they didn’t ask for our IDs with the charge purchases,” Kim said. “That would have been awkward.”

“Did you notice how they ogled you?”

“Pffft,” Kim gestured dismissively.

“How some of the girls looked envious?”

“Pshaw!” Kim said with another gesture.

“Where did you pick up *that* from?” Tim asked pointedly.

“Don’t you remember *you*, in high school?”

Tim grimaced. “Oh, right. Right. I did that all the time whenever you or one of the other boys gave me one of those looks. To show I didn’t care.”

“What can I say? I learned from the best,” Kim said, grinning. She put the last of the shopping bags into one of Madeira’s panniers. “Let’s get back to the hotel and try and enjoy the rest of the con.”

“Oooh, great!” Madeira said as they mounted up. “I’ve been looking forward to that. Luby came up with a *great* fursuit costume for me.”

“Oh, wow, I can hardly wait,” Kim deadpanned as they pulled away.

They Fused up as soon as they were in the hotel garage away from prying eyes. Kim looked down at herself, and caught Tim doing the same out of the corner of her eye. Their Fuser form bore a strong resemblance to her human form, at least insofar as body type was concerned. At least, she had the same difficulty seeing anything beyond her upper chest either way. But at least she had a better sense of balance now—or at least Madeira did.

Then their hardlight pelt flickered and changed. Kim glanced over at their reflection in the windshield of one of the egg-cars. They were now a plush fox of the same size, with a hardlight tee-shirt stretched over mountainous foam-rubber breasts and short-short daisy dukes on their hips. “Well, I guess that was about the only way you could really go with this look,” Kim said. She glanced over at Tim and Quentin, who had a more traditional serval fursuit look with animatronic eyes and ears.

“Well, once more unto the breach,” Tim said.

“Yeah,” Kim said. She followed them into the elevator, ducking their head to get through the doorway. There were a couple of people already in the elevator—from their normal mode of dress and lack of name badges, probably normal hotel guests. Kim gave them a great big wave, and stifled a giggle as they backed away to the other wall.

:That’s actually not too far from the reactions to us in the early days on Zharus,: Quentin said.

:Johnny-come-latelies,: Tim said proudly. *:Fursuiters have been getting those reactions for five hundred years!:* “Ground floor, please,” he said aloud. The elevator dinged and closed.

When they got to the ground floor, the two Fusers

stood back and watched bemusedly as the mundanes all but fell over themselves trying to get out of the elevator. “You know what? This is why I’ve always wanted a fursuit,” Tim said happily. “Thanks, Quentin.”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” the serval replied as they walked out.

“So here we are,” Kim said. “Let’s mingle, and catch up with the others.” They sauntered down the hall toward the convention center, pausing every so often to wave at passers-by. A couple of times they had to stop when people held up their comms to take pictures, or asked if they could pose with them or their children.

:Does this happen often?: Quentin wondered.

:Fursuiters get this a lot,: Tim said. *:It’s kind of one of the reasons why it takes a special sort of person to want to ‘suit. If you’re not good with people, you’re in the wrong hobby.:*

They finally made it to the convention hall, where the con was in full swing. They spotted Lubyanka and Hobbes along the far wall and started making their way over.

:You don’t like me very much, do you?: Madeira asked privately.

:Huh?: Kim said. *:What makes you say that?:*

:You haven’t said a word to me since we’ve been Fused,: Madeira said. *:And I can tell how you feel about the boobs.:*

:It’s...kind of a big adjustment,: Kim said. *:The whole thing is. Can’t you...y’know, make them a little smaller?:*

:Unfortunately, I’m not programmed for ‘smaller,’: Madeira said ruefully. *:As a BBV model, I’m made for a*

very specific clientele.:

:Good Lord, they actually call you a BBV?: Kim said.

:That's an old, old term in furry. It stands for—:

:I know what it stands for. I am what it stands for,:
Madeira said. *:I think it was someone's idea of an in-joke.:*

:Terrific.: Kim rolled her eyes. *:And what do you mean about a "specific clientele"? Girls who want bigger boobs?:*

:Not...exactly.:

Kim would have facepalmed if she'd been running the body right then. *:Oh God. I'm stuck inside a furry robot hooker.:*

:I prefer 'courtesan,' personally,: Madeira said primly. *:It's a respectable job, on Zharus. Or at least it can be, if you're in the right town. I used to work at this great little club in Aloha. A rather libertine city as these things go, even on my own world. Then they traded me in for a newer model. They were supposed to matchmake me with a suitable human. I wonder what happened?:*

As she told her story, Kim experienced the city as she described it. It reminded her of Hawaii. The sky was a slightly different shade of blue, and the architecture was rather strange and archaic, like something out of a history book on the twentieth century. The streets thronged with people having a good time, some were more Fuser-mode furries, but many of them were utterly nude plain humans.

:When we get back there, maybe I can help you find someone who'll suit you better,: Kim said. *:I take it a non-BBV RIDE could reduce these? I'd like to see my feet.:*

:I could reduce them, if it weren't for the fetter

against it in my code,: Madeira said. *:Maybe Lubyanka could disable it. I haven't asked. And...well, to be honest, I do prefer my partner to match my own shape. It makes me feel more...full, I guess.:*

:We're just getting into some really weird territory here...: Kim thought wryly.

:Like I told Tina, I can't help the way I'm made,: Madeira said testily. *:Once we get to Zharus I'll be sure to find someone who'll give you the figure you want. You can even go to a bodysculpt salon and get my tags removed at the same time.:*

:Eh, well...: Kim shrugged. *:It's early days to talk about that. We don't even know how we're going to get there yet. Let's just work the con for now.:*

:Let me handle the female mannerisms,: Lubyanka insisted. The shewolf-tiger pair were drawing a big enough crowd that it made not bumping into anyone more and more difficult.

:They're all yours,: Clara said. During the morning she had been picking up on some of the shewolf's thoughts. *:So...what is a Woman of Sturmhaven anyway?:*

:Only the best thing to be on the entire planet of Zharus,: Lubyanka said. *:A woman, who is from the polity of Sturmhaven.:*

:That...tells me a lot, yeah,: Clara said.

:It is hard to explain briefly,: Lubyanka said. *:You would have to know more about the culture of Sturmhaven to truly understand. We are a matriarchy, that places a high value upon feminine self-reliance.*

Here...:

Clara suddenly felt a whole new range of memories open up—a view of life from around another woman, including the echo of some of that woman’s own shared memories. They had lived in a city—or as they said, polity—that was an odd mashup of German, Russian, and other European cultures and architecture, where women were *real* women and men were most often...their pets. *:Oh, geez, really?:* Clara thought.

:It is not quite as bad as it looks to outsiders,: Lubyanka said defensively. *:It is simply that...well, all right, maybe it really is that bad. But it is home.:*

:So you expect me to be some kind of...modern-day Amazon bondage queen?: Clara sent skeptically.

