

Return to Totalia: Parallels
By Robotech_Master, Jon Buck, and Jetfire

Part One: Visitors

Foreword

Here before you, you see the first of three parts of the next Totalia story. It's taken us a long time to write, and parts two and three will probably be a little while longer. This has been a tricky one to write, just because so much had to happen, in so many different places.

We started out writing it like we did the first Totalia story, with a single combined story for all three branches of the plot. But it soon became apparent to Jetfire it wasn't going to work that way—it was simply too cluttered and jumbled together. He proposed splitting it into three separate stories covering the same period of time from different angles. And once he had done so, it suddenly became a whole lot easier to write.

“Easier” being relative, of course.

So, this story, when it's complete, will cover the preparations to send a fleet off to Totalia from three different angles. This first story follows the Totalian ambassadors and the Scouts who accompanied them home as they look around Zharus and see this new world for themselves. The second, “Clementine,” will follow that ship and her crew as they head off to Totalia as an advance guard to pave the way. And the third, “The Fleet,” will follow Joe, Julius, and Quinoa to Wednesday and back as they fetch the Great Western, and then focus on others (including Melisande) as they build a fleet around it.

And once we've finally posted all three parts of this thing, we'll all take a moment to reflect and wonder if we really are all crazy, before starting on the next one.

Remember when you read the dates in this story that the Zharusian calendar consists of not twelve but ten months of thirty thirty-hour days each, named for Earth months but missing February (because it's shortest) and August (because, really, who cares about August?). This has the side effect of making September, October, November, and December actually match up to the 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th months for which they were originally named. So just remember, on Zharus, March comes after January, and July jumps right into September.

Enjoy!

—Robotech_Master

4/21/2015

Chapter 1

January 12, 158 AL

Zharus Orbital Traffic Control Center, Toptown

It was just another ordinary shift. Shuttles taking off, shuttles landing, suborbitals suborbiting, intrasystem cargo ships moving in and out of orbit. Traffic Controller Second Class Chelsea Swinburne kept an eye on the traffic status indicators and listened to comm chatter with half an ear.

There wasn't much point in doing more. Her job had been rendered even more superfluous since the antiquated Ad-I that had used to run traffic had been replaced by the new EI, who went by "Polestar." He could handle all space traffic needs for this entire hemisphere without breaking a digital sweat and still guide lost tourists to their destinations within TopTown.

Chelsea was just glad that the safety regs still required a human to be on hand at all times, or she'd have been out of a job. As it was, she had even more time to read now, since Polestar didn't mind if she didn't pay full attention at all times. In fact, he preferred she relax during routine operations so she could be as sharp as possible for the non-routine ones.

She turned another page in the book she was reading—one of the old Clint Brubeck adventure stories, this time. They'd seen a resurgence of interest over the last few months, since an unexpectedly-Integrated Madison Brubeck had returned to the system, followed by long-vanished scout Marcus Trenton.

There were all kinds of rumors going around that Brubeck and Trenton had found some new alien civilization, or discovered new metamaterials that could stop the aging process, or found a diamond the size of a planet. Well, actually they'd started finding *those* with telescopes all the way back in twencen or thereabouts, but there were rumors she'd actually *visited* one and met a race of diamond-people who lived on it.

Or was that actually the plot of one of the books about her Dad? It seemed like half the rumors were based on some old Brubeck novel or other, and the snopesers took great glee in pointing that out—which also gave Chelsea more grist for her reading list.

She was just reaching the end of the chapter when the signal that had started it all went off again. Seemed like it was coming more and more frequently these days. "Looks like another unexpected torpedo reentry splash, from the same direction as Brubeck and Trenton's arrival," Polestar reported.

"Thanks, Polecat," Chelsea said. "I guess this one goes directly to Scout HQ, then?"

"Afraid so. I'm polling the DINcom beacon now to strip the message packet. Can't say what it's about." He paused. "I'd say I could tell you but then I'd have to kill you, but truth is, I can't even *see* what it's about. It's got encryption on it even I'd have a hard time breaking."

Chelsea shook her head. "With this kind of secrecy every time a scout torp comes in, no wonder all those rumors have been flying around." Not to mention the way they'd suddenly found it worthwhile to build and replenish a comm beacon with the new DINcom system all the way out at the system rim, so any new torps or ships that came

in could be hailed immediately.

“Well, whatever it is, it’s in the Scouts’ hands now,” Polestar said. “You can go back to your book. That one’s got a great twist ending, y’know.”

“Shush, don’t spoil it,” Chelsea said. *Sheesh, at least the old Ad-I didn’t want to discuss my books with me.*

Brubeck Mining Corporate Headquarters, Uplift

“Well, that was certainly unexpected,” Zane mused as he peered at information from Scout Captain Joel Roberts’s report spread across multiple hardlight display panels floating in front of him. “One could say it changes the equation considerably.”

Scout Commander Lee pursed her lips. “When I assigned Roberts to this run, I never expected something like this. Up to this point, he’s always been one of my most reliable men. Now...I’m not even sure if ‘man’ is exactly the right thing to call him.”

“Peace, Commander,” Zane said, holding up a hand. “First of all, I’d be the last one to say anything against an Integrate staying closeted—especially one in a job that involves traveling outside the star system. There are those pesky export laws to consider.”

“Which seem to have more holes than swiss cheese at this point,” Lee said archly. “We’ve always known some of our scouts tended to carry forbidden items, but they never were quite so...brazen before.”

“Regardless, I’d recommend leniency—especially since it looks like his Integrate oomph was needed to pull this thing off safely,” Zane said.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Lee said. “But there will be *some* sort of disciplinary action against him and his so-called Magic Voice. Not to mention tightening up of Integrate data-engram identification on all scout ships and equipment.”

“Dandruff fingerprinting, you mean?” Zane asked, grinning. “Perhaps for his sins you could put him in charge of training the other RIDEs, EIs, and Integrates who want to join the Scouts. I’ve been hearing rumblings of interest out of the Enclaves ever since Maddie returned. It’s been pretty helpful in corralling assistance for the expedition, in fact.”

Lee’s eyes narrowed and she adopted a thoughtful expression. “Mm. That could work. He certainly has the necessary rank and experience to work with trainees, and his own experience as an Integrate and a Scout would be an asset in that regard. For that matter, perhaps your sister could help, as well. Though I suspect that the program may have to wait until after your expedition to begin in earnest.”

“Might not want to wait *too* long,” Zane said. “They’re already building FTL ships in Camelot. If you don’t let them in the Scouts, some Integrates might just decide to head off on their own.”

“I think I know who you’re talking about. That’s a good point,” Lee admitted. “Though, as you pointed out, your own expedition could serve as a useful surrogate for the time being.”

“Oh, gonna shove the burden off on me, huh?” Zane grinned. “As it happens, I’m okay with that.”

“But getting back to how Captain Roberts handled matters on his trip, I’m not saying anything against him. From what he’s said in the report, it sounds like he made the best of a bad situation, and might just have helped us out a whole lot in the process.”

Not to mention giving us a rather important warning about invisible space rocks. We'll have to figure out some way to safeguard against those before we leave."

"I've already put our best scientists on it," Lee said. "They'll be happy to liaise with any researchers you'd recommend, of course."

Zane nodded. "Good. And I'd say having representatives on hand from the government-in-exile, not to mention a formal request of assistance, will make things a lot easier with the Assembly. The last of the roadblocks about whether we have any right to engage in 'unwarranted militaristic adventurism' ought to just evaporate. This venture is now a hundred percent legitimate."

"Ought to, but probably won't," Lee said. "But that's for the politicians to wrangle with now."

"And they're even bringing back another one of your missing scouts," Zane said. "Do you have her genetic material on file, by the way? We could have the hospital start prepping a clone, and it would be ready by the time she got here."

"Unfortunately, we don't have her samples," Lee said. "She was based out of a satellite facility on Zheng He. By the time we could get to them and they could get it back to us, she'd be practically here already."

Zane winced. "Ugh. Maddie's not gonna be happy to hear that. I guess it's a brainbox for her, then?"

Lee nodded. "Ordinarily we'd just leave her in cryo until the clone could be prepped, but as time-critical as the matter is right now, we'll need her input."

"I'll be happy to pay for the best prosthetic shell money can buy," Zane offered.

"Thank you, Mr. Brubeck, but we Scouts have our own resources," Lee said. "She won't want for as capable a shell as Zharus can build."

"Fair enough," Zane agreed. He cleared the panels away, and offered a hand over the desk. "Thanks for keeping me posted. I appreciate it, and Maddie will too."

Lee shook it firmly. "Not at all, Mr. Brubeck. This matter is of vital importance to all of us. We will appraise you of any further developments."

Zane nodded. "Thanks for coming by."

After the Scout Commander left, Zane looked up at the little bird in the corner of the room. "You got all that?"

"Yep, got it," the songbird LRIDE said. The System Security Committee had deployed a flock of them to record and oversee what Zane and his siblings were up to when the expedition matters came up. "Encrypted and sent to official storage. I don't even know what I saw anymore."

"Great. Well. I guess I'd better hunt down Maddie and Aggie and tell them the news. Keep your eyes peeled for those early worms!"

"Whatever you're doing, good luck!" the bluebird tweeted.

Zane wandered out of the office, humming "Zippedy Doo-Dah" under his breath.

*January 15, 158 AL
The Satellite of Love*

Every morning Darrek Sigurdssen awoke in his tiny bunk with a smile. He was traveling faster than the speed of light in a little pocket universe, slipping underneath Einsteinian space like a submarine under the sea—subspace, as they called it. In the outdated multiversal theory he was familiar with it was called the "bulk." The universe

they lived in was a subset “brane” of that bulk. Except, that wasn’t the current understanding of cosmology. He’d had to throw out much of what he thought he knew.

Darrek had doctorates in particle physics and cosmology. Fortunately it wasn’t all useless when he tried to apply it to superluminal physics. The maths were more related than he had feared and the calculus underpinnings were the same. But it was very like going back to graduate school.

He was always sharpest in the mornings, so the first thing he did was pick up the tablet with the previous day’s unfinished work and delve into it. Teenette, in the other bunk, groaned and tossed her pillow at him—as usual. The young woman wasn’t a morning person, which was going to make the rest of the two months remaining aboard the *Satellite of Love* very interesting to say the least—especially given that the ship ran on Zharus’s longer thirty-hour day, which was playing havoc with their biological clocks.

“You can at least go get us some coffee,” bleary-eyed Teenette said, brushing her long black hair out of her face. “And a doughnut or two.”

“Give me just one minute,” Darrek said, completing a calculation exercise he had begun the previous day but hadn’t understood. “There!”

“Now can you get coffee?” Teenette said irritably.

“Okay, I’ll get it,” Darrek said, heading for the galley just next door. There was something about the texture of fabbed food that wasn’t *quite* right to Darrek’s palate. The scout ship’s crew spaces were all clustered at the bow. They included the bridge, galley, science lab, med bay, quarters, and what Joel called the Theater. With a capital T.

The Theater was the largest open space on the *SOL*, five meters high, five meters wide, and ten meters long. Since entering subspace Joel had put getting it working again at top priority. Darrek had gathered it was some kind of reconfigurable space intended to keep the Scout from feeling too claustrophobic during the months of travel.

Before getting coffee Darrek decided to look in. Joel apparently didn’t need as much sleep as normal humans, and had spent the time when Darrek and Teenette were sleeping making repairs too complex for them to assist with.

“Morning, Darrek,” Joel said from inside. A small halo of lenses the size of his thumb floated around his head. He wore a red jumpsuit with a yellow checkerboard pattern on the left side of his chest with the word “Gizmonic” printed above it. “I’m almost done here reinstalling the hardlight emitters. Then we can watch movies in a *proper* theater instead of the galley.”

“What happened to this space? I thought the missiles didn’t do that much internal damage,” Darrek said.

“Some of Captain Forestor’s mole men shot up my equipment before I took my ship back,” Joel explained. The orbiting lenses floated into an open wall panel, where they seated themselves with a click. Joel replaced the wall panel. He did everything without actually touching the lenses or the panel. “And that, as they say, is that. Magic Voice?”

“Please exit the Theater while I conduct a few calibration tests,” Zach-as-Magic Voice said.

“Sure thing.” Joel stepped out past Darrek and closed the door.

“So, this hardlight stuff,” Darrek said. “It’s like solidified light, or simulated matter...and you mainly use it to give your RIDES fur?”

“If you want the technical stuff, it’s essentially virtual matter projected via a beta-

cortinide metaisomer lens,” Joel said. “And it’s useful for a lot more than just fur—the entire ship is shielded with it, for instance. If you want to join me for some movies later, feel free. Otherwise it’s a very flexible space. If you prefer lounging on a beach, I can arrange that, too.”

“Maybe I’ll take you up on that, once I can figure out how it works,” Darrek said. “I surmise this means hardlight can create rather complete simulated environments? What are the power requirements?”

“Details, details,” Joel said. “The specs are in the documentation, if you’re interested. I don’t keep them in my head when I don’t need them. Anyway, you’re both welcome to come riff movies with us in the Theater. It’s how Zach and I pass the time during these long flights.”

“I’ll let Teenette know. She might be interested in this ‘riffing’,” Darrek said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m late with breakfast.” *I’d better get to it, then*, Darrek thought. “Thanks again, Captain.”

Darrek headed for the galley and the wonder of a food fabber. *I’m living in a dream world. I ask for food, and it appears.* “Give me one black coffee, one coffee with cream and two sugars, and six glazed doughnuts.”

The fabber hummed for thirty seconds, then a panel on the wall slid open and dispensed the food on a tray to the table. Darrek picked it up and carefully carried it around the corner to the Totalians’ quarters.

Teenette had already gotten out of bed and dressed herself while he’d been gone. She picked up the mug of black coffee from the tray. “What took you so long?” she asked irritably. She took a long sip of the hot liquid. “Oh, that’s *good*. Better than our foodlathes.”

“Well, considering their fabbers assemble materials on the molecular level...” Darrek began. Then Teenette gave him that morning irritable look again. “Ah, *well*. Nevermind. It can wait until you’re fully awake.”

“If not longer,” Teenette muttered, slurping her coffee. “Got to keep up my own studies. I’m looking at their industrial fabrication methods while you focus on the nano-scale. How they handle logistics. So much new stuff to learn.”

“You’ve got *that* right. There are whole new areas of physics I’ve barely even scratched the surface of. But what are you studying?”

“What else? The nifty new tech Zharus and the rest of the galaxy have spun up in the last couple hundred years. Cavorite alone...my God, it’ll revolutionize the whole transportation industry back home. And unlike qubitite, we can make it ourselves as soon as we have real fabbers. I was even able to cook up a little of it myself with the fabber on board this ship.”

Darrek raised an eyebrow. “Really? It’s that simple to make? I could have punched for cavorite instead of this?” He held up a doughnut speculatively.

“Well, not exactly. It took a couple of hours for the shipboard fabber to churn out a disc the size of a quarter, and it’s not the best quality stuff. They have specialized industrial fabbers for making it in bulk. But as a proof of concept, well, seeing is believing.”

Darrek shook his head. “Remarkable. How soon could we do it back home, you think?”

“Well, if Zharus sold us some of the fabbers, we could do it as soon as we got them set up. Otherwise we’d have to build the precursor technology to be able to lay the

groundwork for making the tech we need to start.”

“Build the tools to build the tools. Right. I looked into that myself, in the early days. Could be at least a couple of years to get up to speed.”

“More like five or six. And we’ll have to do that anyway, no matter what Zharus sells us in the short term. But still...once we’re there...” Teenette grinned. “You know, we actually have some tech advantages over Zharus, thanks to Totalium, and I’m not just talking about cloaking. Their sarium batteries are great for a quick charge at almost no energy cost, and are great for outputting huge amounts of energy over a short time, but they don’t hold anywhere near as much juice overall as you can output from a compact fusion plant, or even a nuclear battery. And cav is *very* power-efficient.”

Darrek sipped his coffee. “So once we have cav, we could make better lifter-powered vehicles than they can.”

“Ones with a lot more endurance, anyway. And if we get their qubitite, too, we could add sarium batteries as boost capacitors for times when sprinting is needed. If we hold onto this, we could become as well-known for skimmers and fliers as Eridani is for starships.”

Darrek cocked his head. “That’s...an intriguing possibility.”

“Yeah.” Teenette set down her empty coffee mug. “We really need to be sure we don’t give away the farm when it comes to trading with Zharus. We should make them a fair deal, but not go totally overboard in gratitude.”

Darrek nodded. “That’s definitely something to think about.”

Silence fell as they quietly finished their breakfast. Darrek could tell there was something else on Teenette’s mind, the way she looked like she was mulling over whether to say anything. “Penny for your thoughts?”

The young woman put her empty coffee mug back on the tray. “Well, it’s not anything about their tech, so I’m not sure I should say anything. Tech is one thing, we can adapt to it.”

“But you’re not thinking about how we’ll adapt to their technology?”

“Remember that big blockbuster last year? *Hands of Fate*? Shapeshifting alien lizard people infiltrate Totalia and take over from inside, only to be repelled by the heroic isolationists.”

Darrek nodded. “That one wasn’t that bad, I thought. It actually had a great plot for a change.”

“What I’m getting at here is, after what I’ve seen Joel do, some of these movies are pretty dead on. After the Zharusians get there in force, what if the Zealots can convince enough people to change their minds and support them?”

“No way that’s going to happen,” Darrek said. “People can’t be *that* stupid.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Chairman of the Science Committee, I’ve spent the last few months *fighting* those stupid people,” Teenette said crisply. “Not only *can* they be that stupid, they often *are*.”

Darrek sighed. “Point taken. But there’s not anything we can do about it right now, at any rate. We’ll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it. Until then, no point in worrying.” He stood up and pulled on his tunic. “Now, I’m going to pay my respects to Barbaretta before I return to my studies.”

“Tell her I said hi,” Teenette said, picking up her media tablet. “Okay, let’s keep going with that IDE development history. The Aleutian War and the TX-series transformables...”

Darrek smiled. She was the engineer while he was the theoretician. They were a good pair to send to Zharus. He took one last gulp from his coffee mug and headed for the cargo bay.

April 20, 158 AL
The Satellite of Love

“Nodes are humming. We have begun surfacing resynch,” Zach announced. The black-footed ferret’s avatar was, as usual, trundling around atop the controls. “Which means what, Dr. Sigurdssen?”

“It would take me three hours to show you in calculus,” Darrek replied. “But colloquially, the Einsteinian ‘Local Reference Frame’ we’re traveling in must be re-synched to the surface universe as we open a new gate. If there’s anyone near our surface point, they’ll see mass shadows and ghost images prior to our emergence. For us, that’s only about five minutes. Commercial drives can have lead times in the hours.”

Joel applauded. “Give the man a prize. You understand the math *much* better than we do. And I’ve tried learning in fast-time.”

“Then comes the splash of tachyons on re-entry, and the Drive Ring is shut down,” Darrek said.

“I expect there will be someone waiting for us,” Joel said. “They’ll put a ship or two close enough on-station to the exit point to intercept us quickly.”

“Hopefully they’ll take Barb under their care right away,” Darrek said. The man had sat by the injured scout’s cryotube on a daily basis the entire trip.

“Don’t worry about that, Darrek,” Teenette reassured, hand on his shoulder. “After what I’ve learned about their med-tech she’ll be fine. Better than new.”

“Surfacing now,” Zach announced. There wasn’t a rattle or anything to indicate they were back again, but when the shutters opened the stars looked somewhat different for the Totalians. These were constellations normally hidden by the Caliburn Nebula between their home and Zharus.

“Welcome to the Pharos system, Totalians,” Joel said, petting his ferret half. “Broa...wait.”

“Receiving a hail from the *SRS Endeavor*,” Zach said. “They’re six light-seconds away and on intercept—they’ll be here in an hour. I’m heaving-to and prepping for docking. Commander Lee on-screen.”

“Captain Roberts, we have a great deal to discuss,” Lee said. “But that can wait until your guests have been given a proper welcome and we’ve taken Scout Hansom under our care.”

Joel saluted his commanding officer. “Understood, Commander.” With the 12-second turnaround the conversation had long pauses, more than enough for Joel and Zach to fidget.

“Overall, you’ve done the best you could with the hand you were dealt,” Lee said. “I would like to extend welcome to your guests. We’ll do so properly once we’ve docked.”

“If you don’t mind, Commander, I’d like to be present when Barb wakes up,” Darrek said. He waited for the response and fidgeted as much as Joel and Zach.

“That can be arranged, sir,” Lee replied. “We’ll work out the details once we can speak face-to-face. *Endeavor* out.”

“Darrek, I think you’ve grown a little obsessed with her,” Teenette said. “I heard

you talking to her cryocapsule. That's not healthy, *Doctor*."

"I'm partly responsible for her injuries," Darrek said heatedly. "Until I see her awake and whole again I can't put my mind at ease."

"The good news is, that'll probably be a matter of hours at this point," Joel said. "Well, theoretically as long as days, depending on what they decide to do. In any case, it won't be long."

"And it won't be long until Her Highness has that little talk with us, either," Zach said. "Nooooo looking forward to it. She's probably going to be sarcastic at me. I think I liked it better when she thought I was a dumb spaceship AI."

"We're probably due for a month of scrubbing toilets with a toothbrush. Anyway, let's get everything secured for docking," Joel said. "The *Endeavor*'s a sort of spaceborne tender and recovery ship, so they'll get started on servicing the SOL right away."

"I take it they have full medical facilities?" Darrek asked. "Why didn't they send that ship to Totalia to recover the missing scouts?"

"Wrong mission profile. That ship is for rescuing shipwrecked scouts from uninhabited systems."

"Or recovering the wreckage," Zach added.

"And the body, if things *really* went south."

"Not what you'd want to send where there was a space navy—excuse me, *cosmy*—waiting."

"That makes sense." Darrek nodded. "All right. Just point me at what I need to do, and I'll help get ready as best I can."

"Don't worry about looking officially official. At least not yet," Joel said. "There's going to be plenty of time for that crap once they get you dirtside to Zharustead."

"Relax," Teenette said, "and enjoy the ride."

The *Endeavor* showed up first as a faint bright spot in the distance, the light from Zharus's distant sun reflecting from one side of the hull. It took on greater definition as it approached. It was a utilitarian sort of design, as far as ships from Eridani Shipyards went. The flattened cylinder of it had fewer curves and was studded with sensors and a few weapons blisters. An enormous docking bay door—half the length of the 450-meter ship—opened on the starboard side.

The *Satellite of Love* fit inside with even more room to spare than there had been in the *Kybalion*. As the docking tackle latched into place, then gently brought brought her inside, Joel swiveled his seat away from the control console and stood. "Well, this is it. We who are about to die salute you."

"Well, I don't think it'll be that bad," Zach said. "Uh, I hope."

"You don't have anything to worry about," Joel said. "You're just the AI."

"Oh, look, there's an honor guard waiting," Darrek said. "At least, I *assume* they're an honor guard. Suppose they could be a firing squad."

Joel rolled his eyes. "Not helping."

"The anticipation's always the worst part," Teenette said. "Come on, let's go get it over with."

A few minutes later, Joel led the way down the ramp, followed by Darrek and Teenette. Waiting at the bottom were Commander Lee, the *SOL*'s Maint Chief, busy casting her critical eye on the ship's damaged hull, and a half dozen of the ship's crew,

all clad in formal dress uniforms. Joel swallowed, then stepped forward, saluting. “Ma’am.”

“Captain Roberts,” Commander Lee said coolly.

“These are Totalia’s ambassadors, Special Ambassador Doctor Darrek Sigurdssen, Chair of the Science Committee, and Special Ambassador Teenette Clark of the Loyalist Resistance, a close friend of Kendlen Canton,” Joel continued.

Lee saluted the Totalians in turn. “We are honored by your arrival, Dr. Sigurdssen, Miss Clark. Please, let us show you to a space where you can move around. We realize that being cooped up in a Scout ship for months is not for everyone.”

“Thanks, but first we’d like to be sure that Barbaretta is going to be all right,” Darrek said. “You’ll be seeing to her right away, yes?” He looked behind him anxiously.

A trio of medicos had already gone up the ramp behind them and were clustered around the cryotube, waving sensors over the frozen, injured scout, muttering amongst themselves.

“Barb made quite an impression on them, Commander,” Joel said. Zach rezzed on his shoulders. He reached up to pet his body-mate’s avatar. “I think getting her awake again as soon as possible would be a good idea.”

Lee pondered, looking at the way Darrek was watching the medicos. “Ah, I think I see your point. Please, follow us to the Medical Bay. The doctors will be along with her tube shortly.”

“Good, good,” Darrek said, not taking his eyes off the doctors.

Lee looked at the hardlight ferret on Joel’s shoulder. “We can deal with other... issues until after Scout Pilot Hansom is awake.” A smirk passed her lips. “So, this is ‘Magic Voice’.”

“That’s me!” Zach said. “Uh, Commander.” The ferret made an effort to salute.

“Er...” Joel said. “Uh, yes, ma’am...”

“You can relax, Captain,” Lee said. “I’ve already decided *not* to boil you in oil. Given certain matters of recent history, I can understand why you felt the need to conceal certain things.”

“Ah...thank you, ma’am,” Joel said, visibly relaxing.

“That said, you *should* have come clean after Mr. Brubeck’s announcement,” Lee continued. “And certainly before being dispatched on an important assignment to a previously unknown wildcat colony.”

“With all due respect, Commander,” Joel said, “you didn’t even give me a chance to finish my beer when you marched into Cheers and practically dragged me out by the shirt collar.”

“There were a number of months prior to that mission in which you *could* have said something, Captain. I can’t make the best use of my resources if I do not know exactly what they are.”

“Understood, ma’am,” Joel said sheepishly.

“You’ll have a chance to explain yourself at the Inquiry—*not* a Court Martial. SOP in cases with extenuating circumstances,” Lee said. “For now, we have a prosthetic body prepared for Barbaretta. We should have her back on a new set of feet within a few hours.”

“Great!” Teenette said. “We want to be there when she wakes up, for sure. For now, why don’t you show us to that place you were talking about where we can move around? It *will* be nice to be somewhere we can’t reach out and touch a wall again.”

At first there was nothing, then there were scattered thoughts. The thoughts were vague, random things. She grasped at them, but they evaded her. She...who was she? Was there a she to be? That evaded her, too. Finally, she just drifted. If those thoughts meant anything, she imagined sooner or later they'd let her know.

Barbaretta. Her name was Barbaretta. That made sense, at least. And with her name, everything else started falling into place. The memories of her life started trickling back in, in random order. She was exploring her first world. Captured and imprisoned on Totalia on arrival. Growing up on Zheng He. Studying at the Scout Academy.

After hours (seconds? Days?) of reliving these memories, Barbaretta began to get some sense of where and when she was. It was just a matter of following the memories to the end of the string. Her last memory had been of leading a Totalia Resistance supply raid, climbing into the truck to run, and then...nothing. Something must have gone wrong, obviously. Scout medical training had noted that cases of severe trauma often interrupted the transition of short-term memories to long. *Am I waking up from anaesthetics?*

With that, Barbaretta opened her eyes, or thought she did. Instead of a hospital room, she seemed to be on the flight deck of her ship, the *Red Sonja*, in orbit around Zharus. Actually, now that she looked closer, it was the bridge of the *Sonja* as it had been years ago—she hadn't had that hula girl on the dash for over a year before she'd been captured, and the navigation panel had been replaced by a different brand with a new layout at the last inspection. *I'm in some kind of virtual reality, then. Constructed from old imagery of my ship. Did I get captured by Zealots? Is this some kind of interrogation trick?* After a moment's thought, she discarded the idea. The Zealots had her ship as it was now (and she tried not to think of what shape it might be in by now); they wouldn't have needed (or been able) to use older footage.

The door chime sounded. Barbaretta turned to glance at the door back to the rest of her ship, then she got up and pressed the button on the commplate next to it. The screen lit up with the visage of Scout Commander Lee. "Scout Captain Hansom, may I join you on your bridge? We have some matters to discuss."

That sealed it. There was no way the Zealots could have known about Commander Lee. Which had to mean they'd gotten her home somehow. But if they were waking her up in VR instead of a hospital room, *that* had to mean...

But first things first. "Of course, Ma'am!" Barbaretta hit the button to open the door, then stood aside for Lee to enter. She saluted, and Lee returned it. Then she gestured to her co-pilot's station, usually unoccupied but a standard fixture on this model of ship. "Please, have a seat."

Lee nodded. "Thank you, Captain." She slid into the seat, and Barbaretta took her own a moment later. They turned the chairs to face each other.

Barbaretta glanced across at the Scout Commander. "So...how bad is it?"

Lee pursed her lips. "I won't sugar-coat it, Captain Hansom. Your body is fairly bad off, though you only had a mild concussion to your brain, thank heaven for small favors. It's not so bad it can't be saved, however; no need to clone you a new one, unlike our first assessment. Under normal circumstances, we would simply keep you under for a few weeks while the nanosurgeons did their work."

"But you need what's in my head." Following the chain of supposition led to

further conclusions. “So the operation to retake Totalia must still be underway?”

“Barely even started, I’m afraid. But there will be time to go over that later. Right now, I need to brief you on your options for recovery. As stated, unconsciousness is not an option.”

“So I guess that leaves the brainbox transplant.” Barbaretta considered. “I know it’s a common procedure these days, but I can’t say I’m terribly keen on having my grey matter scooped out of my skull like so much ice cream.” She paused. “Assuming it hasn’t been already.”

“Not yet, Captain. We felt we should give you the choice, since another option has lately become available. I’m given to understand it is now possible, using experimental cybernetic implants, to read your brain out into a RI core, then read it back in later.”

Barbaretta blinked. “Really? Brain uploading is possible now? How do they deal with the ‘continuity of self’ problem?”

Lee flashed a wry smile. “That is something you would have to ask them. But I gather it is not an issue.”

“Huh. Then what, they put me in a RIDE?”

“A brainbox-style human body prosthesis is more likely. We have connections with the Marshals, so we can obtain one of their FBRs. But I gather they *could* use a traditional DE shell if you wanted.”

Barbaretta frowned. “I gather I’m not going to have a lot of time to make the choice either way.”

Lee nodded. “We can give you an hour to think about it, but...as you say, we need your expertise as soon as possible.”

“Not a whole lot to think about.” Barbaretta shrugged. “If I’m going to be keeping this body instead of getting a new one force-grown, might as well leave the brain where it is. Let’s go with the implantation and copying. Can always scoop the brain out later if it doesn’t take.”

Lee nodded. “As you say. I’ll let them know to commence the process. You may black out again, but when you wake, they will be ready to begin.” She rose from the seat, and offered Barbaretta her hand. “I look forward to a full debrief when you are ready, Captain Hansom.”

Barbaretta got up and took the hand. “I’ll look forward to giving it to you. Uh...I guess this probably isn’t a good time to ask how I got back here?”

Lee smiled. “We’ll go over that a little later, Captain. But don’t worry. Things are going well so far.” She stepped through the door, which sealed behind her.

Barbaretta watched her go. “Well. There’s a thing.” Then she sat back in her chair, closed her eyes, and waited. She was never quite sure exactly when everything faded to black after that.

How am I supposed to diplomatically tell them I don’t like kraken? Darrek pondered. It was rubbery and too sweet. All he could do was smile and nod. Teenette, on the other hand, had helped herself to thirds. Darrek had just never really developed a taste for seafood, but he was here to sample everything Zharus had to offer on behalf of his isolated world.

“Hey, kids.” Joel, hardlight ferret companion on his shoulder, slid onto the seat next to Darrek at the Scouts’ Lounge table. “Oooh, is that real kraken? I’ve missed that stuff.” He grabbed a piece from Darrek’s plate and munched on it. “Mmm. The fabbed

stuff just doesn't come close."

"You're telling me!" Teenette mumbled through a full mouth.

On the other hand, Darrek said, reaching for a glass of particularly good red wine. "Do you normally keep food and drink like this on your big ships, Commander Lee?"

"We've been on enough rescue runs to know that stranded scouts deserve some luxury and pampering after their ordeal," Lee said.

"Like me, about eight years ago," Joel said. "Three months on a barren rock plugging hull leaks. And it was my first assignment, too. No Brubeck's Luck here."

"Speaking of stranded scouts, how is Barbaretta coming along?" Darrek asked.

"Captain Hansom has regained consciousness. I have to hand it to your med-tech, Ambassador. They stabilized her so well before putting her in cryo that she had no brain damage, considering the extent of the trauma to her legs and torso." Lee nodded to Darrek. "The process to transfer her to a new temporary body should be well underway by now."

"When can we see her?" Teenette asked.

"The med-techs assure me she will likely be able to attend our initial debrief in just over an hour," Lee said.

Darrek raised an eyebrow. "That fast? No need for recovery after the transplant surgery?"

"There are transplants, and then there are transplants," Lee said cryptically. "All will become clear at the debrief."

Teenette yawned. "I hope it's a *brief* debrief. It's getting on toward evening by our body clocks."

Lee nodded. "Of course. We will have plenty of time for longer meetings on the way back to Zharus." She smiled faintly. "Longer for some than others. Don't think I missed seeing that eyeroll, Captain Roberts."

"*Bus-ted!*" Zach caroled.

Joel petted his body-mate between his ears. "Oh, don't worry. Zach and I are putting together something for Scout records. Ship logs and our own perspective. I'm no Ed Wood or Coleman Francis, but I hope it'll entertain and inform."

Teenette groaned, having watched plenty of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* on the voyage. "Joel, to be honest, if it's *that* bad..."

"If I can't riff myself, who can I riff?" Joel said. He stuck a fork in some fire-grilled kraken that smelled of the odd Zharusian spices that weren't sitting well in Darrek's stomach.

"Ahem, quite," Commander Lee said, in the careful tones of one who would likely have been backing carefully away had dignity permitted. "At any rate, I should go and prepare for the debrief. I look forward to seeing you there." She nodded to those at the table, and excused herself.

"I think we scared her away," Zach said once she was definitely out of earshot. He paused a moment, then waved a little hardlight pennant. "Yay us!"

"I hope you're not going to get in too much trouble because you helped us," Darrek said, for about the thirtieth time since boarding their ship.

"Don't worry about it," Joel said. "It would have come out sooner or later anyway. Come to think of it, if I hadn't ended up having to tip our hand now, we'd have been in that much more trouble when we finally did come clean."

“Mitigating circumstances’ and all that,” Zach added.

“I’m looking forward to finding out what’s developed since we’ve been gone. I know Madison made it back, but they won’t tell me any more than that and I’m locked out of the shipboard newsfeeds,” Joel said. “With DINsec, they can make that *stick*, too. Apparently they don’t want to ‘spoil the surprise.’”

Teenette nodded. “Somehow, I get the idea there are going to be plenty of surprises for all of us.” She grinned. “Well, at least I won’t be surprised on an empty stomach!”

An hour later, they all filed into the designated conference room. It was one of the ship’s smaller briefing rooms, sized for a dozen or so people, rather than the huge lecture-hall spaces used for mass briefings. That was something, anyway, though Joel had no doubt he’d probably be behind the podium of at least one mass lecture and probably more before he was finished.

Apart from himself and Zach, Teenette, Darrek, Commander Lee, and the *SOL*’s Maint Chief, the seats were empty. “Hey, where’s Barb?” Darrek asked.

“She’ll be joining us shortly,” Lee said. “Please, be seated. We’ll start with the *Satellite of Love*’s damage assessment and repair estimates. Lt. Case? Your show.”

“I’ve seen worse,” Case said, standing up. A hardlight lectern rezzed in front of her, along with a holographic model of the ship, highlighting the damage and repairs. “All told, not much to say. Joel and Zach’s field repairs were more than adequate and the Intie-tuned weapons and defense modifications performed beyond specs. The *SOL* will be mostly repaired before we reach Zharus orbit. That aft missile bay took the brunt of the damage and we’ll have to replace it and the hull around it.”

“Be sure you fill the tank with high-octane!” Zach piped up. “And I want those windows *spotless!*”

“I’ll leave a can of liquid schwartz in the glovebox, just for you,” Case quipped. “Other than that, Commander, I’m done.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant. You’re dismissed,” Lee said.

Case saluted, then left the room. As the door closed behind her, the hardlight projector array at one end of the room began to power up. Lee glanced at it. “It appears Captain Hansom is ready to join us.”

Barbaretta’s voice came over the speakers. “Right! Uh...hi, everyone! Hang on, just a sec...” With a flicker, Barbaretta appeared at the end of the room in hardlight holotar form—a meter-and-two-thirds woman with short mousy brown hair. She looked more or less normal, wearing scout khaki slacks and a sleeveless shirt. Except...

“Hey, what happened to your ink?” Teenette asked.

Barbaretta glanced down at her bare arms. “Huh? Oh! Hang on...” With another flicker, tattoos of several planets appeared down her arms. “Huh. Wait...” They vanished again, then came back in, slightly smaller, with a couple more added. “Yeah, that works better. Think I’m gonna have them redone on the meat bod, too. I made everything too big. Found more planets than I thought I would.”

“Uh...wow?” Teenette said. “Uh...are you okay?”

“Considering I’m *alive* thanks to you, I’m fine and dandy,” Barbaretta said. “The rest, well, being a Scout’s a risky business and we’ve all had scrapes. Hey, is that *Joel*? Who’s your little friend there?”

“Here’s a hint.” Zach cleared his throat, then his voice became female with an

echo. "Movie sign in five, four..."

"All part of the debrief, Captain Hansom," Lee said. "Let's not get too sidetracked. Totalians, Barb is using a hardlight-based telepresence rig while her body is being repaired."

"That's not *all* I'm using," Barbaretta said. "But one shock at a time."

Joel felt Zach reach out with a ping, slipping into fast-time. *:Oooh!:* Zach sent. *:She's in a RI core! How is she in a RI core?:*

:They had to use a reeeeeeally big shoehorn,: Barbaretta sent. *:It feels weird, but I'm getting used to it. Anyway, risky business. Scrapes. Speaking of which...what are you? You're all...techno-organic.:*

:Uh...yeah. We'll have to gab about that later. For now, we probably shouldn't talk behind people's backs.: The whole conversation had only taken a second, so no one had noticed.

Lee glanced at a privacy-polarized hardlight display on the table in front of her. "Ah. We have another attendee ready to join us via long-distance telepresence. You might know her."

Another node of the hardlight projector flickered and lit up, and a humanoid leopardess was standing across from Barbaretta. Her image flickered, lost some resolution, then stabilized. It still looked a bit hazy and unreal next to Barbaretta's. "Barb! Darrek! Teenette! It's great to see you again!"

Barbaretta stared at her. "Madison? And...Samantha? What happened to *you*?"

Joel blinked, then laughed out loud. "Integration! All the cool kids are doing it!"

"Wow, seriously?" Teenette said. "We get our butts saved by an Integrate, and now it turns out you're one, too?"

"I'm more concerned with what happened to *you*," Madison said, glancing quizzically at Barbaretta. "They scanned you out? Really?"

"It was either that or scoop my brain out with a melon baller," Barbaretta said. "Rather the ol' grey matter stays where it is. Besides, they tell me it's still experimental, and I can't pass up the opportunity to explore something new."

"Wow. We're gonna have to talk about that," Samantha put in. "Yeah, I'm still in here, too."

"By the way, Marcus got here safely, a couple weeks after I did," Madison said. "He's out on a training exercise right now, but he'll be around when you get planetside."

"Cool! Looking forward to meeting the old so-and-so again," Joel said. "Hamner's okay, too...but if you got my torps, you already knew that."

"Let's get down to business," Commander Lee said. "Ambassadors, the next couple days before you arrive at Zharus won't be the most exciting. But we want to get as much of this official business out of the way as possible so you can enjoy what our world has to offer yours."

"First thing is to present my full report," Joel said. "Darrek and Teenette already lived through it, of course, but everyone else might find it interesting." Joel opened a link to the room's hardlight projector and fed the report in. Then as it started showing, he had an idea. He sent a quick link request across to Barbaretta and Madison, and a few moments later the three of them, plus Zach and Samantha, were seated in a virtual reality movie theater. Madison's image shifted to human with leopard tags.

"Whaaaaaat's uuuuup wiiiiith theeee..." Barbaretta flickered. "...clock speed? Oh! Right...since we're running on computer hardware, we can think faster. Neat! I didn't

know it applied to VR, too.”

Joel grinned. “Right! We can have our own private screening of the report here, and have plenty of time to talk about it before they’re even halfway done with it out there. Of course, we can talk out there, *too*, but...”

Samantha smirked. “There are some things the pure-organics just wouldn’t understand.”

Zach bounced up and down on the back of Joel’s seat. “You’re smart, kitty!”

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you for some time,” Madison said. “Especially since I learned you were an Integrate. I’ll bet you’ll have some great advice for little old us.”

Joel chuckled. “I’ve got a few questions for you myself. Like how you got all furry to begin with, though I’ve already got a pretty good guess. The wound you took on the way out?”

Madison nodded. “It was pretty dire. ‘Mantha held it together long enough for us to get into jump, then...well, as the old song goes, ‘I’ll stop the world and melt with you.’”

Barbaretta glanced back and forth between them. “Could someone tell me what the hell an ‘Integrate’ is? I’m not from Zharus to begin with, and never made it planetside all that much.”