:It’s not like that!: Lubyanka insisted. *:There are plenty of Sturmhaven women who feel men deserve more equality. The movement has been growing more popular lately.:* She shrugged. *:Of course, when we do get back, nothing says we actually have to go there. RIDEs go where their owners go.:*

:Am I your “owner” now?: Clara said.

:Now is...special circumstances. But when we get back to Zharus...: She sighed. *:Well, RIDEs have to have owners.:*

:Well, this is enlightening and all, but I think we’re missing a few steps before we get to that,: Clara sent. The whole explanation left a bad taste. Zharus had suddenly lost some of its shine. *:You haven’t heard anything more from Harriet, have you?:*

:Not yet. But judging by what I’ve seen of her so far, we probably won’t hear from her until she has something

important to tell us.:

:Hopefully it's good news,: Clara said. *:Hey, would you look at those two?:*

:I see Madeira has quite gotten the knack of fursuit acting,: Lubyanka said. *:Sending her my memories of the panel yesterday must have helped.:*

The fox was hamming and vamping it up, sauntering around in an exaggerated sashay, hips swaying from one timezone to another. Every so often, she would strike one of the classic poses—leaning back against a wall with an arm behind her head, or embracing another fursuiter for a muzzle-to-muzzle “kiss” with one leg cocked back. Comms and the occasional dedicated camera were much in evidence.

Quentin and Hobbes were having their own fun. Over in a corner of the room where there was plenty of space, they were having a mock play fight, batting at each other with big plush paws. Of course, as a statuesque she-wolf, she and Lubyanka were coming in for their fair share of attention themselves. They weren't exactly stealing the show—the more experienced *real* fursuiters were just as good or better at the acting—but they were all getting their fair share of attention. Clara chuckled. *:Heh. If they only knew exactly what they were photographing. I'm just amazed at how good your hardlight is. You barely see it outside of government buildings here.:*

:Hardlight technology was developed on Wednesday, Zharus's next-door neighbor,: Lubyanka said. *:We share much technology, but do not export as much. Our hardlight projectors alone might have been enough reason for them to try to reverse-engineer us.:*

:Hey, guys!: Tom commed. :A bunch of us are gonna go outside and wave at passing cars. Wanna come?:

:Sounds like fun!: Tim said.

:I'm in!: Kim added.

:Guess we might as well, eh Luby?: Clara said.

:Let's go,: the she-wolf agreed.

There were furry fans at almost all levels of society, and a few of them had been able to finagle access to the archives of ancient popular culture that the Zharusian Steader brothers had unearthed. It turned out these included a lot of old news coverage, videos, and blogs of furry conventions from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. With this source of information, modern furries had sought to revive many of their ancient traditions. Going outside and waving at passing cars was one of those.

:I must admit, this is amusing,: Lubyanka said, as another one of the egg-shaped cars slowed, its occupants staring. A couple of them nearly swerved off the road before the backup autodrives corrected their course. :However, I find myself wondering...as oppressive as your government is, how is it that you "furries" are able to escape their notice?:

:It's kind of complicated,: Clara said. :It's not so much people acting weird that they don't like. It's...being dishonest about it. Pretending to be "normal" while being weird on the inside. People who raise their freak flag and wave it all about, they're okay with. Like, if you felt like you were born the wrong sex and always said so, there's no problem if you choose to have a clinic cross you. It's just if you like playing femmes in VL and one day out of

nowhere decide you want to be one in the real world too, that they have problems with.:

:Or if you should get changed over by a RIDE who kidnapped you, I imagine,: Lubyanka sighed.

:They're kind of rigid about these things,: Clara said. *:Even if they "knew" it was an accident, the prejudice is still there.:*

:That doesn't make any sense,: Lubyanka said.

:Nobody said it had to,: Clara said. *:Whose hangups ever do?:*

:But...shouldn't that still mean you come in for trouble? Those of you with fursuits do not wear them all the time, after all.:

:On the other hand, there are so many people with grown-on animal ears and tails who aren't furrries at all but just kept them as a souvenir of their Zharus visit, they're almost not even worth remarking upon—so it kind of balances out.: Clara chuckled. *:That, and we've also managed to convince them that we're "historical reenactors.":*

Clara felt Lubyanka's puzzlement through their link. *:Reenacting...what, exactly?:*

:Twentieth-century furry conventions,: Clara said. *:Yeah, I know it doesn't exactly make sense, but most of the bureaucrats really don't even give a rip about history. And the ones who do...well, they're more concerned about how they look to the ones who don't, so as long as we've got a good fig leaf, we're covered all around. If the Society for Creative Anachronism can run around in funny costumes on weekends, well, so can we. In some ways, we've actually got an easier time of it than most,*

because our furriness means they don't pay as much attention to other weirdness.:

:How...peculiar,: Lubyanka said, waving at another car.

:Welcome to Earth, hope you enjoy your stay,: Clara deadpanned.

The others were having just as much fun waving (or, in Madeira's case, blowing kisses) to cars as the rest of the fursuiters. They figured that they would probably have about ten minutes before someone showed up to warn them against making a public nuisance. But then everything changed when Harriet broke in over their comms.

:Hey, guys. I see you're already outside. Good. Listen up—you need to scram right now. Don't worry about sneaking off. Seems like someone with half a brain has taken charge of looking for you 'uns—they just dispatched a lot of cops your way and they'll be at the con in a couple of minutes. So just go now. Split up and head different directions out of town. I'll blot you out of the traffic cams.:

:Understood,: Lubyanka replied.

:Hey, let's give these guys a show, shall we?: Tom suggested.

Lubyanka grinned. *:Why not?:*

As one, all four RIDEs dropped the plush fursuit disguises and replaced them with their real pelts. "Hey, guys, it's been fun hanging out with you-all," Tom said casually. "But we need to get going now. Smell ya later!"

The RIDEs' hardlight flickered out and they converted over to their skimmer forms and hit the road. Unlike the

other three, who were all bikes, Hobbes's skimmer mode was a small red flying saucer with a bubble canopy. As one, the RIDEs took off, bringing up hardlight eggshell disguises as they went. Behind them, a small crowd of furies stood still in shock, looking every bit as poleaxed as the driver of one of the cars they'd been waving to.

Thirty seconds after leaving, Clara and Lubyanka passed by half a dozen police skimmers going the other way. They didn't even notice. "I feel kind of bad for all the furies back there," Clara said. "Something tells me this con's going to end in a bunch of interrogations all around."

"Hopefully they'll believe the ones who saw us go," Lubyanka said. "Now you see why it was necessary for your friends to come, too?"

"Yeah, yeah," Clara said. "I can't help feeling like you guys *enjoyed* it a little too much, though."

"If you'd spent *your* life entirely at humans' whim, how do you think being able to turn the tables would feel?" Lubyanka asked.

Clara sighed. "Okay, point taken. Let's just get out of town and see where Harriet wants us to go next."

The nine of them met in a forest clearing in VR over an encrypted comm band. Harriet stood across from the others. "I'm sure you're wondering why I called you all here today..."