“Oh, sorry.” Madison nodded to Barbaretta, cat ears flicking forward. “It’s kind of a side effect of RIDE Fusing. No one knows exactly why, but sometimes a Fused RIDE and human sort of...melt together, permanently, and get super-powers. Might want to keep that in mind and be careful if they put you in a Fusable shell. Doesn’t *usually* happen right away, but...well, you never know.”

“Now it’s my turn to be all confused at something you two know but I don’t,” Joel said. “They put Barb in a RI core...*how*, exactly?”

“New discovery in nano-cybernetics,” Samantha said. “Teen hacker accidentally figured out how to map human thought engrams into nano-implants. Now everyone’s doing it.”

“It’s an interesting experience so far,” Barb said. “You know, I’d thought about getting a RIDE if I got back to Zharus. But maybe I’ll just *be* one instead.”

“It ain’t necessarily all it’s cracked up to be,” Zach said. “It was hard enough learning to be one being *born* that way. Coming into it as a human? Wow, I can’t even.”

“Where are you coming from, anyway?” Joel asked. “Your signal has enough interference to suggest it’s coming from a long way, but you’re chatting in realtime.”

Madison grinned. “I’m back on Zharus, actually. We had a bit of an FTL comm breakthrough, thanks to my brother’s girlfriend.”

Joel scratched his head. “That DINcom thing? I heard about it from some friends in the Marshals before Zach and I left, but it didn’t seem like much more than an interesting toy. You’ve really got it working for reals?”

“It’s still got some serious glitches, and it’s pretty costly to keep a high-bandwidth link up for very long, but yeah.” Madison chuckled. “We’re running up a hell of a long-distance bill right now.”

“At least you didn’t call collect.” Joel grinned. “Anyway, we’ve still got that report to watch. You’ve already got the broad strokes from my torpedo report, but I had time to fill it out some on the way back home.”

“I haven’t seen any of it!” Barbaretta said brightly. “And I really am curious to know exactly what happened after I went night-night.”

“Well then, let’s roll it! Magic voice?”

Joel reached back to give the ferret a friendly rub on the head, and a dulcet female voice intoned, “Movie sign in five...four...three...”

Chapter 2

April 22, 156 AL

The bluish expanse of the Dry Ocean grew larger beneath the rapidly descending elevator car from Toptown. Totalia was about ten percent larger than Old Earth, but Zharus was much larger than that. It was difficult for Darrek to grasp the sheer size of the supercontinent below them. By itself, the supercontinent of Gondwana had more surface area than all the landmass on his homeworld, and there were two more supercontinents besides.

“Naming your continents after ancient Earth supercontinents? That makes some sense,” Teenette said.

“Zheng He is a planet of archipelagos,” Barbaretta said. They had placed her in what the Zharusians called a Full Body Replacement frame, modded with their ubiquitous hardlight. She looked like she had back on Totalia, except with the new, smaller tattoos from the debrief meeting. “Like someone dropped gravel in a bathtub. Biggest ‘continent’ is the size of New Zealand on Earth.”

“The continental interior back home is still pretty arid,” Darrek said. “No plants to hold moisture yet. But I gather, nowhere near as arid as that landscape.”

“You’re going to see it firsthand,” Madison said. The leopardess Integrate had met them when the *Endeavor* arrived at Toptown.

“I’ve been on desert planets before,” Barbaretta said. “Some of them even hotter than Zharus gets. I’m looking forward to exploring other things...like life on four legs.”

“You’re seriously planning to get a RIDE body?” Teenette asked. “Thought about what kind?”

Barbaretta shrugged. “I’ll see what’s available. I’m not picky.”

“I’ve been thinking about maybe looking for the right RIDE myself. Maybe help Darrek find one, too.”

“If you want, maybe we could try partnering up,” Barbaretta said. “At least for long enough to see what it’s like to Fuse. I’m not so sure I’d want my first Fuse to be with a stranger, and maybe you wouldn’t either.”

“Geez, slow down.” Madison shook her head. “It took me *months* to get comfortable with the idea of letting someone else inside my head, and you’re talking about it like it’s just putting on a jacket.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” Samantha put in a moment later. “I’d just like to point out if you hadn’t been such a scaredy human, we could have had fun together for those months, instead of just a couple of weeks.”

Joel leaned back against the window and smiled thoughtfully. “It’s just something people have to figure out for themselves. Some jump in, some take their time. Couldn’t really say which way’s better.”

Madison sighed. “If you *must* dive in headfirst, I guess my brother’s girlfriend is the one you should talk to for advice. She’ll be waiting with the others when we land.”

“I can’t believe we’re here,” Teenette said, smiling.

“You said it,” Darrek agreed. “We’re about to tread soil no one from our planet has ever touched. The first Totalians to visit another planet for generations!”

“But hopefully not the last,” Joel said.

Darrek tried not to look at Barbaretta directly. He had spent far too much time sitting next to her cryopod aboard the scout ship, and said a few things that had felt right at the time. (Not that she’d been able to *hear* him.) He wanted to embrace her, confess how he felt responsible for her entire ordeal. That her consciousness had somehow been transferred into a robot body made it...awkward. He wasn’t sure how to feel about how the Zharusians had essentially invented functional immortality during Joel’s short absence.

Back home, a faction of the Totalian religionists would call it “Transcending the Flesh” and probably embrace it. He didn’t share their mystical worldview, but he had to keep that in mind for his first report to the Totaliment, to be sent by message torpedo in a few weeks.

From the reactions of the native Zharusians, though, it was as new to them as it was to him. *So I have that going for me. We can struggle with these issues together.*

The plan was for the Totalians to just be like any other tourists, not standing out. They would have no special escort besides the tour company and guides being provided—though considering the bodyguarding capabilities of RIDEs, it would probably be enough. After a tour of Gondwanan city-states—polities, as they called them here—including several Integrate Enclaves, they would go to a few Laurasian cities, and visit a science station on the quarantined continent of Rodinia. Interspersed with the tourism would be a slew of meetings with just about every political entity under the sun, including ambassadors from most of the other human colonies. The sun that was just different enough in spectrum from his home star to provide a palpable reminder this was a new and alien world.

Teenette pointed. “Look, you can make out individual buildings now!”

The viewport HUD displayed the names of various landmarks and scenery. The bay was the Bay of Tranquility, with the Briny Deep off to the northeast. To the west was the Thalassic Ocean—a redundant name, to Darrek’s view. Essentially it was the “Ocean of the Sea” in Greek. Directly beneath them was a hollowed-out mountain that served as the space elevator’s groundside anchor.

Totalia had the technology to build a space elevator, but it didn’t have the economy or the motivation to follow through. Opening trade with Zharus would hopefully fix both issues, or so Darrek liked to think. He would certainly be talking up the experience of riding one in his report. He wrote more notes on his tablet in the shorthand he’d developed for long committee meetings, then held it up to snap another image capture with the camera in the back.

“Can you put that down for a little bit, Darrek?” Teenette said. “Just enjoy the view.”

“I *am* enjoying the view. This is how I enjoy it.” Darrek finished his note and put the tablet aside. “Really, I feel like I *should* be taking stills and video of *everything* at every moment, or I’m going to miss something.”

“I suggest getting an implant,” Barbaretta said. “No equipment to carry around—except in your head.”

“Implant, huh?” Darrek glanced at Barbaretta. “More like an ‘explant,’ in your case.”

Zach bounced up and down. “I could go for some eggplant right now!”

Madison chuckled. “If you think this is something, well, you ain’t seen nothing

yet.”

Darrek wasn't sure what he had expected Aloha to be like, but whatever it was, it clearly wasn't this.

It wasn't the technology that gave Darrek pause—it was the people. The sheer numbers, the crowding. The polis of Aloha alone had many times Totalia's population. The sidewalks and byways of the city were packed and teeming as he stared out the window of the sleek limo. And it wasn't even a holiday! It was easy to feel overwhelmed, and from the look on her face, Teenette was feeling equally apprehensive.

For now, the pink Cadillac limo was on actual wheels instead of a hundred meters off the ground. They drove along the scenic, sparkling waters of the Bay of Tranquility, towards their hotel. The first meeting with groundside government officials, including the Eridani ambassador, was behind them.

Meeting someone from yet another colony had filled Darrek with great anticipation. What he'd read and watched about that strange planet on the scout ship stoked his curiosity. But as it turned out, the man had looked pretty much like anybody else except for some odd bits of metal around his eye and a pale complexion. He was one of the lower-level attaches who were only lightly enhanced so they could pass for “normal,” though he'd been in a real-time two-way link with the local embassy. He promised an invitation to the embassy to meet directly with the higher-level ambassadors later and learn about their world's metamaterial. Darrek said he'd be delighted, and meant it. Cyberdani enhancements sounded...interesting.

Not that the Zharusians themselves were any less interesting. Between the transhuman Integrates, the humans with animal “tags”, and various forms of RIDEs and rarer EIDEs, Darrek spent most of the drive people watching. It wasn't the landscape that Totalia would have to adjust to—it was these people. Millions of them—billions, in fact. *How many of them would want to emigrate to Totalia?* He wrote this question down in shorthand. Then he added a followup: *How many Totalians would want to leave?*

“Ugh. I hate crowds,” Barbaretta said. “I suddenly remember why I went into scouting. Again.”

“There'll be a crowd of people waiting at the hotel, probably,” Madison said. “But they'll be the *good* kind of crowd.”

The limo soon pulled into the hotel's parking garage, letting them off near the elevator to the suites. Madison handed out key cards. “We'll just go right up to the suite; registration's already taken care of.”

“I could use a breather, thanks,” Darrek said. “Teenette?”

“I think I'll gadabout the hotel a little before the next meetup, if that's okay,” the younger woman said. “I think I saw some remote control agrav toys in the hotel store—er, fabbery. I want one of those aircars—er, skimmers.”

“Spend your *mu* wisely,” Darrek said. He couldn't help grinning over the oh-so-literal nickname for “monetary units”. Whoever thought that name up was a man or woman after his own heart. “We're still on a budget.”

“I'm a grown woman, Darrek. Please,” Teenette said tartly.

“Still, Aloha absolutely *excels* at separating tourists from their money,” Joel said.

“And their clothes, apparently,” Teenette said. “I'm just going to mingle among the natives a little.” She put her hand on his shoulder. “You look exhausted, Darrek.”

“It’s been...a day,” Darrek said. He looked at his two (four, really) Integrate escorts, and Barbaretta. “I think I can find my way to my suite, if that’s okay.”

“Fine, Darrek. Just fine,” Joel said. “The shindig can wait a bit longer until you’ve recharged. Get some rest. Go watch a good movie for a change. Comm us when you’re ready.”

“Mind if I tag along, Teenette?” Barbaretta asked. “I really haven’t been dirtside all that much, so it’s a new experience for both of us. Besides, these leg servos could use a stretch.”

The Totalian smiled. “Sounds like a plan, Barb. It’ll be good to spend some time together that doesn’t involve fixing a truck.”

“Have fun, you two,” Joel said as the duo strolled away.

The suite was on the 42nd floor, facing the Bay. It was just a common hotel room, with nothing that was outside the norm on Zharus. Two and a half months on Joel’s scout ship had familiarized him with hardlight and fabbers, so he couldn’t even claim them as novelties. He had the suite’s hardlight system create a writing desk out on the balcony, then sat down to add a few notes on his tablet.

Human consciousness. Uploading. Mind transfer. Continuity of self, or even the soul. Does this mean true immortality? Aren’t Integrates also immortal already?

Joel and Zach had shrugged at a similar questions on the journey. Integrates had only been around for thirty years or so, and nobody knew what their effective lifespan would be. They weren’t purely technological beings like RIDEs and Barbaretta now was, but they could have a lifespan of thousands of years.

All told, technology is just a neat and shiny thing, and it’s the second order effects that need closer scrutiny. I need to put on my Anthropology and Sociology hats to get to understand how these things will affect Totalia, he wrote. It helps that the Zharusians themselves are undergoing such rapid change, so I should meet with their academics at some point. But they are also a less homogenous, more pluralistic culture than tiny Totalia.

Darrek made a few notes to that effect while the thought was in his head, then put the tablet aside. The fatigue of changing time zones was starting to weigh on him, and it seemed like a good time to catch a nap. Or perhaps he could see what sorts of entertainment were airing on the local media channels.

Either way...he’d made it. Here he was, light-years from home. All things considered, he thought he could afford to relax.

April 24, 158 AL

Joel and Zach returned to Toptown soon after the Totalians’ welcome party, after bidding a heartfelt see-you-later. As much as they’d come to know them during their months of travel together, the Integrate Scout had duties to perform, and there was still a punishment to be meted out for their decade of keeping certain important information from Commander Lee.

The *Satellite of Love* awaited them at Toptown to take back to Uplift. Though the vessel was in good shape, it still needed refitting for the job ahead. That meant months of downtime before the Fleet left, doing whatever Lee required of them.

“Time to pay the piper,” Joel said. They hovered along at a good clip through the spaceport docking corridors rather than walking, both anxious to return to Scout HQ

and get it over with.. A lifting Integrate was an unusually uninteresting sight these days, Joel reflected. Nobody gave them a first glance, let alone a second.

“Face the music,” Zach added from the crook his his arm.

“Yep. I’d rather watch *Manos* without riffing.”

“Yep yep.”

“Or even *Battlefield Earth*.”

Zach looked upwards in shock. “Whoa, Joel! Let’s not get *too* masochistic now.”

The ship came to life as they entered the airlock, Polestar giving them immediate clearance to depart. The *SOL* was away from the docks before Joel was even on the flight deck. They would need to do some orbital maneuvers once they were a safe distance from the Alohavator, but otherwise they were just planning to do a straight drop to Uplift since they had so much delta-v to spare.

Ninety minutes later they were on the ground. As was traditional, Lt. Case met him at the bottom of the ramp, with a tablet in hand. Joel signed the ship over to Case’s care. She had done most of her scowling on the *Endeavor*, so here she and her crew were all business. The maintenance scaffolding and hookups were starting to engage.

“The Commander wants a few changes to your loadout for the next trip out, Captain,” Case said. “And that aft missile bay still needs a full replacement. We couldn’t do that on the *Endeavor*.”

“Thanks, Geri,” Joel said.

“And I want Zach’s signature on this handover doc, too,” she said, handing the tablet back with a grin. “It’s as much his ship as yours, right?”

“Finally!” The ferret snorted, then his avatar jumped atop the tablet and added his left pawprint next to Joel’s scrawl before jumping back. “How’s that?”

“That’ll do just fine, Zach. Thanks.” Case folded up the tablet and put it in her chest pocket. “Now, shoo. They’re expecting you two at Cheers.”

“Well, let’s not keep our friends and the booze waiting. See you later, Geri.”

Cheers was significantly larger than his last visit. It had spread out by filling in a lot of the space on the lot, but also going upwards, adding a second floor. “Guess Diane went through with her expansion plans,” Joel said.

“Check out the wolfy bouncer,” Zach said, eyeing the Fuser standing with her arms crossed next to the new main entrance.

“There he is!” Marcus Trenton shouted from the bar. “Get your Intie arse over here, Joel! And your furry friend, too. ‘Allo there, Zach.”

“Just how much did the Commander spill?” Joel said, taking the offered barstool next to Trenton. Zach scampered off his arm to the countertop.

“Enough to know you’re going to spend a few *days* in debrief,” Scout Maaz Goden said. “So get some good booze in you already. Diane has some new stuff that can actually get Inties drunk.”

The bartender was a white she-wolf Fuser Joel *also* hadn’t seen before. Her nametag said Henrietta, and she spoke with a Sturmhaven accent. “I have new ‘blueshock’ cocktail. Gives a nice buzz. It’s the charged sarium powder. Is very good.”

“Sounds great!” Zach said.

Henrietta mixed the cocktail quickly, adding the powder last and giving the tumbler a little tap. The liquid began to spark and sizzle as if it was lightning in a glass. Zach’s ferrety eyes sparkled as he stared at it, entranced. “Ooooooh. I hope it tastes as good as it looks. Shiny!”

Joel picked up the tumbler. “Down the hatch.” Then he took a swig. There was an audible spark. “*Whooo! I felt that one!*”

Zach rolled on the countertop, giggling. “Ooooh, now *that’s* what Shiny tastes like.”

Zharus was headquarters to hundreds of Scouts, with roughly three-quarters of them out in space at any one time. It seemed like every single one of them still planetbound had somehow wound up in a single room at the enlarged Cheers, with all their attention on Joel, Zach, and formerly missing Scout Marcus Trenton.

“I still can’t believe you’ve been an Intie all this time and we never knew,” Maaz said. “We should have figured, you being weird and all, but hell, we’re *all* weird in one way or another.”

“I rather think the Marshals on this planet stole that particular shtick from us,” Marcus said, sipping his own cocktail. He himself wore his Great Hunter-style khakis, monocle, and handlebar mustache. “Then again, we have Clint Brubeck to credit—or blame—for rather enhancing that part of our reputation.”

“Brubeck’s Luck,” Maaz said.

It was a phrase every Scout knew from one corner of human space to the other. Scout Major Clint Brubeck had had a phenomenal career from beginning to end. He was the reason why the modern Scouts always had more recruits than they could ever hope to admit. And after his youngest daughter’s return from some mysterious planet or two...Integrated, on her *very first* voyage...

“Yeah. Even his *kids* have it,” someone said with a note of disgust and not a small amount of envy. “Which reminds me, Roberts. There’s a lot of rumors about what you were doing out there after the Commander dragged you out of here.”

“Can’t talk about it, sorry,” Joel said. “Still waiting for the full debrief.”

“Surely you can spare a few non-specific details?” Maaz said. “That sneakship of yours came back a little fried. Some new pirate base needing recon out in Caliburn?”

:*As usual, word spreads fast,*: Zach sent. :*And we’re popular.*: “Sorry, Maaz, no comment. I’m in enough trouble with Commander Lee as it is.”

“So, Joel,” Scout Pilot Charra Delgado said from nearby. “Ten years an Integrate, huh? That’s not really *fair* to the rest of us, Captain sir. I’ve been reading. I know how durable you guys are. I’ve seen the newsfeeds.”

“What are you implying, Charra?” Joel said, picking up his drink.

“You’ve been keeping a secret that naturally makes you and your little friend there a better Scout,” Charra said. “Even better than those fully cybered-up Scouts out of Eridani. I mean, there was just *no way* you could’ve come out of that crash four years ago without a scratch on you!”

Joel shook his head. “This isn’t a competition. We’ve all got different strengths and weaknesses. You’re a lot better at on-planet work than I am, for one thing. I don’t have the patience for all that ground-pounding. That’s why they stuck us in a sneakship.”

:*Especially since you think so much faster than she does,*: Zach put in helpfully.

:*Shush, you.*:

“Well, maybe so,” Charra said. “But there’s another thing.”

“I imagine everybody wants a RIDE partner now?” Joel said.

“Nah. More than that,” Marcus said. “They know about Barb.”

Maaz pondered. “I think the future of Scouting is getting yourself uploaded like

Barb, leaving your meat body safe on ice at HQ, and shipping out all robot-like. Like being a human RIDE or something.”

“Nah, I doubt it,” Joel said. “Remember, we’re supposed to be scouting these planets for the benefit of organic human people. We’ll still need to have actual organic human people out there to see how it fits.”

“We can do that with simulations,” Maaz said. “I’ve had one too many close calls. I knew being a Scout was risky, but I think I *want* to be uploaded. Just adding that extra safety margin.”

Zach shook his head. “Or you could end up in shutdown on some alien world for a few thousand years until someone finds you. We have enough trouble with Rip van Winkles sleeping for only thirty years. Can you imagine thirty *thousand*?”

“At least we’d still be there for someone to find in a few thousand years, instead of dust...”

“Says you!” someone else shouted, half-slurred. “Ugh. Too drunk for this kinda talk.”

Joel chugged his drink. “Tell you what, Maaz. If you’re really interested in trying new things, how about I find you a RIDE to partner up with?”

“I could go for that to start,” Maaz said. “I’m sure it was nice to have someone else to talk to on those long assignments.”

“Heh. Yeah. You could say Zach and me were made for each other,” Joel said.

“Best buds forever,” Zach said, giving Joel a little fistbump.

“So, give me some ideas about what you might look for in a RIDE, and we’ll see who we can find.”

“Doubt we’ll lack for RIDE volunteers,” Zach said. “They’ll be breaking down the doors to see space.”

“Count me in,” Charra said. “Not letting Barb have all the fun.”

“Do I even need to ask?” Marcus Trenton said. “I plan on finding a partner on my own, regardless. I doubt Commander Lee will argue with that, considering the circumstances.”

Joel smiled at the formerly-missing Scout. “I don’t think she will. Okay, I guess we have some volunteers to start with. Maybe I can convince the Commander to put Zach and me in charge of a pilot RIDE partnership program?”

“No need to convince me, since I was going to do that anyway,” Lee said from the entryway. “For your sins.” The Scouts in the room all snapped to attention. “At ease, Scouts.”

“It’s nice we’re on the same page for once, Commander,” Joel said as the woman took an empty stool nearby.

Lee nodded. “It is, but if you think this is going easy on you, Captain Roberts, you’d be wrong. This isn’t just about finding partnerships. You’re also going to be testing equipment. I want you working with Kamen RIDEworks and possibly other manufacturers to design shells that *explicitly* meet our needs. We’re going to need better than the off-the-shelf gear.”

“Yes ma’am,” Zach said. “I’ve had some ideas there. It’ll be good to see them in action.”

“Happy to hear it. And one more thing. We’ve had a dozen Integrates apply to enter the program. I’ll also need you to evaluate them and work out a training regime. You’ll be working with Madison and Samantha on that one, though. I’m sure you’ll find

the time for everything.”

“Taking advantage of the fast-time thing we do, eh?” Zach said.

“Damned right I am,” Lee said. She turned to the bartender. “The usual, Henrietta, if you please.”

“One black and tan, coming right up,” the she-wolf mecha said.

Zach tilted his head and looked at her closely. “Hey, is that one of those ‘shell mode’ mods I’ve read about?”

“Da. No human in me right now,” Henrietta said. “Unfortunately is limited for this old frame of mine. Can have shell mode mods *or* partner, but not both. New ones not have that problem. But I like this frame. Is classic. So for now, this suits me. Is good to have choice for thumbs.”

“Huh. Kinda wish I’d had something like that, back in the day.”

Marcus sipped his drink. “You realize that if this all works out, Scouting will no longer be a solitary business.”

“I know,” Commander Lee said. “Some EI applicants want to be the ship itself. We have no procedures for that whatsoever, training or otherwise. So, we’re going by the seat of our pants here. Like the early days of the Space Race.” The older woman smirked. “Just like Scouts should.”

The assembled Scouts raised their glasses of whatever they were drinking and chorused their approval.

“Hear hear!”

“I’ll drink to that!”

“Damned right!”

“Brubeck’s Luck for everyone!”

“I’ll start looking at the applicants,” Zach said, rubbing his forepaws together in anticipation. “Oh, this is going to be fun.”

Chapter 3

April 28, 158 AL

Rhianna, Rochelle, Kaylee, and Uncia waited at the Uplift Aerodrome as the sleek, aerodynamic form of the *Daydream Believer* descended through the dome overhead. A scout ship was a little overqualified for suborbital transport duty, but Madison had wanted to fly her friends in from Aloha herself.

“How about that? Our first visitors from a lost colony,” Rhianna mused.

Rochelle nodded. “Madison’s said so much about them that between that and her and Joel’s reports, I halfway feel as though I know them already.”

The ship made one last sweeping curve and lined up on approach to land. A few moments later, it was down, and Rhianna and Rochelle came out onto the tarmac as the ramp lowered. Rhianna shaded her eyes against the bright morning sun, looking up at the ship. *Good thing the press has moved on to the next big deal. Maddie’s “just another scout” again.*

“Hey, gals!” Madison led the way down the ramp, followed by a middle-aged man with dark hair, a dark-skinned young woman with long, dark hair, and a short, brown-haired woman in scout khakis with tattoos showing on the visible skin of her arms. “Good to be back in Uplift again. Rhianna, Shelley, Kaylee, Uncia, I’d like to introduce my friends: Dr. Darrek Sigurdssen and Teenette Clark of the Totalian Loyalist Resistance, and Scout Captain Barbaretta Hansom.”

“What’s left of me, anyway. Hi, kids!” Barbaretta waved.

“Hi!” Teenette said. “Maddie’s told us a lot about you since we got here.”

“We’ve heard a lot about you three, too,” Rhianna said. She smiled at Barbaretta. “I understand you have a custom commission for us?”

“I guess you could call it that. I want to know more about my options, first thing.” Barbaretta grinned. “If I’m going to be out of body for a while, might as well make the most of it.”

Darrek stepped forward. “I’ve got something for you, too. A few grams of the current rarest substance on your planet. Well, rarest apart from radioactive decay elements, of course.” He chuckled. “If I didn’t get you some, I think Maddie would have mugged me for it.”

The leopard Integrate grimaced. “I want a working DIN, dammit.”

Teenette glanced from Rhianna to Rochelle, confusion writ plainly on her face. “Uh...sorry if this is kind of blunt, but...did you two *really* used to be guys?”

“I wasn’t what you’d call a ‘manly man’ before, but yes,” Rhianna said. “Of course, I’m not exactly a girly girl *now*, either.”

“But I am!” Rochelle said, giving her head a toss that stirred her long white hair.

“How complete is...?” Teenette stammered.

“Down to the genetic level,” Rhianna said. With the recent arrival of her extended family, more than a couple dozen of them, she’d been dealing with this issue *a lot* lately. “Takes a few years for the change to fully stabilize, but otherwise I can have babies. Totally fertile.”

“Incredible! I read about this on Joel’s ship, but I wasn’t sure how common

‘crossriding’ actually *is* here,” Darrek said. “I’ve been wanting to interview some crossriders for my report to the Totaliment.”

“Might want to talk to my older brother, Dr. Ferris Stonegate,” Rhianna said. “Anthropology is right up his alley. I know *he’ll* sure want to talk to *you*.”

“Anthropologist?”

“Yes. And pretty fresh from Earth, too.”

“Wonderful!” Darrek grinned. “I can’t wait to meet him. But you had some other things to show us?”

“Sure. We can start going over some of our tech for you back at the Garage, while we make Maddie’s DIN,” Rhianna said. “There’s a skimmer van waiting for you folks.”

Kaylee changed to her bike form and revved her lifters while her partner mounted. “See y’all there!”

Upon seeing the Freerider Garage, Teenette smiled. “Reminds me of my Aunt’s place. She fixes cars, herself. Found my knack for mechanical things hanging around her.”

“Like me and my Nana,” Rhianna said. “Grandmother, I mean. When I was a little boy she had a workbench set up just for me to tinker.”

“Interesting just how casually you say that,” Teenette said. “That you were a little boy, that is.”

Rhianna shrugged. “Why? It’s just a fact. That I’m a woman now doesn’t change what I was then. It doesn’t change what I remember being.”

“It’s a pretty common attitude hereabouts,” Rochelle said. “You can get some pretty odd pronoun constructions in everyday speech. ‘He immigrated from Earth a few years ago, but she runs a garage now.’”

“I’ve been reading the materials you forwarded. I think I have some idea how to incorporate the stuff into the DIN structure, but there’s going to be trial and error,” Rhianna said.

“We can’t simulate the stuff prop’ly yet,” Kaylee added. “Need to know its physical properties ‘fore we can even program the fabber to work with it.”

“Ah, I can help with that,” Darrek said. “Melting point, specific gravity, et cetera... I have it all memorized to seven or eight decimal places.”

Rhianna chuckled. “Handy.”

“You can’t avoid it if you do much work with the stuff. Tell me where to type it in and I’ll get right on it.”

“Just recite it!” Uncia said. “I’ll plug it in as you do.”

Barbaretta wandered around the garage, taking in the RIDE cradles, the racks of parts and equipment, the tool carts with carefully-ordered rows of tools. “Funny. All these years I’ve been reporting in here, and I never knew the first thing about RIDEs other than that we weren’t allowed to take them with us, so how useful could they be.” She held up a hand and turned it at the wrist, flexed her fingers. “And now I are one. Or will be. How soon can you get me a...body? Shell?”

“Shell,” Rhianna said. “And we can certainly order out for one. But...what kind do you want? They go all the way up from mice to dragons.”

“Wow...dragons? Really? Might be fun to be a dragon.”

Kaylee snorted. “I’d start out a little smaller if I were you. Dragons are a bit *much* for a first-timer.”

“You’re probably right.” Barbaretta considered. “What would be a good fit for a Scout?”

“Well, they’ve got Scout RIDEs,” Rochelle said. “They’re very light, meant for slipping deep into enemy territory and slipping out again fast.”

“Not quite the right kind of scouting for me. I’d want something that could carry a bunch of equipment. Big, but not *too* big. Maybe ‘bout ‘Mantha’s size?”

Rhianna nodded. “Medium Mobility or Support frame, probably. Mobility’s a jack-of-all-trades, like Kay here. Adds on all sorts of equipment through modules and paks. Support has tools and equipment for repair and support roles built in.”

“That sounds more my speed.”

“Now we just have to figure out what kind of animal you want!” Uncia said. “I’m partial to snow leopards!”

“No way!” Samantha put in. “Regular leopards are the bestest!”

Barbaretta grinned. “Oh wow. If I have to make up my mind about *that*, I could be here all night.”

“The first person to do the transfer went with a lioness,” Rhianna said. “As a result, we have a pretty good grasp on how those work, and a body-instinct package with all the bugs worked out.”

Barbaretta shrugged. “I like most big cats, so lioness sounds fine by me.”

“All right.” Rhianna glanced at the available cradles in the garage. “If you’re sure you want one, we can get one over here in just a few minutes.”

Barbaretta favored her with a quizzical look. “Why wouldn’t I want one?”

“Well, it’s a bit sudden, isn’t it? You’ve only been in that body for a few days.”

“And if the lion doesn’t work out, I can go right back into it, can’t I? This isn’t brain surgery. In fact, I chose this so I could *avoid* brain surgery on the old meat-bod ‘til it’s ready for me to be back in it again.”

“Well...yes,” Rhianna admitted. “It’s just kind of weird to me for someone to just...up and *decide* to be a transforming animal robot.”

“We Scouts have a bit more flexible mindset than the average,” Madison said. “Or else we wouldn’t have become Scouts in the first place.”

“It’s just another form of exploration for me,” Barbaretta said. “I’m just going to be exploring a new body is all. I’ve already found some things I like about this one.” She rose a half-meter on the shell’s built-in lifters, then dropped back to the floor. “Now I want to see what it’s like to prowl around on all fours. And who knows, maybe even Fuse with someone.” She glanced over at Teenette. “You were saying *you* wanted to try it, right?”

“Well, yeah...” Teenette said. “You’re offering it with you?”

“Now hang on just a minute,” Rochelle said. “That’s *really* sudden. You don’t even know what Fusing is like.”

“I’ve read some about it,” Barbaretta said.

“You and whoever you Fused with would be sharing memories with each other, for one thing,” Rochelle continued. “Most natural-born RIDEs are okay with that because that’s how they’re made, and most people around here grow up with the idea so they’re pretty cool with it too. But it’s a little bit...intimate for newcomers.”

“I’d be sharing memories with any RIDE I Fused with, right?” Teenette said. “Might as well be someone I already know. We worked together in the Resistance for months.”

“Look, there’d even be a chance—a really small one, unless you get critically injured or something, but still—that you two could Integrate,” Rhianna said. “In my professional opinion, there’s just too many unknowns here. Even over the diplomatic ruckus it would cause. A human uploaded into an RI core and everything else...”

Barbaretta grinned. “You’re talking to someone whose *profession* is *exploring* the unknown. But...point taken. I’ll see how I like the body as it is first.”

“Uncia and I can do the neural graft so you can run the shell,” Rochelle said.

“And we can mod it so you can change to a humanoid mode without needing to Fuse,” Rhianna said. “All bases covered.”

“Great! So pick me out a good one. Scouts’ll foot the bill. You’re the experts.”

“Ya know, with this and Maddie-and-Mantha’s DIN, it could be another all-nighter,” Kaylee said. She licked the back of her forepaw.

“Get Barb taken care of first, and we can do me once we get the Totalians settled in their hotel,” Maddie suggested.

“I’d actually be interested in watching the procedure,” Darrek said. “I need to learn as much as I can about your technology, after all.”

“Not sure how much you’ll get out of DIN-making, but you’re welcome to stay as long as you want,” Rhianna said.

Darrek took a small box out of his pants pocket, then opened the top. A 1-centimeter cube of bronze Totalium glittered. “Here’s two grams to start with. I have more, but I need to save some for your university researchers.”

Rhianna picked it up reverently, then carefully placed it into the fabber input tray. “Now, the fun part.”

“Great! Let’s get started!” Teenette said.

A half-hour later, a pair of RIDEs—a raccoon and a Rottweiler—in hardlight Kamen RIDEworks coveralls wheeled a stylized silver metallic lioness the size of a large motorcycle into the garage on a lifter pallet-jack. “This is it? Looks like something out of that *Voltron* cartoon Joel had.”

Rhianna looked up from the fabber. “That it is. It’ll look a lot different with the hardlight on, of course.” She glanced at the fabber again. “Okay, I think we can run the first batch, Kay. Keep it to quarter-speed until we can be sure it’s got the Totalium fabbing down. So far it’s playing nice with refined Q. That’s a relief. Some metas don’t play nice together.”

Kaylee nodded. “Good sign, Rhi. Got it.”

Rhianna rubbed her hands together. She knew it always made her look unbearably *kawaii* thanks to the kitty nose and ears, but it was too deeply ingrained a habit to break. “Right! Let’s see what we’ve got here.” She slid the pallet-jack over one of the cradles, then kicked the pedal to let its lifters take over so she could slide the jack back out and lower the shell into its embrace. “Thanks, guys! Much as I like working on older tech, there’s nothing like that new shell smell. What do you think, Captain Hansom?”

“Looks sleek and powerful, but beyond that I don’t much know *what* to think. Hard to believe in a little bit that’s gonna be *me*.” She shook her head. “I’ve just about managed to internalize that I’m in a mechanical human body, and here I’m about to go into a metal cat. It’s weird, but I think it’s a *good* weird.”

“Kinda like that feeling you get just before landing where nobody’s set foot

before,” Madison said.

“That’s pretty much it.” Barbaretta grinned. “If nothing else, I’m gonna be a *lot* harder to lock up from here on out. Four years. Four *goddamn* years...”

“This won’t take long. We’ll have you in here before you know it.” Rhianna flipped open access panels on the lioness’s back. “They’ve already started building new shells with most of the necessary parts in place. It’s still in beta, but some people always want to live on the bleeding edge.”

Barbaretta patted the shell. “That’s where we Scouts are the happiest!”

“Uh, you don’t mind if I watch, do you?” Teenette asked, peering over Rhianna’s shoulder. “I race motocross back home, fix my own bikes...”

“Not at all,” Rhianna said. “If you have time, I’ll be happy to show you the basics. Except for the lifters, hardlight, sarium plant, Fuser nannies, and mode-shifting, I don’t imagine you’ll find it all that different.”

“Uh...Rhi, you’ve just listed about 90% of what makes up a DE,” Kaylee said.

“But she’ll totally rock that ten percent!” Uncia chimed in.

“I’ve had apprentices who started knowing less than she does, so I’m sure she’ll pick it up,” Rhianna said. She took a couple of boxes of parts from a rack on the wall, opened them, and started inserting components into the access panels. “I’ve been installing this system a lot lately. Alpha Camp is the main beta-testing site, so we’ve been helping Paul and Lilibet set up everyone who wants it in our spare time.”

“Alpha Camp?” Teenette asked.

“Settlement of RIDEs with reasons to want to be independent of humans. Until this system was invented, the only way RIDEs could have hands was to Fuse, which led to...well, it’s kind of a long story. Can you hand me the leg support armature? It’s that long ‘L’-shaped piece. Thanks. You can see how it locks into these thigh notches here, and here...”

Darrek smiled as he watched Teenette leap to assist. He had never been very mechanically inclined. It was the underlying principles and mathematical formulae that he found compelling.

Then a man in his mid-thirties plodded through the garage’s hardlight door. He had sandy hair, very pink skin, and close-set eyes over a short nose that gave him kind of a ferret-like appearance. “Hey, Ryan!” he shouted.

Rhianna gritted her teeth. “I’m busy, Eddie! I have company over. Come back later.”

“I need some more cash,” the man continued.

“I said *not now*, Eddie!” Rhianna shot back, practically growling. “Out, now!”

“Okay, Ryan. Fine,” Edward muttered before shuffling out.

Rochelle sighed and facepalmed, a gesture echoed by Uncia and Kaylee.

“I’m sorry you had to see that. I have a big extended family who just arrived from Earth,” Rhianna said. “They’ve been under foot a lot lately and some of them are *not* adjusting to Zharus well.”

“It’s only been a couple weeks, Rhi. Give ‘em time,” Kaylee said, rubbing her cheek against her partner’s side. “They ain’t all pudknockers like Eddie, neither.”

“You’ll be meeting more of them tomorrow,” Rochelle said. “Rufia’s taken on some of the less obnoxious ones as apprentices in her tour-guide business, and they’ll be showing you around Uplift.”

“Better her than me,” Rhianna muttered.

“He was rather pale-looking,” Teenette said.

“It’s a new-cloned bod; I know the look.” Barbaretta looked down at her hands. “They’d have gotten me one if my old bod had been just a little more busted-up. Ex-brainboxer?”

“Yeah. If we’d gotten him an FBR like yours he would’ve pawned it right away,” Rhianna said. “Eddie’s not the sharpest tool in the shed. I just *know* one of these days I’m gonna hear he’s hopped a sub to Aloha, run up a huge gambling debt in their casinos, and ended up as indentured thumbs in Alpha Camp. Frankly, the sooner it happens, the better.” She rolled her eyes. “Anyway, we’re almost done. Ready for the big step, Captain?”

“Hell, yes!” Barbaretta said.

“I’ll prep for the graft and core transfer,” Rochelle said. “Right this way, please.”

“This is very exciting!” Darrek said, barely pausing in his continuous jotting of notes on his tablet. “Can I take some pics and vid? For posterity.”

“I don’t mind if these ladies don’t mind,” Barbaretta said, nodding at Rhianna and the others. “I’d like to see it myself. Not every day you get to watch your own brain transplant.”

“No objections,” Rhianna said. “I’ll let you tap into the Garage’s network to record it from multiple angles.”

Barbaretta clapped her hands together. “Great. Then let’s light this candle!”

Waking up this time was a considerably more orderly affair, Barbaretta found. No sooner had she closed her eyes, it seemed, than she was opening them again. She was still perfectly aware of who she was. But just as she had the last time, she was opening her eyes in VR first.

She seemed to be in a forest clearing, just a little more stylized and cartoony than real life. And she was still human. She glanced down at her perfectly ordinary avatar, a little disappointed. “Hey, what’s going on? Aren’t I supposed to have paws now?”

“First things first,” Rochelle said. “We have to graft.” She walked into the clearing, Uncia padding along behind her.

“Hey, that’s illegal, you know. And I didn’t think Uplift did its politics that way. Nextus, on the other hand...”

“Hey, that’s a good one!” Uncia said. “I’m gonna have to remember that!”

Rochelle rolled her eyes. “Everyone’s a comedian. Anyway, we’ve got to give you the right instincts and...well, autonomic nervous system for your body—both the lion one and the RIDE one. So your brain will know what’s where like it grew up that way.”

“Didn’t Jeanette say something about feeling like her big toe was spinning because she didn’t know what a cooling pump felt like?” Uncia said. “Before she grafted on the right mental bits, that is.”

“Yeah. Lucky for her, she had a full-fledged RI core riding along she could copy the template from. Most people who go this route swap with their partners, so they’ve got the same deal going. Since you don’t, we’re using a stand-alone template she helped us make up.”

Barbaretta shrugged. “Okay, you’ve convinced me. Do what you gotta do.”

“Right. The template will sort of attach itself, but won’t affect your personality or memories. You’ll shuck it off if you go back to a human body. Here...” She offered a folded, tawny, shaggy pelt. “Slip this on.”

Barbaretta raised an eyebrow and took it in her hands. “Like the skin-changers of old, eh?”

“Sometimes the old archetypes are the best.”

“Okay, let’s see...where’s the zipper on this thing...” Barbaretta slid her arms and legs into the pelt like a set of coveralls, pulled the skin on...and suddenly a tawny lioness was sitting on her haunches where she’d been a moment before. Barbaretta blinked and looked down at herself from a head that suddenly felt too big and...long.

“You’re a kitty!” Uncia cheered.

Barbaretta got to her feet and tried to step forward, but somehow she ended up on her side with her legs tangled up. “Oof!”

“Heh. Yeah...just because you’ve got the instincts doesn’t mean you’ve got the reflexes.” Rochelle chuckled. “Give it a little time, you’ll get it sorted out.”

Barbaretta rolled back to her feet, stood back up, and tried again. This time, she took three or four halting steps before tripping. “This might take a little work.”

“No worries, you’ve got time.”

After a few minutes of practice, Barbaretta was able to move around without falling over. “This is more like it!”

“Good for you!” Uncia cheered. “You’ll be pouncing on gazelles before you know it!”

“Now let me see...” Barbaretta cleared her throat, opened her mouth, and...
roared.