"Unaccustomed as you are to public speaking?" Tom said.

Harriet grinned. "Right. So anyway, with the formalities out of the way—I've come up with a plan to get you all back to Zharus. We're going to need to get ahold of

some things to make it work, though.”

“Like what?” Clara asked.

“Like these.” Harriet clapped her hands together, then split them apart. Between them, the image of a glass and metal tube grew as the distance between the hands expanded. “Standard cryogenic suspension capsule. Not so very different than the ones they shipped the original colonists out in, but about half the size and twenty times more reliable. Still used today for deadheaders who can’t afford to pay for luxury cruise accommodations, as well as for keeping critical medical cases alive until replacement organs can be grown or cyber-parts can be fabbed.”

“So you’re planning to ship us out as cargo,” Lubyanka said. “That way you’ll bypass any checks on individual people.”

“Right. Won’t have to worry about disguising your humans, forging identity papers, worrying that someone might see through the papers, and so on,” Harriet said. “Not to mention the RIDEs would have to go as cargo anyway. Best all around to keep you all together.” She clapped her hands back together and the image vanished. “That said, they’re not always easy to come by. As medical equipment, all sales are carefully tracked. So we’ll need to purloin a few, and make it so their loss won’t be noticed ‘til you’re already long gone.”

“Okay, so where do we need to go?” Tim asked.

“Well, they usually keep some in warehouses near the major spaceports, but I think you’ve pretty much outstayed your welcome in Springfield,” Harriet said.

“Apart from that, the closest place where we can get what we need is in Kansas City. It’s just an hour or so away by

skimmer. I'm sending you the coords for a meetup now." The gem on her arm twinkled. "Travel by separate routes to get there, stay under cover, swap disguises every so often if you can find a tunnel or something away from prying satellite eyes. And remember, Earth has lower speed limits than Zharus. Don't do something that would invite a ticket, eh?"

"So once we get there, what then?" Kim asked.

"The basic plan is pretty much the same as for rescuing you guys: bypass security, go in, get what we need, scramble the records on the rest," Harriet said. "Still casing the joint and figuring out the specific details; should have them by the time you get there."

"Well, you've done all right by us so far," Quentin said. "Guess we'll see you then."

"Right. Drive safe." Harriet winked out, and a moment later the VR shut down, leaving them back on their individual RIDEs.

"All right, then!" Lubyanka said cheerfully. "Kansas City, here we come."

The trip to Kansas City was largely uneventful. When they passed through a small town northwest of Springfield called "Humansville," Lubyanka said, "You know, I think we better move on quickly. For some reason, I don't feel welcome here." Then, closer to Kansas City, they stopped in the town of Peculiar, Missouri to recharge Lubyanka's batteries. "What a...perfectly normal place," Lubyanka mused.

They circumvented the Kansas City metro area and headed for the spaceport in the northwest part of town.

The meetup point was a storm sewer just a couple of miles away from the airport. A trickle of water flowed down the center of the otherwise-empty tunnel. As they pulled up, Harriet stepped out of the shadows. “We’re clear here,” she said. “Already made sure there’s no people around, and there certainly aren’t any cameras down here. We can drop the disguises and chat openly.”

The four RIDEs transformed to Fuser form and gathered around her. “So what’s the good word?” Tom asked.

“I’ve firmed up the plan while you were traveling. Look.” She projected a virtual map of the airport in front of them. “Here, to the northwest of the airport, are the warehouses I’m talking about. They generally hold supplies and equipment for various flights—either orbital shuttles, or in some cases things that might be needed by in-system or interstellar traffic. Spare parts, consumables, escape pods...and cryotubes. Security is about what you’d expect for something like that...decent but not Fort Knox. Most of the stuff there isn’t exactly something you can put in your pocket. We won’t have any trouble getting in with me on the job.

“Once we’ve got what we need, then we need to get it down to here.” She pointed at a complex of buildings on the southeast side, almost directly across the airport. “This is where cargo pods are loaded for interstellar transshipment. As it happens, a lot of the local Steader Corporation’s goods go through here...which is good, since I are one. I hardly had to do any tweaking at all to get a few pods set aside for our needs. One for you-all, and several more for decoys, just in case they’re able to track us this

far and start getting some ideas. Also laid in some other supplies we'll need that weren't quite so hard to get ahold of."

"Sounds like...a plan, I guess?" Hobbes said doubtfully. "Seems a little seat-of-your-pants to me...but then, you are half-Harold."

"Now there's no need to be insulting about it," Harriet said. "He's kind of like an unflattering birthmark. You know it's there, you can't get rid of it, but you don't like being reminded of it." She shrugged. "Anyway, we outclass them by such an extent, we hardly need a plan at all. We just need to be reasonably careful and we'll be done before you know it. We'll go in at midnight."

"Good enough," Quentin said.

"Any news out of Springfield?" Tim asked.

"Haven't really been paying much attention, to be honest," Harriet said. "Let me see what my daemons have to say. Hmm. Looks like they moved in and shut the con down for 'subversive activities.'"

"Crap," Kim sighed. "We have a lot of friends there."

"You never know," Harriet said. "Give it a year or two, a lot of them might just be joining you on Zharus. Hell, EarthGov will probably pay for the tickets."

Tim facepalmed Quentin's Fuser form. "Something tells me we might just have caused Earth's furry fandom as a whole's...well, not death but *deportation* knell."

"Eh," Harriet said. "From all the 'I wish I could go to Zharus too' comments I scanned off furry mesh forums when I was figuring out where you hid, they'd probably thank you for it in the end. Make a new furry fandom on Zharus—we've got *real* furrries there."

“I guess that’s a bright side,” Tom said. “Feel bad for the people’s families, though. Hell, I feel bad for *our* families.”

“Don’t worry. If the government thinks they had something to do with this, they’ll probably join you, too, sooner or later,” Harriet said.

Tom groaned. “Stop cheering me up!”

“I don’t know how much longer the government can keep deporting the people it doesn’t like,” Tim said. “Sooner or later they’re going to realize if they keep doing that they won’t have anyone left.”

“Their loss is Zharus’s gain,” Harriet said. “And the longer it takes them to figure *that* out, the better off Zharus is.”

“Anyway, I guess there’s not much more to do now but sit and wait for midnight,” Clara said. “Eh. The sooner we get this over with, the better.”

“Just close your eyes and think of Zharus,” Harriet suggested. “You’ll be there before you know it.”

The intervening hours passed pretty quickly. Tom had the idea to get everyone together in VR for a five-handed game of Settlers of Catan, with the RIDEs and humans playing as partners together. (“I’ve got wood for sheep!” “What, doesn’t every furry?”) In the end, Harriet won, though she’d never actually played the game before. They weren’t sure whether it was due to her extra computing power or just beginner’s luck. After that, it was time to head out and get into position for the operation.