Rochelle jumped. “Yow, that’s loud!”

“We should go hunting later,” Uncia said with much greater aplomb.

“We can do that?”

The sole human of the trio waved her hand in the air. The scene around them changed, the stylization vanishing along with most of the trees—leaving a dry African savannah with herds of antelope and zebra in the distance. “Welcome to Nature Range. Un-hon will give you the welcome brochure and complimentary dinner. But you’ll have to hunt it down yourself.”

“I dunno, Shelley, that might be going a little fast,” Uncia said. “She just got kittied.”

“No, no, I want to try this!” Barbaretta said. “Won’t be the first time I’ve killed and eaten raw meat. We had the craziest survival courses back in scouting school...”

“Well, this time it’s just tooth and claw. No cheating with pointy sticks or rocks...or thumbs!” Uncia said, baring her own teeth. “Rawr!”

“You sure you’re up for that? You can still barely walk.”

“It’ll be a great way to get practice in.” Barbaretta tossed her head. “I don’t expect to catch anything, but I should get a lot better at running.”

“Good enough. And when you’re done, it’ll be time to install your core in the shell,” Rochelle said.

Barbaretta got slowly to all four feet. Then she yawned and stretched. “This feels...”

“Weird?” Uncia supplied.

“*Natural.* Not weird at all. And that’s the weird part.” Barbaretta glanced over her shoulder and twitched her tail. “This is such a trip.”

“Working as intended, then,” Rochelle said. A spread of screens popped up in front of her. “The graft is good, no problems with the linkages into your neural map. I

can see a few places that could stand improvement in the next version, but those can be patched in later.”

Barbaretta lifted a paw and looked at it, extending her claws. “You said RIDEs and humans were already swapping themselves?”

“Uh-huh!” Uncia said. “Some of ‘em even do it willingly!”

“That’s good...wait, what?” Barbaretta blinked.

“People can use any tool for good or evil—and by people I mean RIDEs, humans, Integrates, and whatever aliens we may run into in the future,” Rochelle said.

“Yeah, okay.” Barbaretta looked back at her tawny-pelted sides. “You know, I’m still missing something here. Let’s see...” Her tattoos started to appear as darker hairs in her fur, rapidly changing in configuration until they all fit. Planets, stars, and swirls of nebulae backed by a golden coat.

“I admit, it’s you,” Rochelle said.

“Just one more...” Barb glanced over her shoulder again as another planet appeared at the very back of her left flank. “There. Got Totalia on my left butt cheek. All set.”

“Oooh, burrrn!” Uncia said. “Now are we going to catch some zebra or not?”

Barbaretta wiggled her butt experimentally. “Lead the way and I’ll try to keep up!”

Out in the real world Rochelle opened Uncia’s head-helmet in Fuser. “Great news, everyone! The graft took. Barb’s off hunting with Uncia for a few virtual hours to break in. How goes Maddie’s DIN?”

“Third beta,” Rhianna informed, the DIN floating in a lifter field inside the scanner. “And probably the last. Totalium has some very *interesting* signal subspace-phase transmission properties.”

“Interesting how?” Darrek asked.

“Well, it’s not really absorbing wavelengths or certain radiation,” Rhianna said. “All that energy has to go somewhere. It’s a lot like some of the modified cavorite we use for heatsinks. Which reminds me, if we can alter the metachemical isomer, Totalium could be better and safer than...”

“Rhi, you’re driftin’,” Kaylee said.

“The point is that the energy is going right into subspace. It’s a one-way door, though. Otherwise it’d be more like p-cav, which lets energy *out* of subspace. That’s how our pulse weaponry works.”

Darrek nodded. “From my readings of subspace theory, you’re probably on the right track.” He shook his head. “I just hope it is subspace, and not some parallel universe where everyone on the planet is dying of radiation poisoning from all our reactor shielding.”

“This version is ready for testing, Madison. Give it a try,” Rhianna said. “On a whim I adapted some of my DINcom design. If it works we’re going to have a tonne of new data to send Dr. Rosenthal.”

“Okay, let’s see what we’ve got.” Madison took the gem with the small metal plug and slid it into the socket in the hollow of her neck. “Got a good connection...getting a decent throughput...”

“Good! Now, push it as hard as it’ll go. I need a full test. We only needed micrograms to make that DIN, so don’t worry about burning it out.”

“Ack. All right...” Madison screwed up her face against the expected burnout, and the gem glowed brighter. “Maxed out. Still getting a little warm.”

“Still within degradation rate tolerance. You’re good, Maddie, ‘Mantha,” Rhianna said.

“Wow, that’s great!” Madison said. “It feels like this one’s going to last a while. Uh...how many of these can we make with the Totalium we have?”

“Well, I only needed micrograms. I can churn out a hundred replacements and still have most of it to play with—with Darrek’s permission, of course.”

“Heh. Even with just micrograms in it, you realize every one of those DINs is practically priceless right now?” Kaylee said. “You could buy a country or two with the rest of it.”

Rhianna shrugged. “There’s a whole planet of it just a few light-years away. The price will drop soon enough.”

Rochelle pulled Uncia’s helmet head back down again. “Oh hey—Unnie’s signaling they’re done with their hunt.”

Rhianna pushed back her chair and got up. “Well, let’s get the core transfer set up, then.” She went over to the cradle and flipped open the lioness shell’s cranial plate, then turned to the workbench with the core interface that had Barb in it. “Have Uncia tell her to power down, and we’ll get started.”

Across the room, Teenette put down the media tablet on which she’d been reading magazines and came over to watch.

“Does Commander Lee know about this?” Madison asked. “I was just wondering. Barb didn’t say.”

Rhianna shrugged. “Either way, she will when she gets the invoices.”

The indicator light on the core reader went out. “That’s it, then.” Rhianna pulled on a pair of gloves and gently lifted the spherical core unit out of the socket.

“Brrr,” Samantha said through Madison’s mouth. “Just seeing someone carrying a brain in their hands like that...”

Rochelle grinned. “RIDE cores are tough, you know that. She could drop it on a concrete floor and probably not even scratch it.”

“It’s one thing to *know* that. It’s another to *see someone with a brain in their hand.*”

Rhianna reached into the lioness shell’s head and settled the core gently into place. “There we go. All secure.” She closed the panel and activated the pre-boot diagnostics. “Kamen’s a good maker. No problems with the Shell Mode mods. She should be fine on two legs right away.”

“And that’s...really Barb now,” Teenette said.

“Functional immortality,” Darrek mused. “Transcending the flesh. It’s marvelous.”

“We could probably fit you out with one, too!” Uncia said. “I’m thinking something in a nice shade of squirrel.”

“I fear if I allow myself to be...modified in that way it could hurt my credibility with the Totaliment and the average citizen,” Darrek said. “As much as I want to experience it.”

Uncia smirked. “Suuuuure you do.”

A slight hum filled the room as the lioness powered up, eyes flickering on before her tattooed pelt rezzed, starting at her paws. She opened her hardlight eyes, looking

around the room. “We are...live?”

Rhianna pushed on the clamp release pedal. “Try out those lifters, Captain.”

“Lifters? I’ve got lifters? Where...oh, there the little buggers are. Hold on.” A moment later, the lioness rose from the cradle and settled down on the garage floor. She craned her neck to look around. “This is new.”

“Wait until you’re in skimmer mode, flat out in the Dry,” Kaylee said. “Nothing like it.”

“Uh...am I okay to move around?” Barbaretta asked. “I don’t want to fall over on top of someone.”

“Your VR lion-body reflexes should carry over, for the most part,” Rochelle said. “Even if you fall over, your body’s tough, you can take it.”

“Sweet.” Barbaretta slowly padded forward, then walked around the garage. “Feels just as natural as in there.” She sat down on her haunches and proceeded to scratch behind one ear. “Dang it feels weird to do that. Like I’m some kind of contortionist.”

“You’ll get used to it!” Uncia said. “We kitties are flexible.”

“Yes, that’s what I just said.”

“That new shell needs a good shakedown,” Rhianna said. “I don’t know what your plans are for the rest of the day, but pay attention to the break-in manual. The cav needs conditioning...”

Rochelle put her hand on her friend’s shoulder. “I think she can handle it, Rhi.”

“You shoulda seen the crap powered armor they gave us,” Barbaretta said, tail swishing. “Of course, now I *am* powered armor, aren’t I?”

Rhianna nodded. “Pretty much. Speaking of, you should make sure the Shell Mode mods work before you go anywhere.”

“All right...how?”

“Lemme show ya,” Kaylee said. “I don’t have the mods yet myself, but I can show you where the switch is anyway. Just let me connect. I’m sure you’ll get it once ya see it done once.”

Barbaretta glanced at her and heard a little bell, signaling another RIDE asking for a connection. “Okay...?”

:It’s this subroutine right here.: Barbaretta sensed Kaylee highlighting a command in her operating system—metaphorically, a series of levers. *:The others are the triggers for your other modes.:*

:Thanks. Got it.: Barbaretta drew her attention back to the outside world, and triggered the change. Her hardlight skin winked out, and she had just enough time to register the oddity of the sensation of being hardlight-naked before her body started shifting and contorting around her. Then she was standing on two legs, and a moment later the hardlight was back.

“Woo! Good for you!” Uncia cheered, and the others applauded.

Barbaretta glanced down at herself. “This is new. It...doesn’t feel all that different from the body I came here with, this way. A little chunkier, I guess...”

“Congrats. You’re one of the first generation of RIDEs to be able to go humanoid without a human inside,” Rhianna said. “Until very recently, Fusing was the only way RIDEs could get thumbs. This led to...unforeseen consequences.”

Barbaretta snorted. “I’ll bet.” She took a few experimental steps, noting the way her footsteps fell heavier than before. “Funny, I’d have expected to go ‘clomp clomp

clomp.”

“It’s the hardlight. You’ve got real lion feet, or a reasonable facsimile thereof.”

“I don’t feel as clumsy as I’d have expected, either.” Barbaretta tried a crescent kick into an empty corner of the room. “This is amazing!”

Rochelle grinned. “The miracle of Qubitite.”

Barbaretta turned back to face them. “So what else can I do?”

“Well, you can turn into a bike, right? Just like Samantha could?” Teenette said. “What kind of bike?”

“Let’s find out. Let me see...” Barbaretta cocked her head, then a moment later her hardlight flickered out and metallic parts slowly unfolded into a rugged off-road skimmer design with four lifter pods on outriggers, a winch at the front, and a sizable cargo rack at the back.

“Not the fastest thing on the street, but a lot of power. Just what you might want on an unexplored planet.”

“Uh...huh.” Barbaretta’s voice came from a speaker on the instrument cluster.

“Uh...how do I even move? I don’t have a frame of reference.”

“It may help if you think of yourself walking or running,” Kaylee suggested. “Not quite the same thing, but it’s a start. Gettin’ off the ground is kinda like standin’ up.”

“It might also help to have someone take you out for a drive,” Uncia added.

“Having someone else control the throttle and steer lets you just feel what it’s like to move, then you figure out how to copy that.”

Madison grinned. “And as it happens, I gather we have someone here who’s put in a lot of time lately learning to drive a skimmer bike.” She gave Teenette a meaningful glance.

“Great! How about you help me test this new bod out, Teenette?”

“I’d love to!” Teenette said. “Uh...what, you just want me to climb on?”

“That’s genr’ly how it’s done,” Kaylee quipped. “Ah remember my first time out with Ryan.”

“I’ll never forget, either,” Rhianna added. “You two have fun. Just be careful, please.”

Teenette approached Barbaretta gingerly. “Funny...when you were talking about getting a RIDE shell, I never thought about how...awkward it would be, uh, ‘riding’ you.”

Barbaretta snorted. “Don’t read stuff into it that isn’t there. I’m a bike right now. Get on already!”

Teenette threw her leg over the seat, and put her feet on the footplates. She reached out to grip the handlebars experimentally. “This isn’t too far off from the ATV quads they have back home. So let’s see...” She revved the throttle, and the bike lifted off the ground.

“Oookay, I sure felt that!” Barbaretta said.

“Then you’ll feel this, too!” Teenette threw the bike into gear and moved forward. The garage door opened in front of them to allow them out.

“We’ll see you guys later!” Barb said cheerily. “Don’t wait up!”

Chapter 4

Barbareta took stock as she trundled out the garage door. She was...a motorcycle. She had lifter pods, a chassis, handlebars, and even a passenger. It felt unfamiliar, but it also felt *right*. Her lifters didn't feel quite like legs or feet, but they didn't quite *not* either. She wasn't moving them to walk, but she was *pushing* with them in a way that registered. Or at least, her body was doing it, at the behest of someone else on her back. But *that* felt right, too.

Perhaps the strangest thing was that it *wasn't* so strange. In some of the twencen role-playing games that were part of the Scout library, anything that changed a person's body away from human, like cybernetics or whatever, cost "sanity points" and going too far could drive you crazy. But Barb didn't *feel* crazy. Maybe that was just part of the magic of qubitite.

"Hey, you all right in there?" Teenette asked. "This is weird. I mean, with Samantha, she was what she'd been all her life. But you..."

"I'm fine," Barbareta assured her. "Keep on doing what you're doing. I'm working on building up kinesthetic memories so I know how to do it on my own."

"Sure thing. This is nice. You're not quite as responsive as the Scout skimmer I used back on Totalia, but I'll bet you're a lot better on rough terrain. Er...your body is, I mean. Uh, I mean...you know, there's no way to put that that doesn't sound weird."

Barbareta chuckled. "I know what you mean. So...how about we head for the nearest exit, and see how fast I can go outside the dome?"

"Can we do that? I mean, I thought it was halfway to boiling out there."

"I should have a hardlight aeroshell that will keep the temperature regulated. See if you can find the switch."

"Oh, right. It's under the environmental controls, got it." Teenette pressed a switch, and the breeze against her face died away.

"Great! I think I know how to do that on my own now. If you don't mind, I'm going to try steering."

"Go ahead, it's your body." Teenette lifted her hands from the handlebars, and Barbareta reached out to take over. She couldn't say exactly *how* she did it—there weren't really any human words that fit. But she suddenly grasped how to steer herself just like a human might understand walking in a different direction.

"Got it! Whoa, hey, I'm driving myself!" She swerved from side to side, revving her lifters a little faster, rising higher into the slower traffic lanes over the buildings. All around her the skimmers and RIDEs were broadcasting signals giving her their ID, velocity, and position relative to herself.

"You good with that?"

"Yeah...yeah, I think I'm getting the hang of this."

Barbareta checked the navigation system for the nearest exit from the Dome, and took the next outbound lane. "The manual says I'm safe to drive around out in the Dry Ocean thanks to this shell. I have to say, no matter how nice this dome place is, I like the idea of being out in the open more."

"I know what you mean," Teenette said. "I always liked the nature trips back in my school days. There weren't a lot of excuses to get outside the city otherwise."

“I hope I can get some time off from holding hands and being debriefed to do some exploring out there,” Barbaretta said. “Some *real* exploring, being as it’s the closest thing I’m gonna get to the real scouting deal while we’re stuck here.”

“I remember you telling me about Torvalds,” Teenette said. “Biochemistry was right-handed. Nothing edible, but nothing that could infect you either.”

“That was where creatures tried to eat me, yes.” Barbaretta chuckled. “High oxy atmosphere, lower gravity. Animals grew *big* there, and they didn’t know I wasn’t edible. Six-legged thing the size of a bus and a mouth like a chainsaw chased me for thirty klicks before it gave up.”

“You’d give them even more indigestion now.”

“Yeah.” They passed through the permeable hardlight gateway out of the dome, entering a world of desert and bright sun. “Now let’s open ‘er up!” Barbaretta slowly cranked up the throttle, paying close attention to her balance. She’d ridden plenty of skimmer bikes before, but things felt a lot different when you *were* the bike.

They soon left the Domes behind them, racing out into the desert flats sending up a cloud of dust behind them. “Wow, this is great!” Teenette said. “I can’t believe how much smoother lifters are than wheels. We need to get this tech back home!”

“Lucky thing for you, it’s one of the easiest techs to get. You folks could *almost* make it now, if you knew what you were doing. I bet you’ll have it within months after they throw the bums out.”

“And won’t *that* just change...well, everything?” Teenette chuckled. “If everyone’s going to have flying cars, we’ll need a whole new air traffic control system.”

“You’ll need a lot of new stuff, that’s for sure,” Barbaretta said. “And I don’t think everything’s going to be hunky-dory even after they kick the Zealots out. Not everyone’s gonna be happy about all those changes. You might even end up with some of the people who fought the hardest to kick ‘em out starting to think maybe they were right after all.”

“I hope you’re wrong.” Teenette sighed. “But I don’t suppose you are. People are complicated, aren’t they?”

“Yeah.”

They cruised along in silence for a while, taking in the scenery. As Barbaretta got more used to the body’s internal systems, she switched over from optic view to infrared, then laser ranging, then tried out a 360-degree sensor view for kicks. She wasn’t just *seeing* the desert, she was understanding it topographically and in three dimensions. *What a trip. This would have been great for surveying in the field.*

There was just one more thing to try...

“So...” Barbaretta said. “This Fusing thing...you wanna?”

“With all the stuff they said about it? Sharing each other’s memories and all? You sure you want to try that this soon?”

“The way I figure, that sort of thing isn’t going to get any easier if we wait, so if we want to do it at all, we might as well try it now as later. Besides, we know each other... and you saved my tail.”

Teenette smiled. “You didn’t *have* a tail when I saved you. But aren’t you worried about your private memories? Little things you’ve done and thought you wouldn’t want anyone else to know?”

“Are you?”

“Well...” Teenette blushed a little. “Maybe a *leetle* embarrassed about you learning a few things, like the way I hero-worship you. But...mostly, no. You know how

to keep secrets, and I think I do too.”

“Then I’m not either. Hell, when would I even have had the chance to *do* anything embarrassing? I spend my life alone on alien planets...or, most recently, locked up in jail for four years.”

“Sorry about that.” Teenette shook her head. “Raph Clarke is *such* an idiot. I’m still embarrassed we almost have the same last name.”

“Eh, that’s all behind us now. I’m looking forward to seeing the look on his face when we go back and kick his booty. So anyway, how ‘bout it?”

Teenette shrugged. “Okay...why not?”

Barbaretta slowed to a halt, and reached within for the mode-change switch. The pre-Fuse diagnostics ran in milliseconds, her body tingled with primed nanites. “Here goes nothing.” Once again, she felt the peculiar sensation of her body dismantling and reassembling itself. This time, it was taking humanoid shape again...with another person inside. A moment later, her hardlight flickered back on.

And there she was...standing there with another person inside. And she was moving—moving *her*. It was as if her skeleton had separate muscles and a mind of its own. But she almost didn’t notice that, compared to the flood of memories and sensations flooding across the neural link her nanites had just forged to Teenette. She began seeing memories from the Totalian girl at the same time she was aware Teenette was examining her own.

It was a strange feeling. It could have felt intrusive, an invasion of privacy, except...they knew and trusted each other enough that it was more like sharing, watching a favorite movie together. In moments, they learned more about each other than they had in previous months.

:Yaaaa! You weren’t kidding about that huge, nasty thing!: Teenette said internally.

:And you weren’t kidding about the hero-worship. I’m blushing here.:

Barbaretta sent an emoticon of a super-deformed blushing lioness face across the neural link, and Teenette giggled.

:Sometime I want to spend a few hours just looking at your scouting memories in depth,: Teenette sent. *:But for now...:* She switched to speaking aloud. “...let’s focus on the real world? I’ve got a catsuit on and I want to try her out!”

“I want to try me out, too. Now...how about boosting up to that rock formation?” Barbaretta pointed with a beclawed fingertip.

“Works for me!” Teenette said. “Up, up, and away we go!”

They spent the next hour hovering over the desert, leaping from rock formation to rock formation, practicing martial-arts moves, and otherwise having fun together. The odd thing was that having a living human body inside felt different than simply being in shell mode. It just felt...*right*, somehow. Barbaretta wondered if it was the equivalent of an endorphin response, programmed in to make RIDEs happier about the idea of Fusing, or just a coincidence. Either way, she liked it. And from the sensations coming across their link, she got the feeling that Teenette did, too.

“I’ll have to bother the Quartermaster for some customized planetary survey gear,” Barbaretta said. “Can do a lot more with these sarium battery packs. Drill probes, atmospheric analyzers, biological assessments... There’s a lot of worlds out there just waiting for us.”

“Makes me wonder where all the aliens are,” Teenette said.

“You and everyone else since Carl Sagan.”

“I hate to say it, but we should probably think about heading back.”

“I suppose so.” Barbaretta glanced back toward the dome of Uplift, currently a small glinting spot on the horizon. “Y’know...given that we’re going to be doing most of the same stuff with most of the same people anyway, I was thinking, maybe I could just –I mean, we could, uh...”

“Partner up for the duration?” Teenette said. “Sure, why not. But what about the risks? ‘Integration’ and all that?”

“Well, it seems like the chance of that ever happening is very very small. From the research I’ve been doing in fast-time, looks like most people never Integrate, even after Fusing for years. There are some special cases and exceptions, but none of ‘em fits me.” Barbaretta shrugged for both of them. “Anyway, judging by Maddie, it’s not the end of the world if it happens anyway.”

“Yeah, I guess. I’m still amazed at that. The crazy things that happen...” Teenette shook her head. “Yeah, well, let’s get on back and show everyone how we threw our caution to the winds.”

“Works for me!” A little reluctantly, Barbaretta de-Fused back to skimmer form, and they headed back for the dome.

“It sounds like this ‘nullifite’ you found on Barsoom is somehow related to our Totalium,” Darrek said to Madison.

“Except it’s an active absorber rather than a passive one,” Madison said, sipping some of Rochelle’s famous coffee. “Would’ve killed me if it wasn’t for ‘Mantha. The Scout metamaterials scientists are still testing it and the lifeforms that had it in their system. The organisms seemed to use it as a sort of substitute for chlorophyll and photosynthesis. Makes me wonder if there are electric fish in that ecosystem.”

Darrek scribbled more notes, then checked the time. “They’ve been out a while.”

“It’s always like that, the first time you’re with a RIDE,” Samantha put in. “Especially if...well, you know.”

“I know what?” Darrek said.

“Oh, they’re gonna Fuse,” Samantha said. “Teenette would’ve tried a Fuse with me back on Totalia if it weren’t that the tags would have been problematic. Ten to one Teenette’s got ears and a tail when they come back.”

Madison chuckled. “No bet. I may have spent most of my life not understanding why someone would want to just...up and Fuse right away, but that doesn’t mean I don’t know it when I see it.”

Kaylee rolled her eyes. “Kids these days.”

As if on cue, a distant skimmer sound grew louder, and a moment later a vaguely leonine off-road skimmer pulled in, with a lion-tagged Teenette on back. In addition to the ears and tail, her dark hair now had a few tawny streaks in it. “So, hi again,” Teenette said. “Yeah, she’s not a bad RIDE. I think I’ll take her.”

“You went ahead and did it, didn’t you,” Rhianna said. “Well, not really my place to judge, I guess. So how’d it feel?”

“Like nothing I’ve ever felt before,” Barbaretta said. “But I like it. I think I want to do more of it.”

“It was great!” Teenette said, eyes sparkling. “It was nothing like piloting that suit

of transforming armor Joel gave me.”

“They’re not too bad for what they are, but yeah. Nothing like a Fuse,” Rhianna said. She patted Kaylee on her head, then Fused up with her. “Now, what’s your plans for the rest of the day?”

“We’ll be turning in before too long, as we have a tour of your fine polis scheduled for tomorrow,” Darrek said. “I suppose we should go ahead and return to the hotel.”

Teenette looked over her shoulder at her tufted tail. “I’m going to need some new clothes.”

Madison grinned. “Don’t look behind you, but it looks like you’ve picked up a tail.” Teenette laughed and made a slapping motion at her.

“Well, when in Rome,” Darrek said. “But as I told our new friends, one of us should remain...er...”

“Untainted by our technology?” Madison suggested.

“Perhaps a bit strong a phrase, but it’ll do,” Darrek said.

“Well, drop by any time while you’re in town!” Rochelle said. “And enjoy the polis. It’s a really great place to live.”

“I can believe it,” Teenette said. “I’ll bet it’s a great place to visit, too.”

“I still can’t believe this place.” Raynor Stone, a brown-haired man in his early twenties, leaned back against the old hardlight dome generator and looked around the park again. The ice cream shop nearby was doing a brisk business, including the cone in his own hand.

“You’re about to drip on your new clothes, cuz,” Leda Stone, a slightly younger brunette girl next to him, pointed out. “Better lick that thing.”

Mumbling something about lines taken out of context, Raynor did so. “So, here we are on Zharus, and things are weird.”

“Tell me about it.” Leda worked on a cone of her own. “A whole planet of people who think nothing of plopping themselves into a sentient machines that can rebuild their whole body.”

Raynor groaned. “I know. Believe me, I know. Mom and Dad are all excited about it...not so much for themselves, but for *me*.”

Leda giggled. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. They saw what Ryan did, and now *they* want a daughter too.”

“Hey, then I could get you to babysit Quincy some!” Leda said brightly. “Work on those mothering skills.”

Raynor facepalmed. “Don’t even joke about it. Really, I like me the way I am.”

“I think it’s kind of a neat idea.” Peter Bellamy, a blond-haired 17-year-old came over to join them, holding a malt glass with a straw. “If you want to be somebody different, you can. I could go into a body shop and come out looking like some twencen celeb dude. Sean Connery, Idris Elba—”

“Marilyn Monroe,” Leda suggested, arching one eyebrow at Raynor.

“Yeah, but *you* should be the one who wants it.” Raynor shook his head. “I get the uncomfortable feeling that Mom and Dad are going to bring some she-RIDE home one of these days and have her glomp me.”

“You know, you’re over the age of majority here,” Leda put in. “You could just move out.”

“I don’t *feel* over the age of majority,” Raynor said. “And I don’t think Mom and Dad feel like I am, either.”

“You could just do it and get it over with!” The boisterous voice belonged to Rhianna-*nee*-Ryan’s larger-than-life friend Rufia—who had been Rufus before arriving here, Raynor knew. “Three years is plenty of time for them to get it out of their system. Then you could change back later...if you still wanted to.”

Raynor shook his head. “Ugh.”

Leda grinned. “Aw, c’mon, cuz, I could help you out with it. It’ll be fun!”

“Fun for *someone*, maybe. But...I’ll think about it.”

Rufia chuckled. “Anyway, we’re going to meet up with a couple of even newbier newbs than you-all. This’ll be your first lesson by example in the tour guide biz.”

“I’m still not sure how we’re supposed to be tour guides when even *we* don’t know anything about this place yet,” Raynor said.

“Oh ye of little faith. You don’t know anything about tour guiding, either. So you might as well learn both at once. At least this way, you won’t make any of the classic newb mistakes, like renting the wrong sex of RIDE.”

Raynor cast a slantwise gaze in Rufia’s direction. “Unless, of course, you’ve been bribed to make *sure* I rent the wrong sex of RIDE.”

“I admit nothing!” Rufia said. “But you *know*, that’s not a bad idea...maybe I should give your folks a call. Vonnie, could you take a memo?”

The elk snorted as she stepped up behind Rufia. “Do I *look* like your secretary?”

“Well, it was worth a try.” Rufia clapped her hands together. “So, come on. I’ll introduce you to our new friends.”

At the edge of the park, a man, a woman, and a lioness RIDE waited. Rufia quickly introduced them as Darrek Sigurdssen, Teenette Clark, and Barbaretta Hansom. Raynor thought it odd that a RIDE should have a last name, but if Rufia wasn’t making anything of it he supposed he wouldn’t either. “You’ve all got a few things in common, in that you’re all new to this planet.”

“Oh yeah? Where are you from?”

“Here and there,” Barbaretta said. “I’m originally from Zheng He, though I’ve traveled around a lot since.”

Leda cocked her head. “They have RIDEs on Zheng He?”

“I’m not actually a RIDE, I just look like one right now. The squishy body’s in the repair shop.”

Rufia grinned. “Oh, didn’t we mention? They figured out how to put people in RIDEs now. That’s going to cause a stir when more people know about it.”

“We’re from Zheng He, too,” Teenette said.

Raynor noticed they didn’t have remotely similar accents, but maybe there were different settlements on the colony. “Well, pleased to meet you.”

Darrek spoke up. “I gather you’re cousins of Rhianna Stonegate?”

“Who do you—oh, *Rhianna*, right.” Raynor shook his head. “Still so hard to get used to thinking of Ryan as that. Yeah, she’s pretty much the reason we’re all here. I think he came out here to get as far away from the rest of the family as he could...and then the joke was on him—her—when we all showed up anyway.”

“Of course, the joke is on us now, too,” Leda added. “Since now she’s the one who knows all about how this place works, and we’re the newbies having to learn a whole

new planet and culture.”

Teenette grinned. “Which would be us, too.”

Barbaretta nodded. “So we’re all going to learn about it together.”

“I’ve rented a skimmer bus we can all go around in. There’s room for you too, Barb.” Rufia checked her watch. “Should be here...oh, there it is. I use these guys a lot; cheaper than owning my own. Though if business keeps getting better, who knows, I might bite the bullet.”

A small bus labeled “Uplift Charters” pulled up next to them. There was no one in the driver’s seat. Darrek raised an eyebrow. “You’ve got fully-automated traffic control here?”

Rufia grinned. “Handy, isn’t it? All aboard, everyone.”

And they don’t have traffic automation on Zheng He? Raynor wondered as they filed aboard.

Rufia stood at the front of the bus and grasped the microphone dangling from the ceiling on a cable—an obvious prop given that directional microphone technology could have amplified her voice with no obvious equipment necessary. But here on Zharus they went in for the whole twentieth-century verisimilitude thing. “Right, so! Welcome to Uplift. Jewel of the Dry Ocean. Academic capital of Gondwana. City in a Snow Globe. Yadda yadda yadda. You’ve already seen a little of it, but Vonnie and I are gonna show you some of the more fun parts. Buckle up for safety, everyone! Okay, m’dear elk, hit it.”

Yvonne was seated, legs folded underneath her, in an open area behind the vacant driver seat that also incorporated a RIDE charging hookup. “Hold onto your butts.” The bus lifted under her control, then moved forward.

“So what are we gonna see first?” Darrek asked. “The University? The generators that power the dome?”

“Racing tracks?” Teenette suggested. “RIDE factories?”

“I’d like to see the creches I heard about where they raise baby RIDEs,” Leda said.

“We’ll see all of those, I promise.” Rufia grinned. “But we’re going to see stuff that we pass right by, first. So up ahead is the main entrance to the Brubeck Mining corporate campus. We’ll be coming back to a side entrance of the place later to visit the RIDE museum, but it’s big enough to take up a good chunk of Uplift’s main dome right here. This is where the big fight took place a year or so back that ended Fritz the Integrate’s reign of terror...”

Over Nextus

Zharus still has something akin to city-states, Darrek wrote. Although not until about a century ago, when the “polity” of Nextus was founded. Apparently said founders were extremely adept in finding loopholes in the Colonial Charter. The revised Charter, amended upon landing, contained a clause that restricted the supercontinent of Rodnia from being terraformed. The wording of the clause regards each supercontinent as a ‘self-contained world’. Somehow the Founders used that as their legal grounding for the creation of a politically independent Polity. That word is important in itself. See further details about the history of Nextus in Appendix D.

Beneath their airborne tour bus the city’s geometric precision was obvious. Concentric circles, tangent boulevards, turning into a grid of streets ten kilometers from

the center. The landscape and parks were all verdant and green, and maintained with equal precision to the rest of the city.

“Is that building a Klein bottle?” Teenette said, pointing at the half-kilometer-tall structure. “It’s gorgeous. Really stands out.”

“One of the more famous landmarks,” Rufia said. “Nextus Nano’s current HQ. My pal Shelley’s in and out of there a lot.”

“Reminds me of Totalia City a little,” Darrek said. “Totalism prefers a more angular geometry, though.”

“Pyramids, triangles, and combinations thereof,” Teenette said. “Still, after the ramshackle look Uplift has, it’s a nice change of pace. Our own architecture could use a few more curves.”

“I think *you’ve* got some great curves already!” Rufia said with a friendly leer.

Yvonne snorted. “Stop hitting on the clientele. *I’m* not covering your legal expenses if you get sued for sexual harassment.”

“Hey, can’t blame a gal for trying.”

The rather unimaginatively named Klein Building itself was an island of glass-clad curves in a sea of stark, un-ornamented concrete forms surrounding it. Darrek’s tablet called the dominant architectural style “Brutalist”. Totalian buildings might have had severe lines, but were often very artistically ornamented. His first impression of Nextus as they descended was that it looked rather cold and uninviting. “A nation of bureaucrats.”

“Aw, don’t judge ‘em too harshly just yet,” Rufia said. “Once you start peeling away their surface layers they get a lot more friendly.”

“You just have to find that way in first,” Yvonne added. “And that’s not always easy.”

“Oh, you’ll find quite a few exceptions,” Rufia said. “The Brubecks and the Steaders, for example. But the rank-and-file bureaucrats can be something else.”

“Interesting,” Darrek said. “And of course, RIDEs were invented here.”

“I was *born* here,” Yvonne said. “Literally born. Probably the one and only good thing to come out of Fritz’s antics. Not even Mama Patil and Doc Clemens knew RIs were capable of breeding in the Q-mainframe. A true happy accident...even if those dickish ‘crats did excise those memories from me. Only got them back once the Fritz crap was over with.”

“So, it was one of those wonderful, unforeseen happenstances,” Darrek said.

“Nobody knew Q-mainframes were quite that good, yeah,” Yvonne said. “Anyway...the hotel is just a hop and a skip away. Landing in five.”

Chapter 5

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Nextus

Darrek stepped out of the hotel, glancing around to make sure he was alone. Teenette and Barbaretta were out somewhere exploring. They didn't sleep in their room, half the time. Teenette was determined to make the most of the time she could spend exploring, and when she'd learned how simple it was to sleep in Fuse, she and Barbaretta no longer bothered to come back in the evening unless there was some pressing need to. They'd just find an out-of-the-way spot to Fuse-sleep, or Teenette would go to sleep while Barbaretta continued looking around and gave her the highlights when she woke up again.

Darrek had to admit, that kind of tempted him to partner up with a RIDE himself. They had so little time on the planet, and it was just a little irritating that *Teenette* was managing to make more efficient use of it than he. In part, that was what drove him to make this solitary expedition.

He wanted to look around some on his own, without a tour guide or other minder showing him around. It should be possible, especially since he'd withdrawn some cash *mu* so that the charge cards they'd been given wouldn't tattle his location to whatever artificial intelligence was tasked with minding him. He couldn't be certain there was such, of course, but given how quickly Rufia and Yvonne had shown up the last few times he'd charged something on his own, it seemed a reasonable surmise.

His destination this time was the rental skimmer stand at the corner. He'd taken them out before, on auto-pilot...and, again, his minders had shown up before too long. Even when he'd politely excused himself, he had the feeling they were hovering just out of his sight, watching him all the same. In a sense, Darrek couldn't blame them—if something happened to him, it might well trigger an interplanetary incident—but nonetheless, it was hard to do any kind of real research with someone looking over your shoulder, even if you couldn't actually see them.

But Darrek had read the rental manual, and it turned out there was a manual mode for "skilled drivers." From the little he'd been able to try them on his own, Darrek was pretty sure the controls were close enough to motorcycles back home that he could get by.

Darrek dropped some *mu* into the coin slot, including an extra tithe to cover insurance since he wasn't using a charge account, and the stand dispensed his skimmer—a fairly large bike with angled grips and anti-gravity pontoons along the sides. He straddled it and examined the instrument panel. Autopilot was easy enough to switch off. And there was also something marked "Transponder Beacon." Darrek didn't like the sound of that—the whole purpose of this trip was to get away *without* being tracked—so he turned that one off, too.

Thus prepared, Darrek started the bike and headed for the gateway out of town. There were several sites just outside of Nextus he wanted to get a better look at. The so-called "Recreation Park," named with the literal-mindedness that was such a part of the city-state's character, looked like a nice place for a picnic lunch after visiting the

Terraforming Museum. The museum was built *inside* of one of the Neumonformers that had done the job before the original colonists landed—an irresistible must-see for him, but he wanted some time on his own for once. They would be sending their first report back to Totalia in a few days, covering everything that had happened since they'd arrived, and he wanted just a little something more to put in it.

By the time he got to the city gate, he'd figured out how to activate the hardlight environmental bubble, which was good—it was a little too warm outside to be comfortable right now.

He pulled onto the surface road and opened the throttle up some. He could have flown higher, of course, but he was barely comfortable driving in two dimensions; he didn't want to risk three yet. And there wasn't much surface traffic, so it would be safer that way, too.

The trip seemed to be going well. He'd zipped along for a good fifteen minutes, and was just starting to loosen up and enjoy himself, when disaster struck. He was approaching the crest of a rise when, without warning, a sleek wheeled vehicle appeared over the crest of the ridge...directly in front of him.

With a screech, the vehicle skidded out, fishtailing across the road. It almost but didn't *quite* manage to miss the tip of the skimmer's right anti-gravity pontoon, and before Darrek quite knew what was happening, the skimmer was tumbling through the air. His body froze in place, locked tight by the emergency damper system, and the hardlight environmental dome solidified into a dark grey sphere around him.

The bike must have bounced several times, but the dampers were so effective Darrek didn't feel any shocks or impacts. Once it came to a rest the grey sphere flickered out, revealing the bike sitting upright about twenty meters from the surface road. Then the dampers released, and Darrek slumped against the instrument panel.

The ground car was roughly the same distance on the other side of the road, sand and dust fountaining from its rear tires as it pulled back up to the road. It was like nothing Darrek had seen on Zharus so far, a compact coupe with four large wheels at the corners and not a vertical surface. It was white, with pink light tubes ran along the body lines between panels. The segmented hubless wheels were attached to the rest of the vehicle just on the top quarter, with more pink lines resembling a tire tread. The sleek two-seater was designed with one thing in mind: *speed*.

The canopy slid back and a woman climbed out. She had a mix of Asiatic, European, and African features that was common on colonial worlds with highly-mixed populations like Zharus, with black hair and almost glowing green eyes. She wore a jumpsuit matching the color scheme of her car, with a company logo on the breast pocket. The woman stalked forward, anger evident in her posture. "What in the *frack* do you think you're doing? Driving in the *wrong* lane, with no transponder—you could have been killed!"

"You...don't drive in the left lane here?" Darrek managed weakly.

"No one drives in the left lane on this entire *planet!*" the woman said. "Where are you *from?*"

"Uh...Zheng He...sorry. Force of habit...should have brushed up on local traffic laws..."

The woman tilted her head. "That's not a Zheng He accent. And they don't drive in the left lane *there*, either." She considered. "In fact, your accent corresponds to no accent in Uplift University's linguistics database by any closer than 68%." She frowned,

anger abating to thoughtfulness. “That still doesn’t explain why you switched off the traffic transponder.”

Darrek facepalmed. “*Traffic* transponder...oh. I, uh, thought it was something else.”

“Why would you think that? Have you never *heard* of a traffic transponder? But that wouldn’t make any sense...automated traffic control is universal.” She shook her head. “Anyway, it looks like your bike is out of commission.” She nodded to the right pontoon, which was now missing its front half. “There’s no reason you should need to wait for a tow; the rental company can take care of that. Why don’t I give you a lift back to Nextus? We can talk on the way.”

“Uh...all right. I guess I might as well, miss—”

The woman smiled. “Arca.”

“Pleased to meet you, Arca. I’m Doctor Darrek Sigurdssen.” He offered his hand, and she took it, then steadied him by it as he stepped down from the bike.

“Hello, Doctor Darrek!” Arca said. “Come on; we’ll call the accident in on the way back.”

“Aren’t we supposed to wait for the police?”

“I’ve got enough points in the Game that I can pull some favors and bypass that. You might get a ticket, though.”

Darrek shrugged. “I’ll risk it, I guess.” He followed her to the car, passing through a quick blast of heat as he passed out of the skimmer cycle’s environment bubble and then into the car’s. He climbed into the bucket seat next to Arca’s, and she slid the canopy shut and pulled back onto the road.

As they picked up speed, Darrek had time to replay the conversation, especially the part about Uplift University’s language database. “Excuse me if this is too much of a personal question, but...are you a RIDE?”

Arca shot him a wide-eyed glance, and laughed. “I’m your *ride* back to Nextus, let’s put it that way.”

“I have a...friend who was scanned into an RI core, then put into a human shell for a while,” Darrek said. “After how quickly you accessed network databases, I was just...wondering.”

“Oh, was I thinking out loud again? I really should stop that.” Arca smiled. “No, I’m not a RIDE. I tried being one, a couple of times, and it was fun for a while, but it didn’t work out. You’re close, though. I’m actually an EI, not an RI.”

“Oh, like ‘Polestar’ who oversees the Aloha Elevator?”

“*Exactly* like him!” Arca said. “Except that he lives in a giant soda straw, while I prefer having arms and legs. And wheels.” She emphasized the latter by stepping down harder on the accelerator. Darrek was pressed back into his seat as the landscape seemed to blur.

“Er...should you really be going this fast?”

“Why not? We have automated traffic control, so I would be informed if there were an obstacle ahead.” Arca paused. “Well, present company excepted, of course. But what are the odds of that happening twice in one trip?”