Getting into the warehouse was surprisingly simple. After Harriet gimmicked the security cameras and made

sure the human guards were on patrol sweep in another part of the building, they simply cruised right up to the loading dock, opened the garage door, and slipped inside.

On the interior, the warehouse was about the same as any other: huge shelves full of crates, alternated with stacks of crates too big for shelves. Lubyanka said something about someone named “Indiana Jones” that Clara didn’t understand. Lubyanka promised to fill her in later on, when there was time.

Harriet led them deep into the warehouse, to a section of crates about the size and shape of oversized coffins. “These are the ones. And there’s more than enough of them here. Now we just need to find a couple of lifter pallet jacks so we can haul them out. Then I’ll go hotwire a truck from the lot.”

“Well, this seems easy enough so far,” Tom mused. “Maybe this won’t be a problem after all.”

“Oh, you just had to say that, didn’t you?” Harriet paused. “Crap. All the ‘jacks are at the other end of the warehouse. I guess they round them up at the end of the day. And the guards are coming this way...and we can’t just stun them, because they have to check in every ten minutes.”

“Okay, right. How about we split up, then?” Tim suggested. “You and the RIDEs fetch the ‘jacks and get the crates out. We humans can distract the guards. Get caught and escorted out if necessary...you can come rescue us after you get the crates clear.”

“Hmm. Okay, works,” Harriet said. “You’ll need to hide the ears and tails, though. That’s the kind of detail that will stick in people’s minds.”

“Give us caps when we de-Fuse,” Tom said. “And the tails can tuck into baggy pants or dresses...”

“Got it,” Hobbes said. “I’ll give you a fake nose, too. Should be good for a half hour or so before it comes off.”

Harriet nodded as the RIDEs de-Fused. “There’s a guard coming along each wall. Tom, Clara, you head that way. Tim and Kim, over there. Good luck.”

Clara followed Tom in the direction Harriet indicated. “So, what’s our story? We need to come up with something convincing.”

“Uh...hmm. Dunno,” Tom said. “Why would we have snuck into a warehouse? To see what’s in here? Maybe our dog slipped his leash? Our skimmer broke down and we were looking for help? We’ll figure something out.”

They reached the wall and leaned up against a set of crates. In the distance, they heard the guard’s footsteps. “Okay, so what is it then?” Clara whispered. “Quick, we’ve got to decide so we can keep our stories straight!”

Tom glanced toward the footsteps, then back at Clara as they grew louder and louder, almost reaching a crescendo. “Um,” he whispered at last. “Right. Just...follow my lead, okay?”

“What lea—MMPH!” Clara squeaked as Tom suddenly threw his arms around her and kissed her full on the mouth.

Clara’s eyes widened and she stiffened, but before she could jerk away a voice said, “Here, now! What’s all this, then?”

They broke off the kiss suddenly, and Tom looked up. “Ack! Uh...hi. Um...our skimmer broke down outside, and we didn’t have our comms with us. We came in here to see

if we could find someone to call us a taxi...”

The security guard, an older man in a blue rent-a-cop uniform, scratched his head. “Oh, *sure* you did.” He chuckled. “I was young once, too, you know. But a private warehouse is no place to be sneaking away to make out. I’m afraid I’m going to have to escort you off the premises.”

“Uh...sorry...” Clara said, blushing—and the blush wasn’t just from being caught. *Ooooh, I am going to kill that man. Just wait ‘til we’re alone...*

The security guard cocked his head for a moment, then tapped his earbud. “Yeah...yeah...you’re never gonna believe this, but I just caught another couple over here.” He turned and looked at them. “What, you were on a *double* date? This is a new one on me.”

“It’s a new thing in his frat,” Clara supplied. “We, uh, try to find the weirdest places to...well, you know.”

“This place looked big enough for the whole frat at once,” Tom said. “But I guess it’s too well-guarded. We’ll have to tell them it’s a no-go.”

“I should think so,” the guard said. “Well, come along, then. No harm done.” He shook his head. “Don’t know why they didn’t see you on the cameras. Have to check into that.”

:Good work, you four,: Harriet sent over their nano-link. *:We’ve got the ‘jacks, and as soon as the guards take you guys back to their office we’ll be free to move them and snag the crates.:*

:Great,: Clara sent back. *:Let us know when you need us.:* Behind the guard’s back, she glared at Tom. *You and I are gonna have words, mister.*

A few minutes later, the four humans walked away from the warehouse. The guards had let the four of them off with a stern warning, which they'd taken as meekly as they could, while Harriet whispered progress reports in their ears. It looked like the theft had gone off without a hitch.

Tim and Kim were holding hands as they walked, looking at each other, whispering and giggling. From Clara's perspective, it was almost sickening.

Clara took Tom's arm and pulled him far enough away from the others to talk without being overheard. "I can't believe you *did* that!" she fumed.

"Hey, it was the only thing I could think of that didn't look suspicious," Tom said. "And it worked, didn't it? They didn't have time to come to any conclusions at all, because we gave them a believable one to jump right to."

"You could have *warned* me," Clara grumbled.

"It was a spur of the moment kind of thing," Tom said. "Anyway, don't worry about it. It's not like we're really a couple or anything. Heck, it wasn't even all that great of a kiss anyway."

Clara stopped and stared. "What?" she said.

"Really, it wasn't all that—" Tom began, then broke off as Clara slapped him. "Ow! What was that f—MMPH!"

Clara grabbed his face in both hands, pulled it up to hers, and gave him a kiss that almost knocked his teeth in. Then she let go, pulled away, slapped him *again*, and stalked off after Kim and Tim.

Tim stared after her, rubbing his face. "...the hell was *that* for?" He shook his head. "I swear, I'll never

understand women—wait.” He hurried after Clara and the others, as the truck driven by Harriet pulled to a stop ahead of them.

“I can’t believe he *did* that!” Clara grumbled to Lubyanka, as they sat by a campfire in the forest in her virtual reality. “He just...*kissed* me. And *then* he said it wasn’t a great kiss!”

“Have you ever kissed a man before?” Lubyanka wondered.

“What? No, of *course* not!”

“Then it’s probably not surprising it wasn’t the best kiss,” Lubyanka said placidly. “Don’t worry. You’ll get better at it.”

“That’s not the *point!*” Clara said. “I mean...I don’t *want* to go around kissing boys!”

“Girls, then?” Lubyanka suggested. “Many Women of Sturmhaven lean that direction. Not unusual, especially for those who have crossed.”

“*No!*” Clara sputtered. “I just became a girl yesterday, it’s a bit early to go around kissing *anyone* yet.”

“Which is why it’s not surprising,” Lubyanka said.

“But why did *I* go and kiss him back?” Clara groaned, facepalming.

“I would leave *that* analysis to qualified crossover therapists,” the she-wolf said. “You could ask one once we arrive on Zharus.”

“Oh, right. Like enough people don’t *already* know about us, I should go and involve someone *else*, too,” Clara said. “Helpful.”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Lubyanka said. “Human sexuality

is a complex thing, and you will settle. This sort of thing is common to new crossriders. Your mind is not yet used to the new balance of hormones in your body. It is much like being a teenager again.”