By the time they got back to Nextus, Darrek thought he’d earned at least four or five more grey hairs. Arca seemed to drive with wild abandon...except that wasn’t quite right, he realized. She drove like someone who had an absolutely insane reaction time,

capable of responding to hazards before an ordinary person could even notice them. He supposed he shouldn't really complain, given that same reaction time had probably prevented him from ending up a smear on the asphalt. Still, it was unnerving, to say the least.

"So, hungry?" Arca said as they almost flew over the plascrete roadway without lifters. "Of course you're hungry. There's a BB's Burgers..."

The car took a hard left turn that only modern inertial damping and lifter bursts could make possible, a full ninety degrees in only a few meters into the parking lot of a restaurant. It had a comfortingly familiar look of a fast food place. She came to an equally quick stop next to a menu board.

The overly cheerful tone of voice was familiar, too. "Welcome to Burnside Bill's Burgers, what can we rustle up for you today?" a young woman said.

"I'll have an Uber BBQ burger...make that a number six combo, with curly fries and a chocolate shake. And what do you want, Doctor Darrek?" Arca smiled at him.

"Uh..." Darrek stammered, "Same, I guess. Uh..."

"Payment received. Pull up to the front window," the clerk said. "Thanks for coming to Burnside Bill's!"

"You...eat?" Darrek said.

"One of the many pleasures of the simulated flesh," Arca said. She took the bags that were handed to her and unceremoniously handed them to Darrek, followed by the milkshakes. "Here."

Darrek looked around for somewhere to put them. "Where are the cupholders?"

"We'll chow down at the Policia parking lot, so no cupholders needed."

"Well, you'd better take it easy getting us there unless you want this cockpit redecorated by milkshake."

Arca laughed. "Oh, don't worry. I'm very serious about my milkshakes."

The food smelled...just like any other fast food from home, Darrek thought. Was it fabbed? It was hard to tell on this planet, where alongside fabbed food they raised real cattle, farmed real wheat, and caught real fish. Not that Darrek would have eaten the fish. He had a distaste for seafood in general.

After a surprisingly sedate drive, Arca pulled off the street into a visitor's parking lot in front of a local police station. She reached into the bag and handed Darrek a burger.

"Is there a tray or...oh." A hardlight food tray materialized over his lap. He handed her one of the milkshakes after the steering wheel retracted into the dashboard and another tray appeared in front of her. "Very useful technology, hardlight."

Arca raised an eyebrow. "One would think you'd never seen it until recently."

"I was taught never to take technology for granted while young," Darrek said. It was very much truth. "We're eating our meals on plates of simulated matter. And you, uh...do you..."

"This is a modified HUM body replacement frame," Arca explained. "I get energy from eating, just like you. But it's not really stock. I have lifters, bigger batteries, and a few other surprises. Just because I like living like a human doesn't mean I have to go all the way." She patted the car's dashboard. "And then there's this baby. I'm still tweaking the design."

"But, food's getting cold. Let's eat."

The meal felt astonishingly familiar, perhaps the first one that really did since

leaving Totalia. It was just standard fare, nothing special. He itched to make some notes on his tablet for the report, but had to settle on a *mental* note instead.

Here I am, having the most humdrum meal I've had in months...and I'm sitting next to another example of...a person. I can't really call her 'technology' per se. No more than I'm just 'biology'. She's gorgeous... Well, maybe he wouldn't put that bit in the report. But he had to admit, she was *very* attractive.

"So, you're from Zheng He, huh?" Arca said between bites. The inside of the car smelled like charred meat and BBQ sauce. "If you're from Zheng He, I'm a toaster."

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to believe it was an isolated small town on the outskirts of Zheng He's settled area?" Darrek suggested.

Arca shook her head. "Nuh-uh." She paused and growled. "Stupid Game rules. Excuse me a moment, I need to go file at a hard point to use the shortcuts I'm trying to use."

"Maybe I should just turn myself in-" Darrek started to say.

"Nah, it's no big deal." She climbed out of the car and leaned in through the window. "Won't be a minute. Stay put."

Note about the Nextus "Game", Darrek wrote on his tablet once she was out of sight. *The people here have made bureaucracy into an artform. Loopholes are built into the system. All Nextus citizens get access to the tools needed to find them and earn 'challenge tokens' that make the process even smoother. Wealth is generally not a factor, or so I understand.*

This kind of mindset, though, has some negative consequences. It makes the culture highly resistant to change...

"A physical pad? Cool. Don't see many people using those."

Darrek dropped the tablet in mid thought and looked out the window. Arca waved at him then climbed back in. "Most just use a personal diary app on their implants."

"I don't have any implants. Personal reasons," he said.

She picked up the tablet and handed it back to him. "Curiouser and curiouser. No implants, no hardlight, wrong side of the road. Were you just defrosted or something?"

"Or something," he said. "So what do you do exactly," Darrek asked, trying to pull the woman's attention from his own weak backstory.

She winked at him, acknowledging the deflection, but rolling with it. "Me? I'm a racer. I'm between races at the moment; just finished an Uplift to Nextus Rally along the Old Skimmerway."

"So racing is common here?"

"It's a world with lots of empty space and lots of fast cars. Racing comes with the territory."

Darrek nodded, and picked up his notepad. "Would you mind if I recorded? It's for uhm... It's for my class back home. Most of them will never leave the planet, so it's a chance to show them."

"Go ahead. What do you want to know?"

He nodded and set his notepad to record. "Well, let's start with the races, what are they like? Do you split RIDEs and human and Integrate drivers or something?"

"Some Cups split like that, but not the ones I run in. Mixed races are just so much more fun."

"But surely the humans are outclassed? Or do the implants help?"

She laughed and shook her head. “Surprisingly, the humans are often the best racers. Their instincts tend to be better. Intelligences, we have huge processing power, but we’re not quite as good at the leaps of intuition like you guys can do. Makes the races fun when the human driver zags when everyone zigs; confuses the hell out of everyone.”

“I’d think your cars would at least be able to perform better, if you didn’t have flesh and blood humans in them to worry about keeping safe...”

“You’d think that, but the safety features are mandatory and universal. After all, we could be carrying human passengers at any time, and you can’t just disable them because you might forget to turn them back on.” She shrugged. “Anyway, the handicap makes it more challenging, which makes it more fun.”

“So have you been racing a long time?”

“Since I was a sprout. I raced all the time on the Grid; that’s the virtual space EIs inhabit. But racing in the Real is much more fun. The danger is so much more, well *real*. Crash in the Grid, and you rez back in. Crash in the Real, and you’re probably out for the race, if not a few days. You might actually *die*.”

Darrek first thought was that she had a deathwish, but he stamped that thought out and came up with a tactfully better term. “Sounds like you’re quite the thrill seeker then.”

“I suppose I am.” She paused and smiled. “Aaand they’re done.... You’re all cleared up. You’ll be receiving a bill for driving without a transponder and littering. Now, how would you like to go to a rally?”

He was struck speechless for a moment. “What? A race? Uhm...”

She laughed hard, “No silly, a RIDE Rights Rally.” She started the car and pulled out of the lot. “I’ll register you as a NeoRus observer.”

“Sure- wait, NeoRus? I’m from uhm... Zheng-”

“If you’re from there, I’m from Earth... You aren’t from Earth are you?”

“No, I am from Zheng He!” he protested.

“Don’t make me use that joke a third time. It’s already getting old. Besides, I checked the records. You supposedly came in on the *Shanghai Queen*, coming from Ibn-Rushd, but it did stop at Zheng He before that. The problem is you weren’t on their manifest on that leg.”

“Well, I-”

She waved him into silence. “Don’t bother. The most damning thing, is the Alohavator records. They show you coming down six hours before the *Shanghai Queen* entered Zharus orbit.”

“Uhm...” Darrek was at a loss for how to explain it.

She laughed again and stuffed some fries into his mouth. “Finish eating, we’re almost there. I don’t care where you’re from... well I care, but only enough to try and puzzle it out myself. In any case, you’ll be at the rally as an observer from Zheng He. It means you’ll only have about ten pages of a survey to fill out afterwards.”

He chewed and swallowed. “A survey?”

“You’re getting off easy. I’ll be there as a participant. They’ll have hundreds of pages for me to fill out after, to see if I met my goals for the rally and if it served the ultimate goal and all that. It’s a Nextus thing.”

She pulled into a parking spot on the street and climbed out. “We’ll walk to the Square from here. What’s your story anyway? I was chatting with Polecat to find out

when you arrived. He got all panicked and cagey. And then I showed him your picture and he got extra twitchy.”

Darrek groaned. “You didn’t tell him where we are, did you?”

“No, but I’m not exactly hard to find. I did register you for this rally after all. Why? You’re not a fugitive from justice, are you?”

“No, just a fugitive from babysitters.” Darrek sighed. “Not that I really mind, I suppose, but I kind of like looking around on my own.”

“Given that you nearly got creamed looking around on your own, and now you’re getting involved with local politics, it’s possible you might need a minder more than you want to admit.”

“Says the one involving me in local politics?”

Arca grinned. “Hey, I never claimed to be a paragon.”

They joined the stream of people walking on the sidewalk. He noted that everyone seemed to be going in the same direction, probably for the same rally. The vehicle traffic changed as they got closer, becoming primarily RIDEs in vehicle mode.

“So this is a RIDE Rights Rally? I thought all that was sorted out?” he asked.

“Not quite. Nextus was one of the first ones to acknowledge us, but they’ve been lagging on getting things finalized. We’re here. Administration Square. That’s their main legislative building over there.”

Darrek had to stop and step out of traffic, a little overwhelmed by it. The Square was four blocks big, and packed with vehicles and people. He tried to estimate how many were there, only to realize he wasn’t counting the RIDEs. “This... This is a lot of people.”

“Yup, and we’re just in time. They’re starting now.”

A stage was set up at the base of the stairs leading up to the legislature. On it were a dozen people, six RIDEs, three Inties and three humans. A Canine RIDE was muzzled and ‘tied’ to a pole on too short of a leash. A horse RIDE was similarly tied up at the opposite end.

A lion RIDE walked to the front and the crowd cheered. “Thanks for coming everyone,” his voice boomed over the crowd. “Now let’s show the Administration what we want!”

Signs popped up around the crowd, some hardlight, most of them real. A lot of people, RIDE, fused, and human alike were dressed up in bondage gear of various types. They roared and cheered on the leaders on the stage.

“What do we want?!” the lion shouted.

“**Freedom!**”

“When do we want it?!”

“**NOW!**”

Darrek held his tablet aloft, recording the sights and sounds around him. The mood was very similar to the Open Totalia movement that predated the coup, even if the cast was somewhat different. It was much more like the civil rights marches of the mid-20th and late 22nd centuries. The atmosphere was both tense and hopeful. Policia in towering, ancient IDEs kept watch on the perimeter. While they were officially neutral, he did catch the occasional pilot fist pumping with the crowd when the pilot thought no one was looking.

He closed his notepad and looked around. “Arca?” he asked, not seeing his new

friend. She was no where in sight. He felt a moment of panic, being alone in the mass of people. The crowd itself wasn't bad, comparable to the ones in Aloha. Unlike Aloha however, this crowd was riled up. He knew it would only take one spark to turn it into a riot.

"Arca?!" he called again, stepping up on a railing to try and search better.

A hand grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled him off. He yelped and found Arca behind him. "You're going to get another fine if you keep doing that," she said.

"Well, I couldn't find you, and I was worried...."

"Sorry, I spotted some friends and wanted to chat. You were busy with your diary, and I figured I'd be back in time. So what do you think of all this?"

"Impressive," was all he could come up with.

She laughed and raised her arms, roaring with the crowd again with another cheer.

"Will this make a difference?" he asked when things quieted down for another speech.

"Yes and no. The legislation's already in the works, it just takes its time to get through the Nextus red tape. But it is good to show them we want it. Rallies like this are a tradition around here. Uh oh..."

"What? What is it?" Darrek looked around, not seeing anything in the mass of people.

She pointed behind them, "They don't seem to be here for the protest," she said. Rufia and Yvonne were weaving determinedly through the crowd in their direction.

Darrek sighed, "Yeah, probably not. They're here for me." He held out his hand to her. "It was good meeting you, Arca. Even if our introduction was a bit accidental."

She shook his hand, but didn't let go. "Oh no, you're too sweet a mystery. I'm not letting you go that easily."

"You sure? It might get you in trouble."

Arca shrugged. "I'm probably already in trouble, so I might as well find out what I'm in trouble for. Besides, I'm in trouble almost all the time. It's not exactly a new state of being."

The elk RIDE and her human—as they got closer, Darrek could see Rufia was wearing a collar around her neck with a rope leading to a similar one around Yvonne's—finally made their way up to Arca and Darrek. Rufia grinned at them. "Been out making new friends, huh? Y'know, if you wanted some private time, you coulda just said. I'd have been happy to show ya how to run the skimmer bikes *without* causing traffic accidents."

Darrek blushed. "Does everyone know about that by now?"

"Everyone who matters," Rufia said cheerfully. "Don't worry, you're not going to get a spanking over it."

"Though *we* probably are," Yvonne said gloomily.

"Nah. We're palsy-walsy with the bosses," Rufia said airily. "At worst we're in for a slap on the wrist." She turned her attention to Arca. "Thanks for taking care of our poor lost sheep, by the way."

"Least I could do," Arca said. "Maybe we should go somewhere a little quieter to chat?"

"You got somewhere in mind?"

"What about Recreation Park?" Arca suggested. "Should be pretty empty, this

time of day, especially with the rally over here.”

Darrek raised an eyebrow. “I still wonder who named the place. It’s so...literal.”

Yvonne snorted. “Some b-crat from Nextus, who else? Anyway, sounds like just the spot. Let’s go.” She led the way out of the crowd, toward the footbridge over the Blue River to the park.

Along the way, the hardlight collars and rope vanished. Rufia rubbed her neck where it had been. “That thing doesn’t have to chafe, you know.”

“But it does! As we RIDEs have long chafed under the yoke of human oppression!” Yvonne said dramatically, nose in the air. Arca applauded.

“You got there pretty quickly,” Darrek said. “Isn’t the hotel halfway across town?”

“We were in the area anyway,” Rufia said. “We like to show the colors at these rallies when we can. Thumb it in their noses that Yvonne’s just about as liberated as a RIDE can be, given that she supposedly ‘owns’ me and all.”

“That’s fine; I grant you permission to use ‘supposedly’ and those finger quotes,” Yvonne said magnanimously. “It doesn’t change the actual *facts* of the matter, that you lost your freedom to me in a card game.”

“Which you engineered,” Rufia pointed out.

“True, but I didn’t cheat! I won fair and square, and you *could* have stopped playing at any time.”

“But then the free beer would have dried up.”

“I rest my case,” Yvonne said primly.

Darrek tried to suppress a laugh and failed. “Oh Lord, you two.”

“This their usual banter?” Arca said, eyebrow raised.

“Very much so,” Darrek said. “And I’ve only known them for a few days. Hm. Where are Teenette and Barbaretta?”

“Touring the War and IDE Museum with Raynor and the rest of Rhianna’s cousins,” Rufia said.

Darrek felt some pity for that young man, and the way his parents (all of whom were extended family of Rhianna Stonegate) were pressuring him to become a young *woman*. Darrek had yet to ask Raynor if it was okay if he recorded his thoughts on the idea for a supplemental part of the Report to the Totaliment they planned on sending via torpedo in a few weeks. Darrek was trying to be as comprehensive as he could, and the ‘crossriding’ social phenomenon was something that really *needed* a fuller explanation to the unprepared.

“So...” Arca said, sitting primly on a picnic table bench. “Does someone want to fill me in on just what’s going on here? I keep running into interesting little walls when I search on anything related to you. Which...really isn’t a good way to make me *less* curious.”

“Uh...” Yvonne said. “I guess saying that it’s complicated wouldn’t be enough to satisfy you.”

“If it was me, the damned opposite,” Rufia added.

“I’ll just keep bugging Polestar until he gives,” Arca said. “He’s my seed-brother and I know his quirks. I’ll find out eventually. I’d rather hear it from you. Y’all piqued my curiosity.”

“You know, Rufia, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have an...ah, how to put this?” Darrek pondered a tactful way to say it. “Another example of the diversity of your wonderful planet on our team.”

Rufia rolled her eyes. “What’re you asking me for? You’re the bigshot ambassador. Tell the world if you want to. We’ll just have to deal with the fallout is all.”

Darrek grinned. “All right, if you want to put it that way, I guess it is up to me.”

“Ambassador? You’re an *Ambassador*? Why didn’t you say anything before? That would have smoothed things out a lot. We probably wouldn’t have even needed to go inside.”

“No, it wouldn’t have. Trust me on that,” Darrek said.

Arca crossed her arms. “So? Spill already!”

“You might have guessed already, I’m not actually from Zheng He.”

Arca snorted. “No, *really*?”

“In fact, I’m not from any of the established colonies. I’m from what you people call a ‘wildcat settlement.’ It all began a couple of hundred years ago...”

The female EI put her hand up. “Okay, whoa. I think I’ve heard enough, especially out in the open in the park. You can tell me more later, somewhere more private, ‘cause I’m going to be around for a while. I want in on this—whatever it is, ‘ambassador.’ Is that an official title?”

“About as official as it gets. Yvonne, you can give her an informational packet in fast-time, if you wish.”

“I think this is something worth learning about in the Real,” Arca said. “From the Ambassador’s mouth. You know, you should’ve mentioned you were an ambassador; diplomatic immunity would have simplified a lot of things.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for next time. How about dinner tonight? Chez Pierre?”

Arca grinned. “Are you asking me out?”

“Er, well, I...” Darrek paused. After all, why *shouldn’t* he ask her out? “Uh, yes?”

“Riiiiight answer!” Yvonne said approvingly.

“I accept, Dr. Darrek,” Arca said with aplomb. “I shall see you there. For now... care for a lift back to your hotel?”

Yvonne looked over at the sleek, white-and-pink shape of Arca’s skimmer. “You drive *that*?”

“Hey, I know that skimmer,” Rufia said. “You’ve won the N-U Rally three times in five years.”

“That’s me,” Arca declared proudly.

“I’ll be going back with her,” Darrek said. *Sometimes a man needs a few more gray hairs. Though how I’m going to explain this to Teenette...*

Chapter 6

June 3, 158 AL
Turbinia, Zharus Orbit

“Well done, Cadet Sinewave. Your first launch went off without major incident,” Scout Marcus Trenton said. There had been a few minor hiccups, but nothing abnormal. This was just to be a test run to Xolotlan and back, a trip for a Zharus week at most. The *Turbinia* needed a shakedown after her hurried refit.

“Thank you, sir,” the female EI replied from the new pilot’s seat. The seat itself wasn’t strictly necessary, but Sinewave wanted to do her first launch manually in her gynoid shell. “Now, if you don’t mind, sir, I’ll install myself in the ship proper.”

“Granted. Carry on.”

Among the new equipment installed during the *Turbinia*’s lengthy refit was an alcove at the back of the Bridge. Sinewave stepped inside and was enclosed in a support structure, then her core was interfaced directly with the ship via a plug on the top of her head. A holotar of her head rezzed over the console. “Interface complete, sir.”

“And *I’m* going to get to land her, right?” Monday said irritably. The blue unicorn snorted. Even in shell mode he barely fit on the Bridge. That was a problem in itself. That he refused to move to a smaller shell was another problem, but not enough to disqualify him in itself. He had an alcove like Sinewave’s in the Garage to hook up to the ship.

Marcus’s own equine ears twitched in irritation. In the new training and deployment plans all three Scouts had to be pilot-rated. Monday had skill-chipped the piloting skills and passed the tests like Sinewave had. But his problems were *not* related to his piloting skills. Marcus couldn’t for the life of him figure out how Monday had been assigned to him. Was it possible to “cheat” on a personality test? Even the initial Fuse had been okay, if brief; just enough to get the tags, really. *No, I don’t like this one bit. If he’s getting on my nerves this badly in Zharus space, what would it be like after years in the field?*

“Cadet Monday,” Marcus said, trying to frame his thoughts. He rubbed the stubby horn on his forehead. “Do you really think that is a proper attitude towards a superior officer? Whom you’ve only known a matter of days?”

“But...” the unicorn said. “Here I thought we were like the Marshals. We didn’t stand on military org too much there.”

Marcus facepalmed. “At this point in your career, Cadet, do you think you can afford to make that assumption?”

The unicorn said nothing, just folding his ears back.

“Sinewave, please contact HQ and inform them we are returning to base immediately,” Marcus said. “Please execute the landing yourself. Orbital drop protocol.”

“Yessir!” the EI’s holotar said, snapping a salute. “ETA sixty-two minutes until dirtside.”