“Oh, great,” Clara sighed. “Had enough of *that* my first time around.”

Lubyanka tossed her head, the lupine equivalent of a shrug. “He probably won’t even remember it tomorrow.”

“Oh, so I’m easily forgettable? That’s supposed to make me feel *better*?” Clara grumbled.

“I think you are going to find reasons to be unhappy no matter what I say about this, so it is probably better simply to drop the subject,” Lubyanka said primly.

“*This* close to a new wolfskin rug,” Clara muttered.

“What the hell was that even *about*?” Tom wondered as he walked alongside Hobbes through a field of waist-high grass. “I mean, it was just a kiss. It’s not like I, you know, dragged her into bed or anything.”

“I don’t claim to be an expert,” Hobbes said. “But judging by the human media I’ve seen, a kiss is very rarely ‘just’ a kiss, especially if you weren’t expecting it.”

“You can’t go by what you see on the vids,” Tom said. “That’s just made-up stuff.”

“But it is made up based on universal, shared experiences,” Hobbes said. “If it didn’t have that kernel of truth, it wouldn’t be universally applicable, and people wouldn’t get anything out of it.”

“And anyway, if it was ‘just’ a kiss, why’d she go and kiss me *back*?” Tom wondered. He rubbed his mouth again. Even in VR, he could still feel the sting.

“Well, you *did* accuse her of being a poor kisser,” Hobbes said. “Perhaps she felt the need to redeem herself.”

“Why would she care about that? I mean...hell, she was a *he* until a couple days ago,” Tom said. “And Clark never made any sort of passes at me. He was always strictly hetero.”

“Perhaps she still is,” Hobbes mused.

“But then she’d...*ohhh*.” Tom shook his head. “But... she *said* she didn’t *want* to go out with me.”

Hobbes chuckled. “You have to understand, on Zharus there are certain fundamental clichés concerning crossriders. And they are only clichés because they are so common that people tend to regard them as universally true. One of those is that the limbic system works in unusual ways...ways which a new crossrider might not fully understand themselves.”

“So...what...she’s secretly attracted to me and doesn’t know how to deal with it?” Tom said.

“She could be secretly attracted to you and not even *know* it,” Hobbes said. “Or, it could just be that you’re male and available.”

“Hmph,” Tom said. “There’s a word for men who go around assuming women are attracted to them but just don’t *know* it yet. It rhymes with ‘papist.’”

“No one said you have to pursue it,” Hobbes said. “If she really is interested in you, *she* will be the one to pursue *you*. It just takes a little time to let her make that decision.”

Tom shook his head. “I don’t like this. Clark was my *buddy*. We worked together at the call center, went out

drinking sometimes...now it's like I don't even know him. *Her.*"

"If it's any consolation, she probably feels like she doesn't know *herself* that well anymore, either," Hobbes said. "The first few days after crossing are often a confusing time, even for those who do it willingly. For many there's a kind of...thrill of self discovery. By the time Harold made me he'd already swapped twice. You need to be understanding."

"Oh, great," Tom grumbled. "You do realize, I'm the only human who still has the parts he was born with in our little bunch, and *none* of the other three could exactly have been said to have done it completely willingly? What am I, their designated therapist?"

"If the shoe fits..." Hobbes said. "Of course, once we get to Zharus, if you don't want to feel like the odd man out anymore..."

Tom shook his head. "Hey, no way, buddy. I'm afraid you're stuck with me. I let my *first* tiger get away. Not doing the same for you. I've got you firmly by the toe, and I'm *not* letting go."

Hobbes headbumped the small of Tom's back affectionately. "You know, Harold was about the worst Calvin I can think of. Oh, he tried to get into the role. He wore red shirts with black stripes, I kept his hair blond, short, and spiky. He tried to sound all philosophical beyond his years. But it just fell flat. I'd guess he was having another mid-life crisis and was trying to recapture his lost childhood, but then he never had been very grown up at the best of times."

"Yeah, I read the comic books in your online storage,"

Tom said. “No offense, but as much as I found them amusing, trying to pretend to be Calvin just isn’t in me. Even if I *weren’t* about twenty years too old.”

“That is the *best* thing I’ve heard in my entire life,” Hobbes said. “Now c’mon, let’s drop back into the Real. We’re almost there.”

“Well, this is it. Your new home for the next year or so, not that you’ll be awake for most of it,” Harriet said. They stood before an immense metal intermodal shipping container. The design really hadn’t changed much in the five hundred years since the containers had used to be stacked like giant LEGO bricks on the decks of oceangoing freighters. The tech had advanced a little—they now had electronic locks, atmo seals, climate control, transponders, and so on—but rectangular bricks were still the most stackable in cargo bays, and there had been no reason to alter the standard dimensions. Harriet unsealed the doors and swung them wide. “Let’s break those tubes out of the crates and get them set up inside. I already put the mounting hardware together.”

Fused, Clara and Lubyanka followed Harriet into the container and looked around. Toward the back of the crate were four identical metal frames that could only be meant for the pods. Close to the door, two small fuel cell generators had been bolted down, with automatic feeder mechanisms attached to put in new cells as the old ones were used up. They resembled giant automatic pistol magazines, the round fuel cells stacked like giant bullets.

“Hey, wait a sec,” Tom said. “There’s no way those generators are going to be powerful enough to run four

cryotubes for a whole year.”

“Actually, there’s enough to keep them juiced for about two and a half,” Harriet said. “They won’t be running them by themselves. They’re going to be hooked in through your RIDEs. The quantum multiplier effect from the sarium in their batteries means they’ll give your RIDEs more than enough power to spare to keep you guys frosty and keep themselves running, too. Of course, that means they’re not exactly going to be able to move around a lot, but then, they wouldn’t be anyway.”

“So we will be directly responsible for keeping our partners alive,” Lubyanka said. “That sounds... reasonable.”

Harriet pointed to the next objects over from the generators, a number of cylindrical tanks and a squat ceramic device with lots of pipes and tubes. “Oxygen tanks and a CO₂ scrubber. Not meant to be used all the time, but if there’s some emergency and you gotta wake up, it’ll give several days of breathable air—long enough to comm the ship’s crew and have someone come get’cha. And there’s a space heater to regulate the temperature, and a few days of emergency rations just in case. Covering all the angles here.”

“But...aren’t they going to be looking for stuff shipped to Zharus at this point?” Kim asked. “I mean, it’s going to look kind of suspicious, isn’t it?”

“There’s a *lot* of stuff being shipped to Zharus at any given time,” Harriet said. “If they were going to search every crate, they’d have to delay the ship for months, and the companies with legit merch to move would never stand for that. Just to be safe, I’m going to be addressing this

crate for Wednesday, and load a time-delay shipping code change into the ship's computers while I'm up there. If worst comes to worst and the change doesn't come off, you'll still be in friendly territory; I'm also putting enough cash in your wallet accounts to buy passage from Wednesday to Zharus if you have to."

"You mean you're not coming with us?" Tim asked.

Harriet chuckled. "Me? Nah. I'll be coming right back down after I plant you on the *Goose*. They don't need me back on Zharus, and I kinda like it here. Maybe I'll trundle along when the stash of Q I brought with me to snack on runs out. Anyway, I can muddy things further, plant false trails and such, after you're clear. With any luck, you'll be on Zharus before they figure out you're not still on Earth."

"We sure appreciate what you're doing for us," Clara said.

Harriet shrugged. "Eh. Don't thank me too soon. Let's get this stuff set up and you in it. The sooner you're all off this rock, the better I'll feel about it."

"That sounds good to me," Lubyanka said. "Let's get these tubes into place."

Under Harriet's direction, the RIDEs brought the cryotubes into the cargo crate and settled them into the frames, then Harriet came along and bolted them into place. Instead of a power wrench, she used directed lifter fields to tighten the bolts, an effect everyone else found pretty impressive. "Eh, it's just a thing," Harriet said.

She stepped back to examine her handiwork, and muttered under her breath as she went over a checklist. "Okay. I think we're ready. Just one final step—I'm gonna need you all to de-Fuse so I can wire the RIDEs into the

power grid. Then it's bedtime for Bonzo." She grinned. "You crazy human kids go wait outside. Take a last look around at planet Earth or something. You won't be seeing her for a while."

The RIDEs unfolded from around their humans, and the foursome filed out into the deserted cargo lot. LED pole lamps shone white light down, casting stark shadows all around.

Kim hugged herself and shivered, glancing around at the others. "I can't believe we're doing this. I have butterflies."

"I know what you mean, sis," Tom said.

"Heh. 'Sis'," Kim echoed.

"It's a bit sudden, all right," Tim said. "I keep thinking I'm going to wake up." He shrugged, then reached over and took Kim's hand. "I think...we two want to be alone for a little bit, if you guys don't mind."

"Oh, sure, go ahead," Clara said. As they walked away, she muttered, "Yeah, right, leave me alone with the Mad Kisser..."

"Hey, I said I was sorry," Tom said. "C'mon, let's walk a little. I think we can get a good view of the spaceport from over there."

"Sorry..." Clara said. "It's just been a...really *weird* couple of days."

"I know what you mean," Tom said. "I wanted to go back to Zharus...but who could have imagined Zharus would come to me?" They rounded the corner on a pile of cargo crates to where they could see the runway. As they watched, a shuttle streaked down it, rising into the air with glowing lifter emitters in its tail. "Just think, we're gonna

be on one of those.”

“Yeah, but we won’t know it,” Clara said. “I always kinda thought I’d get a last look at Earth through the shuttle viewports as I left. Get to see it as the astronauts did, sort of thing. Instead, I’m gonna go to sleep in a few minutes, then wake up on a whole other planet.”

“I got to see it that way once,” Tom said. “Funny thing is, at the time I was so excited about getting to spend time on Zharus that I wished I could just...go to sleep and wake up there. Be careful what you wish for, huh?”

Tom sat down on a discarded cargo crate to watch more shuttles take off, and after a moment Clara took a seat next to him. “What do you think we’ll *do* on Zharus?” Clara wondered.

“Dunno,” Tom said. “Finish our educations, I guess... then find jobs.”

“You make it sound so normal.”

“Well, normality is relative,” Tom said. “On Zharus, it’s normal to walk around inside a suit of furry power armor with a mind of its own.”

“Three whole years...” Clara muttered. “And I imagine that probably won’t count the travel time, either. I wouldn’t be that lucky.”

“You’d have to ask Harriet, or one of the RIDEs,” Tom said. “All I really know about ‘em is they’re fun to clomp around in.”

“Is it really as bad as they say on Zharus? That RIDEs are basically just...property?”

Tom fidgeted uncomfortably. “Well...yeah. It’s one of those things you try not to think about. And the biggest argument why I was a jerk for coming home instead of

staying. I mean, I could have bought Terry and treated him better than forcing him to Fuse willy-nilly with tourists like me. But there was...stuff waiting for me back here.” He shrugged. “Maybe I’ll try to look him up when we get back, see if he’s still around.”

They fell into silence for a while. Then Tom became conscious of a sudden warmth on his shoulder. He glanced over and saw Clara had leaned her head against it. “Hey, you okay?”

“Mmm?” Clara said. “Just...I dunno, a little tired, I guess.”

“Um...” Tom said. “Okay.” After carefully considering the pros and cons, including the potential risk of extreme bodily harm, he finally chanced putting his arm around her shoulders.

“Mmm,” Clara said again, closing her eyes and relaxing.

Does she even know what she’s doing? Tom wondered. *Eh...probably more than my life’s worth to call attention to it.* He gazed resolutely at the launching and landing shuttles until Harriet commed to let them know they were ready.

“So...here we are,” Kim said. “Our last glimpse of Earth is destined to be a deserted cargo yard in a metropolitan airport a couple of hundred miles from home.” He looked up. “I wish we were out in the country. I would have liked to see the old familiar night sky one last time.”

“Zharus is only about twenty light-years away,” Tim pointed out. “Our galaxy is twenty-five *thousand* light-

years across. Most of the constellations should still be the same.”

“It’s the principle of the thing.” Kim looked up at the sky. The city lights blotted out most of the stars, but they could still pick out a few brighter ones. “I wonder which one of those is Zharus’s sun. Can we even see it from here?”

“We can see stars hundreds of light-years away with the naked eye. Should be able to see that one, if we just knew which one it was,” Tim said. “Should have asked the RIDEs, I guess.”

“Yeah,” Kim said. She shivered. “What the fuck *happened* to us? Life just got weird...”

“Sorry about that,” Tim said. “You know I’ve got a bad temper on me, right?”

“If I didn’t before, I sure do now.” Kim shook her head. “I can’t understand how you dealt with...all this. This weird body.”

“This one isn’t exactly ‘normal’ either,” Tim said. “These weird dangly bits...ugh. It’s like having a second tail, but in front. I don’t think I knew what I was getting either one of us into. Sorry about that.”

Kim shrugged. “Eh. We’ll get through it. It’s just three years. That’s, what, maybe two percent of our life expectancy?”

“I guess,” Tim said. “So...I’m curious. What’s the weirdest part of the whole thing, for you?”

“Dunno,” Kim said. “I guess...having erogenous zones on my upper chest? I mean, I used to fiddle with my nipples all the time...cleaning bits of dirt or dead skin out that got stuck in between the bits, you know? Sometimes I

had to rub them pretty hard. But I can hardly touch *these* things without...well. What about you? What's the hardest thing for *you* to get used to?"

"Weirdly enough, it's *also* your breasts," Tim said. "I mean, they were kind of an inconvenience when *I* had them. Not only were they so sensitive, and painful if I didn't have a bra or something, but they also meant I couldn't go topless most places the way guys can. Only... now that I don't have them *myself*, I can't stop thinking about them on *you*. The limbic system is a funny thing."

Kim snorted. "Welcome to being a guy. We'll have you drinking beer and watching football before you know it."

"I feel like...I kind of owe you an apology," Tim said. "Now I realize you...couldn't help feeling the way you did."

Kim rolled her eyes. "Oh, get real. You don't *have* to think with your 'nads. It's just *easier* not to resist. The change just...took me by surprise, that's all."

"Yeah, but...the way it *feels*..." Tim shook his head. "I just...are you *sure* you and Madeira can't get along for a while? I've hardly had the chance to get used to you that way."

"You mean *you* want to play with these things the way you got mad at *me* wanting to play with them on *you*," Kim smirked, gesturing at her chest.

Tim looked down. "Well...okay, yes," he admitted. "I'm weak. I realize that. But if you do...after the three years is up, if we swap back...well, I wouldn't complain anymore about having to deal with having that kind of body myself."

"Oh, *sure* you wouldn't," Kim said. "You're just saying that because you don't have it *now*. Like *I* did before I got

to find out what it was actually *like*.”

“I guess...maybe,” Tim said. “Sorry.”

Kim shrugged. “Well, it’s okay, I guess. Maddy isn’t so bad of a person once you get to know her, even if she does have that weird fetish about her partner’s body. I guess I can deal with it for a while. We’ll see.”

Tim chuckled. “Look at us. Our last night on Earth, and we’re talking about sex.”

“Madeira tells me it’s normal to be thinking about that right after you cross,” Kim said. “All the hormones and endorphins and stuff. It’ll settle out.”

“I guess,” Tim said. “I don’t know...do we even have a future together? Did I screw up our relationship with that stupid spur-of-the-moment crossride?”

“Hey.” Kim came over to him, and put her hands on his shoulders. “*I’m* the one who suggested trading in the first place. I didn’t think you’d go for it, I’ll admit, but it *was* my idea. And I guess I did kind of goad you into it. So if anyone’s to blame, it’s me. I can’t say I’m completely happy with it...but I feel like I’m learning a lot here, and I promise I’ll be a *lot* better boyfriend when I actually am a *boy* again.”

Tim drew her into a hug. “You are *way* too good for me, you know that?”

Kim grinned at him. “I know. But I’ll try not to let it go to my head.”

The signal that the cargo pod was ready came, accompanied by a burst of ancient music playing from inside the cargo pod. The four humans paused just outside the door as they heard the lyrics.

*We're leaving together
But still it's farewell
And maybe we'll come back,
To earth, who can tell?*

*I guess there is no one to blame
We're leaving ground (leaving ground)
Will things ever be the same again?
It's the final countdown.*

The final countdown.

Clara glanced to Tom, then to Kim and Tim. It didn't feel like there was anything else that could be said. Even if they hadn't been too choked up, the song was saying it all for them. "With so many light-years to go," the long-dead singer told them, "And things to be found. I'm sure that we'll all miss her so. It's the final countdown."

They walked into the cargo pod. The RIDEs sat together in their Walker forms, with cables running into, out of, and among them in a network leading to the four open cryotubes. As the song faded out, Harriet nodded to them. "Well, this is it then. Just lie down, close your eyes, and when you open them again you'll be on Zharus. Ain't that a kick in the pants?"

"Something like that," Tom said. "You're sure everything's...safe? There's no other way?"

"Not that I could find, no," Harriet said. "I'd say it's a little late to be getting cold feet, but actually it's more like a few minutes early."

“Ha,” Clara said.

“Don’t worry,” Lubyanka said. “The preparations are good. We have plenty of power, and the pods are in excellent shape. Everything will be fine.” She chuckled. “You are the lucky ones, getting to sleep through all this. We RIDEs will have to be awake in shifts to monitor, so we each have months of boredom to look forward to.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” Tim said.

“We are,” Quentin said. “I was very impressed with the way Harriet wired us up. There is plenty of redundancy to keep things from going wrong.”

“I understand you’re afraid,” Hobbes rumbled. “But this is time-tested technology. People have slept for decades and turned out all right. You’re just going to be in there for a year or so.”

“We will miss you, but you will be waking up again before you know it,” Madeira promised.

“All right, then.” Clara stepped up and gave Lubyanka a hug, being careful not to disturb the power cables plugged into her neck. “See you on the flip side.” She glanced to Harriet. “Do we need to take our clothes off for this?”

“Unless you’re an exhibitionist, it doesn’t really matter,” Harriet said. “The nanites in the freeze bath will take care of everything.”

“Good enough.” Clara climbed into her tube and lay on her back, experimenting with crossing her arms over or under her breasts before finally just dropping them to her sides.

“Righto. Thanks for the care, ol’ pal,” Tom said to Hobbes. “And thank *you*, Harriet. If you do make it back

to Zharus sometime, comm us. We all owe you a *lot*. First round's on me."

"I'll hold you to that," Harriet smirked. "Climb on in there."

"Hey, Quentin," Tim said. "Looking forward to cruising around on Zharus. Maybe you can show me around Nuevo San when we get there?"

"I'd love to," Quentin said. "Now go on, see you when I see you."

Kim approached Madeira. "I just want to say...I know we got off to a rocky start, but...once we get to Zharus, let's see how things go there for a little while. Who knows, maybe we can get along after all."

"I would like that," Madeira said. "We can discuss it when you wake up."

They all climbed into their tubes, and Harriet did something that made the canopies lower. "Good night, everyone!" she called cheerfully. "Dream of me!"

Clara watched the curved glass cover settle and seal into place, fighting the urge to jump out before it could close. *No, no, I'm not ready! I changed my mind, I don't want to go after all!* But that was foolish. The situation was what it was, and there wasn't any other option. *Well, you always wanted to go to Zharus. Be careful what you wish for.*

Her view of the outside world shimmered as the chamber began to fill with a heavy gas. She struggled to keep her eyes open as long as she could, but never noticed when she finally went under.

It's the final countdown

*We're leaving together
The final countdown
We'll all miss her so
It's the final countdown (final countdown)
Oh, it's the final countdown.*

EPILOGUE

January 22, 158 AL

Joe Steader knew something was going on the first time he came home to his Uplift mansion to find a twenty-meter green climate-controlled cargo container sitting on the front lawn. "I'm going to have to have words with the package courier," Joe said mildly. "They're supposed to leave these on the *back* step. What if someone walked away with it before I got home?"

"Dafuq is this?" Julius wondered, sniffing at the corner of the crate.

"Not sure. Maybe the shipping docs will have something to say." He went to the permanently-affixed tablet display and tapped the key. "Huh."

"What's it say?" Julius asked.

"Well, no return address or name on the sender, outside of it being sent through one of the Steader corps on Earth. Other than the standard stuff about locations of origin, destination, and so on, there's just one little note in the 'memo' field," Joe said. "It says, 'Wait for it...'"

"Wait for *what*?" Julius said.

"Beats me. Want to crack it open?"

"Think we should call a bomb squad?" Julius

wondered.

“If someone wanted to do me harm, they’d have a lot better ways than death by shipping crate,” Joe said. “At the least they’d have tried to drop it on my head.” He pulled the lever to unlatch the doors on the end of the container. Julius stepped back out of the way as he swung them wide. A wave of frigid air wafted out. “Huh.”

Julius peered inside. The container was filled with identical sealed crates labeled “Product of Malaysia.” Joe cracked the seal on one of them and peered inside. “Ooooh.” He lifted out a spiky yellow object that resembled a cockleburr the size of a cantaloupe. “Well, clearly someone knows me.”

Julius sneezed. “Durian fruit? Really? Ugh, I haven’t gotten the smell out of my fur since *last* time you had that stuff.”

“Your fur is hardlight,” Joe pointed out. “It doesn’t retain smells.”

“Smells *that* strong are an exception,” Julius said. “Is this whole fucking *container* full of that shit?”

“According to the manifest, it’s packed solid,” Joe said. “Yeah, someone knows me all right. This is *almost* enough durian for even me.”

“Ugh,” Julius said again. “Well, I suppose I can’t complain *too* much. The taste isn’t bad, anyway.”

“Seriously, I’ll pull a few crates for the pantry, and send the rest to one of the grocery corps I own,” Joe decided. “Let people all over Gondwana find out how awesome durian is.”

“That shit is still *banned* in some parts of southeast Asia because it fuckin’ stinks, you know,” Julius pointed

out.

“But prepare it just right, and it’s delish,” Joe said. “In fact...let’s go have some right now. Maybe we should send a crate to Socah, too.”

“I thought you *liked* her,” Julius said.

“Oh, ha, very funny,” Joe said. “I wonder who could have sent it? Couldn’t have been Mikel. This comes from Earth, and he’s still not bestirred himself from Proxima. Besides, he’d have said something. But not too many people know I’m that crazy about the stuff.”

“Which, on the whole, is a good thing. They don’t need any *more* reasons to doubt your sanity,” Julius said, wrinkling his nose.

“C’mon,” Joe said, hefting a couple of crates. “Let’s get some of these inside and comm for someone to pick the rest up.”

“Thank Patil I can turn my nose *off*, that’s all I can say,” Julius muttered, following him into the house.

The next day, Joe had a strong feeling of *deja vu* when he got home again to find another twenty-meter shipping container in the exact same location. “What? I thought I told them to pick it up,” Joe said.

“They did,” Julius said. “I saw them. Besides, that crate was green, and this one’s blue.”

Joe glanced at the bill of lading. “Huh. ‘Wait for it...’ again.”

The container turned out to contain more durian fruit. “Really?” Joe mused.

“Well, you did say the last one was *almost* enough for you,” Julius said. “God, I just thought of a horrible

possibility.”

Joe glanced at him. “What’s that?”

“If this keeps up, and you keep sending it to the grocery stores, people here might develop a *taste* for the fuckin’ stuff. It’s worse than that space chocolate chalam.”

“I think you mean *better than*,” Joe said. “Never could figure why Mikel liked that stuff more.”

“There’s no accounting for taste,” Julius said.

“True. But I got into business because I had a taste for accounting,” Joe said. Julius gave him a loud raspberry.

Over the next week, two more “Wait for it...” crates arrived. Both contained durian. Joe backtraced the shipments and found they had all arrived on different cargo ships that had left Earth at the same time but made different stops on the way to their destination.

“Now that’s something,” Joe mused. “Why send them all by different ships?”

“They wanted to be sure some got through if some of the ships hit an asteroid or something?” Julius suggested.

“But modern interstellar shipping is highly reliable,” Joe said. “You lose maybe one in a couple hundred shipments, if that. And then there’s that ‘wait for it’ message. Clearly, they were trying to get my attention.”

“Clearly, they’ve fuckin’ succeeded,” Julius said. “Speaking as your bodyguard, I can’t say I’m exactly thrilled.”

“But if they meant me harm, they wouldn’t be telling me to ‘wait for it,’ they’d just spring ‘it.’ Whatever ‘it’ is,” Joe said.

“Yeah, maybe so,” Julius grumbled. “I still don’t like

surprises. Especially surprises the size of a shipping container.”

Then one day another shipping container arrived, but they knew at the outset something was different about this one. Julius sniffed at it, then sneezed twice. “Well, now, there’s a fuckin’ thing,” Julius said. “Some Intie’s been messing with this one. Not one I know, either.”

“There are Intie cargo handlers now, you know,” Joe pointed out.

“When I say ‘not one I know,’ I mean I cross-reffed the traces with the ident database,” Julius said. “Most Inties on the planet still aren’t in it, but all the ones who work jobs in human society have to be.”

“Huh. Well, let’s take a look at the notes.” Joe tapped the pad. “Well, huh. This has a file encrypted to my personal key.” He punched in his passphrase. “...ah.”

Hey, Big J:

Sorry I missed your last few birthdays. Been a little out of touch. But I found something here I think you’ll like, and I’m not talking about the fruit either.

Sending along a few new pets for you. Take good care of them, and they’ll provide you with hours of quality entertainment.

See you when I see you.

—H.

“‘H’?” Joe wondered. “Wait a minute...it can’t be...”

“Can’t be what?” Julius wondered.

“Let’s just crack this open and see what we were waiting for.” Joe pulled the lever and swung the doors wide.

Four sets of glowing eyes peered out of the shipping container’s dark interior. “Well, it’s about time!” a female voice with a hint of Sturmhaven accent said. “And who might you be?”

“Given that you’re on my front lawn, I feel like that’s a question I should ask of you,” Joe said, grinning. “But the name’s Steader, of the Crazy Joe variety. This is my best bud Julius.” Joe located the switch for the container’s internal lighting. It came on, revealing the eyes belonged to four RIDEs, hooked up by cables to...

“Holy shit, are those cryo-caps?” Julius said, peering at the frosted-over tubes. “What the living fuck is going on here?”

“Those are our partners,” a tiger said. “We sort of kidnapped them from Earth. It’s a long story.”

“All right, ‘H’ *has* to stand for Harold,” Joe declared. “Only *he* would land something like *this* in my lap.”

“It’s ‘Harriet’ now, but yes,” the tiger said. “If it hadn’t been for her, we might not have made it back here.”

“Well, fuck. We’d better get some cryo techs out here,” Julius said. “Discreetly.”

“The sooner the better,” the wolf RIDE said. “By the way, I’m Lubyanka, this is Hobbes, Quentin, and Madeira.”

“Charmed,” Joe said. “While we’re waiting for the cryo techs, how about you fill me in on how you ended up here?”

“Very well,” Lubyanka said. “I’m still not quite sure

what it was that woke me up, but...”

THE END