Outside the viewport, Zharus spun around as Sinewave reoriented the *Turbinia* for a retrograde burn. Marcus had ordered her to get them on the ground as fast as she could, and was confident Sinewave was up to the task.

“Uh, sir...did I just wash out of the Scouts?” Monday asked.

“Not my decision, Cadet, but I doubt it. I think in your eagerness to get into space, you might have been a little...enthusiastic to get a match.” Marcus had to smile. “We have us all kinds in the Scouts. Might be you’ll find someone who prefers a more... energetic companion.”

Scout HQ

“You know, I think Monday might work best with Charra,” Madison said. She leaned back in the office chair. Her shapeshifting practice had been coming along nicely, and she was wearing her fully-human form today. “Assuming she’s willing to crossride.”

“Can’t hurt to ask,” Joel said. “But she’s not the type. We’ll have to put Monday on notice for when we expand the program.”

“You know, we might be going about this all wrong,” Madison said. “We’re focusing on finding RIDEs for graduated Scouts, but maybe we should add a branch of the program for the academy. Give the students time to find a RIDE they can work with before it’s off to the wild black yonder on a test run.”

Joel cocked his head. “That...might work. It would give the RIDEs time to get used to working with the Scouts, too. They could be students themselves.” He chuckled. “From Marcus’s report, it sounds like Monday could use a few semesters of polish. I’ll pass that thought on to Commander Lee.”

“Of course, I knew that Maddie and I would be a great match from the get-go,” Samantha said. “What about you, Zach?”

“Was more like, ‘hey, I need a RIDE, and you’re it,’” the ferret AI said.

“I got a job with Walton Q about fifteen years ago, so I needed one,” Joel said. “Out on one of their back-of-beyond rigs. We grew on one another, but I was pretty indifferent on the whole thing at first. Then Zach showed me some *Mystery Science Theater 3000*.”

Madison smoothed her hair back. “Who else have we got for Marcus, then?”

Joel considered the list of candidates. “How about Gatsby, the griffin?”

“They’ve got the tags minimized down to wings, ears, and tail,” Samantha said. “No beak, unless he really *wants* one.”

Madison shrugged. “Worth a shot.”

“All right. I’ll let ‘em know.” Joel grinned wryly. “Hopefully this one works out better. It’s tricky finding just the right people to team up with we lone-wolf Scouts.”

Madison grinned. “We’ll get it right sooner or later, you’ll see. Now, back to the grindstone. We still have a dozen matches to make.”

September 1, 158 AL Zharustead

The Governor’s Mansion was set up on a bluff that overlooked the Great Laurasian Bight. Its Grand Ballroom could, and often did, hold parties for hundreds of people as Zharus’s political elite hobnobbed with interstellar stars.

On this night, the gathering barely broke a hundred people. A hundred people who were the top representatives of all of humanity’s colonies on Zharus. Divider walls had been set up in the ballroom to keep them from rattling too much in the space.

The Totalian party stood in one of the walled off areas, waiting for their cue to enter. A screen showed the main ballroom as each colony's ambassador arrived and were introduced to the room.

"For official gatherings like this, the Ambassadors are usually introduced in order of founding date, starting with Earth. Which means you would normally enter before Wednesday. But since this is your grand introduction, you get the final spot, after the Governor enters as Zharus's representative," a political aide explained. He was assigned to them to help prepare them for interacting on the Ambassadorial scene.

"But Zharus was colonized before Wednesday, right?" Teenette asked.

"The host always enters last. That's the NeoRus group just entering now."

"How many know what's really going on?" Barbaretta asked.

Zane shrugged and tugged at his suit jacket. "You've met some of them already, or met their representatives. The rest probably suspect some or most of it; The Ambassador offices have more leaks than an onion farm. Still, this will be official confirmation, and Totalia's introduction on the extraplanetary stage."

"I just hope this isn't too much; that I'm not overstepping our bounds." Darrek gripped Arca's hand for support.

Teenette shook her head. "We have to get this done. After that report we got from the *Clementine* last month, it's more important than ever that we line up alliances wherever possible. If they could hurt the *Kybalion* that badly, who knows what else they might do in the meantime?"

Madison nodded. "Anyway, we've been careful. After tonight they'll know Totalia exists, but they won't know *where* it is. Other than the Scouts who actually went out there and us, the only other people who know Totalia's location are out at Cerberus. We made sure to lock down the Scout records here. They won't even know which scouts were there unless we tell them."

"Oh, yeah, like you and I are about to tell them?" Barbaretta smirked.

Madison grinned, "Coincidentally, we're the two scouts that can most easily forget where Totalia is as well."

"Representing the Zharus Planetary Assembly, Governor Shandar," the aide announced.

"You will be next, once he greets everyone," Zane said.

Arca nudged Darrek and pointed to the raven haired gynoid walking in next to the governor. "That's Regina. She's a cousin of mine, and his biographer and bodyguard."

On the screen, the Governor cleared his throat and waited for the room noise to die down. The screen split apart, showing a view of each ambassador, along with a few larger views of the room.

"Greetings everyone, thank you for coming, especially on such short notice. I assure you, the reason for this assembly, and the secrecy around it, is well worth it."

"Is it me, or does the Earth Ambassador look bored?" Rhianna asked as the Governor droned on with his introduction.

"She probably is. She's all but gone native; Califia native. She'd rather be out on the waves in the bight than in here. It's her chief aide you need to watch; that one's the power behind the throne," Zane said

"Well aren't you all politic-smart now," she said, hugging the tiger Integrate.

He sighed and snuggled back, "Not willingly. I downloaded a thorough briefing

before we came in, mainly from the Steader records. Look there, at the Centauri ambassadors. Both of them are looking confused. Maybe their spy networks aren't up to snuff, or their allies aren't in a sharing mood.

"On the other paw, the Ferengi are practically drooling. Too bad we won't be saying as much as they want. Watch your tongue, and your wallet around them."

"Who are the Ferengi?" Darrek asked, looking across the screens to try and figure it out.

"That's what we call the Keplers." Barbaretta pointed to the Kepler ambassador. "A bunch of pirates and scoundrels. They'd do anything for a buck, then rob you to take it back. Be extra cautious around them."

"And Boom! The bomb has been dropped," Zane said with a predatory grin. On the screens, waves of shock and surprise were passing through the crowd as the announcement of Totalia's existence was absorbed.

"Looks like Earth had wind of it. As did Proxima, but they apparently forgot to tell their quislings at Centauri," Kaylee noted, watching the reactions. She caught Rhianna's look and grinned back. "What? I grabbed the same political packets Zane did."

"Ibn-Rushd and Zheng He both look surprised too. Kepler knew, and we told Wednesday, NeoRus and Eridani already. Maybe the Ambassador spy network isn't as good as we expected," Zane said. He let Rhianna go and headed to an outline of a door in the hardlight dividing wall.

"In any case, that's our cue to head out. Prepare to face the wolves everyone," Zane said. He and Madison would be the first of the Totalian party to step out, followed by Teenette and Darrek. Arca and Barbaretta would follow close behind the Totalians, and then the rest of their entourage.

"Considering how much pull they have with the fleet, you'd think a Steader or two would be here," Rufia noted.

Rhianna shrugged, "I figure it's revenge. We tossed DINCom negotiations with Wednesday on their laps, they're tossing Totalian-everyone else politicking on ours. I think they got the better end of the deal."

An ornate door appeared in the divider wall and the aide started counting down from ten, using his fingers to count down the last five seconds. At his cue, the doors opened outward, to a trumpet fanfare. The fanfare smoothly transitioned into an orchestral theme.

"Is that from 'Darla's Front Door'?" Darrek whispered. He thought he recognized the quirky little tune, but it was an orchestral version. *I suppose it does have more gravitas that way, but...*

Madison nodded. "I, or rather Samantha, yonked it while we were trolling your networks. Figured it was a decent musical anthem for you, Ambassador," she whispered back.

"But it's the theme to a *kid's show!*"

"It was about the only show we could find that wasn't all xenophobic."

"Yeah, it was too busy teaching toddlers the alphabet and numbers and colors."

"And to play nice with each other. Which is really what it's all about, isn't it?"

Samantha noted.

Well, she's got us there, Darrek thought as he walked out into the spotlights. Suddenly, they were front and center to the rest of human space. He stood next to

Teenette, his hand reaching back for Arca's, while he waited on his cue from Zane.

The tiger Integrate stepped forward and looked around the room. "Greetings, Governor Shandar, your Excellencies, honoured guests and friends. Thank you for coming. I'm sure you all recognize me and my sister, and are wondering what the hell we have to do with this lost colony. It turns out, we have a lot to do with it.

"I'm sure you are familiar with the story of how my sister came back from a scouting mission as an Integrate. Surprised the heck out of all of us. What we kept quiet at the time, is where she came back from. While out in the wild, she, like numerous scouts before her, discovered Totalia. And while that nth contact situation was a bit rough, she was able to return to us with that information.

"Locally, it was a shocker as you can imagine. We kept a lid on it while we figured out what to do about it, both to keep from stirring things up, and out of respect for Totalia's isolation. Luckily, more events happened that gave us the guidance we needed. Another scout returned home from Totalia, this time bringing guests. Official representatives of the Colony, come to help advise us on how best to reintroduce them to humanity at large.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I'd like to introduce you to the Totalian Ambassadors, Doctor Darrek Sigurdssen and Ambassador Teenette Clarke."

The room filled with applause as the Totalians stepped forward. Darrek scanned the room, noting the expressions and wishing he was elsewhere. He clasped his hands behind his back, then moved them to his sides, waiting for the applause to die down and trying to calm his anxiety. *Well, I hope this speech goes over well.*

"Totalia bids you greetings," Darrek said. He proceeded on to tell an abbreviated history of Totalia, leaving out any mention of Totalium along with certain recent events and being partly truthful with others. They'd spent most of the day reviewing what they could, should and would say to the Ambassadors, all to try and maintain security while not seeming to avoid much. "Until recently my government preferred to remain isolated. The Scouts respected our wishes and kept our existence to themselves. But thanks to a recent referendum on the matter, we decided to finally reveal our existence and rejoin humanity."

"Just where is your purported colony located, if I may ask?" the Earth Ambassador's aide said.

"We are moving slowly. When we are ready to open more formal relations and possibly trade routes, we will be in touch. For now it's enough to say we exist."

"How do we know you exist? All we have is your words," the Kepler delegate called out. "We can't even verify it with Scout records."

Darrek started to speak, but felt Zane's hand on his arm. "I'll handle this," the tiger said.

Zane starred the Kepler diplomat down. "You don't know they exist. You'll just have to take our word for it. That's part of the problem with the secrecy we're working under. But Zharus doesn't... Zharus can't keep this entirely to herself, and we don't intend to hide it any longer than we have to, for Totalia's sake. Totalia has been isolated for two centuries. Having all of us show up at once would be a disaster, potentially worse than Endeavor. That's why we're being cautious.

"Still, they do want to reconnect, but on their own terms, and we are going to help them with that. Towards that end, we have arranged to borrow the new Circus ship, the *Great Western*. As we speak, it is in the outer reaches of the Pharos system, being

loaded with everything Totalia needs to know about modern humanity. Within weeks, it will depart for Totalia to share those gifts. You, or your representatives, are all invited to be on board.”

Zane waited as the noise level rose in the room with that revelation. When it died down again, he spoke. “We have lots of room, so we should be able to accommodate just about any size delegation you wish to assemble. Just have your people contact mine, and be ready to leave soon.

“Now, enough grandstanding, let’s mingle.”

Zane stepped between Teenette and Darrek and partly escorted them down the steps to the main floor. “These people are professionals, so you won’t be mobbed. Instead, they’ll expect you to approach them for the most part. Just remember, everyone’s got big ears, and they’ll be listening to what you say and what you’re asked. So try to relax, but stay alert.”

Soft music started playing, an ensemble of string instruments, and the room lighting changed subtly. Floating trays filled with drinks and *hors d’oeuvres* came out of the side rooms. The Ambassadors watched them, but mostly gathered into smaller groups of their own.

“Any suggestions as to who we should talk to first?” Darrek asked. He snagged a small plate off a floating tray, and winced when he realized it was kraken on a kracker. He glanced around, but there was no handy spot to leave it behind.

“Depends. Do you want easy, medium or hard? You’ll have to face them all eventually tonight. You know Eridani and Wednesday so you could start with them. The hard ones would be Earth, Kepler, or the Centauris.”

Teenette nodded to a familiar faces approaching them. “Or we could just let someone else throw protocol to the wind and let them come to us,” she said.

Madison chuckled, “Leave it to the Neorussians to be the most straightforward.”

Teenette glanced down at the unwanted appetizer in Darrek’s hand and rolled her eyes. “Oh, give me that. I swear, didn’t your mama ever teach you to clean your plate?” She swiped it and quickly made it vanish, then turned her attention back to the oncoming diplomats.

The Zharusians faded back, to let the Totalians handle the encounter. A short man led the way, followed by a taller woman.

“Greetings, Doctors. I am Ivan Tolstov, Ambassador for Neorus. I believe you’ve already met my chief aide, Natasha Kohut?”

“We did, in Cape Nord. I’m glad you were able to make it here in time,” Darrek said, shaking the offered hands.

Ivan grinned, “It was a close call. My shuttle just landed a few hours ago.”

“Well, Natasha was a perfect host when we met, and she spoke highly of you,” Teenette said.

“Her report on you, and of Totalia, was very informative as well. I look forward to visiting it in person,” Ivan said.

“We’d be glad to have you.”

Ivan patted his pockets and looked puzzled. Natasha opened the small purse she carried, and pulled out a ring box. “Here you go, Ivan. You left it on the shuttle.”

He took the box and blushed. “Ah right. Thank you my dear.”

Opening the box, he presented it to Dareek. Inside, a red gem the size of a

fingernail was nestled in the middle of a small device that could spin it around. There were standard power and data connectors at the bottom.

“I’d like to present to you, a gift, from NeoRus to our prodigal brothers and sisters of Totalia.”

Darrek took the box, not quite understanding what it was. “Thank you, we-”

Teenette blinked. “Is that a data crystal? I read that those are illegal to export from NeoRus.”

“I am allowed some leeway as the planet’s representative,” Ivan said. “That crystal contains all of human history as we know it, from the earliest cave painters to everything we know of all of the colonies. I’m also looking forward to adding Totalia’s history to it.”

“We appreciate your gift. Thank you, on behalf of Totalia, and from myself as well,” Darrek said, reverently closing the lid on the box. He tucked it into the pocket of his suit jacket.

“Please, enjoy the party. I’m sure we’ll have the chance to talk more later,” Ivan said before wandering away.

Darrek snagged a flute of champagne from a tray and sipped it to clear the taste of kraken from his mouth. “Well, that wasn’t bad at all.”

“NeoRus is technically neutral, but they are very friendly to Zharus. Were they closer, we’d probably officially be allies,” Zane said. They wandered towards the large windows overlooking the large lawn. At the far end, a simple stone fence guarded the edge of the cliff.

“Uh-oh, now this might be trouble.” Zane nodded to the two Earth ambassadors who were now drifting in their direction.

“Remember, it’s probably not a good idea to snub them too badly,” Madison said. “Endurance and the like are the sort of open secret everybody knows about but nobody’s so gauche as to bring up in the open, most times...” She trailed off and took a step back as the Earth delegation came into earshot.

The aide spoke first. His voice dripped with skepticism and condescension. “Earth welcomes our wayward child back into the fold. Though I doubt all is as it appears.”

The Ambassador herself rolled her eyes. “Dude, Chuck. How many times do I have to tell you? Lighten up!”

The expression on the dour man’s face made Darrek stifle a laugh. He had a nervous tic in the corner of his eye when she spoke.

“Nothing is ever as it appears,” Zane said airily. “For example, I appear to be a tiger, and yet I’m a CEO.”

“Be that as it may, Mr. Brubeck,” said “Chuck”. “Earth believes such skepticism is warranted. Without access to Scout records we cannot independently verify your claims.”

“Chuck, you’re being a dick again,” Earth’s Ambassador said. “What did I say about being a dick? Stop it, or you can go back to the office.”

“I don’t blame you for being skeptical,” Darrek said with a faint smile. “We are not ready to show where we are yet, but you are welcome to return with us and see for yourself.”

The Ambassador smiled, “I’m afraid my own travelling days are behind me, but I’m sure we can gather a suitable group.”

“Yes, we are eager to see what our lost children have been up to, and are ready to welcome you back. I’m sure there will be many opportunities for trade between Earth and Totalia,” Chuck said, trying his best to keep his expression friendly.

Darrek’s smile didn’t budge. “We’re really more interested in Zharus as a trading partner right now anyway. In time, I’m sure we’ll be working with the remaining colonies and with Earth. But at this time, Zharus will be our main focus while we get up to speed. Considering the distances involved and from what I’ve heard, it’s not really clear Earth has much to offer us at this juncture.”

Chuck’s face turned red with anger. He took a deep breath, then the Ambassador put her hand over his mouth. “Chuck will be leaving now,” she said. Her voice took on an edge to it. “*Won’t you, Chuck?*”

“Mmmph mmmph!” Chuck said.

“What was that?” She took her hand off his mouth.

“Yes. Ma’am,” Chuck said through clenched teeth. Stiffly, he turned around and headed towards the Ballroom door.

“Now that *he’s* taken care of, I’m Xenia De Gaulle,” the Ambassador said. “Very pleased to meet you, Ambassadors. I’m...certain you’ve been briefed about Earth’s unfortunate history on wildcat colonies, Dr. Sigurdssen?”

“Part of the reason why we’re not going to disclose our location until we’re ready, I’m afraid,” Darrek said.

“I’ve met the Endurance survivors,” Xenia said. “They have a little town about a thousand clicks north of here. I’ve done everything I can for them—not that they accepted much from me. Unfortunately that doesn’t include an official apology.”

Darrek raised an eyebrow. “That’s more frankness than I was led to expect.”

Xenia sighed. “Without my aide here to record, nothing I say is actually official. It’s a...loophole. I learned how to find and use them from some friends in Nextus.”

Zane laughed. “You really have gone native, Ambassador, haven’t you?”

Xenia shrugged. “I doubt I’ll be in this position much longer. There are only so many loopholes I can exploit before they’ll just send someone more ideologically in line with Chuck.”

“I hope you won’t be sending your aide along to Totalia,” Teenette said, wrinkling her nose. “Or anyone who thinks like him.”

“Fortunately, there are members of my staff I do trust not to turn this into an interstellar incident. I will send along a list as soon as I return to my office.” She excused herself politely, then moved away.

“Well, that went better than I hoped,” Zane said. “She wasn’t quite what I expected. Her aide, on the other paw, is the arrogant Earther to a T.”

“If we hadn’t met so many other friendly Earthers, he’d make me want to change my vote on staying isolated,” Teenette said, rubbing her arms. “Hard to believe EarthGov would send someone so politically inept.”

“He’s not inept, just a solid believer. Why don’t we go meet some friends,” Madison said, nodding to the Eridani group. “And keep your eyes on the Ferengi. They have big ears.”

The Keplerians didn’t seem to be waiting, but it was quickly obvious they were doing their best to stay in earshot as much as possible. Darrek spotted one chatting with Ivan a few steps too close to be polite while he spoke to the Eridani ambassador. And later, Teenette spotted another lingering on her choice of drink while she talked with a

Centauri aide that was excited to visit Totalia.

The three attending wore slick beige suits and I-specs. The way two men and one woman carried themselves made Darrek's spine crawl. They were like used car salespeople waiting to pounce on a mark. He caught Teenette's eye and motioned for her to come over.

"One last group to meet. No point in putting it off any longer," he said, glancing over at the trio. For once they were giving the Totalians space, as if expecting what was coming.

"Do we have to? Feels like we've already talked to them. Between Chuck and them, I feel like I need a bath."

"Regrettably, we can't show too much favoritism, at least not here. Who knows? Maybe they're actually nice folk."

"No, they aren't," Barbaretta said. She and Arca were their minders for the night, mainly to help them avoid the big political land mines. "But you're right, you have to speak to them at least once."

Teenette nodded and sighed. "Then let's get this over with."

Darrek straightened his shirt and approached the nearest Keplerian, the larger man who was the Ambassador. "Totalia greets our esteemed colleagues from Kepler."

"Hello to you, too," the man replied curtly, looking over the top of his I-specs. He held out his hand to Darrek. "Chip Chaser. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise, Mr. Chaser."

There was an awkward silence as the trio stared down the quartet, waiting for someone to make the first move.

"So what's the Kepler system like? I hear it's... uhm..." Teenette trailed off, not sure how to finish her ice breaker.

The woman laughed without a hint of joy. "It's a frozen hell hole, barely worth inhabiting. But at least we're not Wednesday." She held out her hand to Teenette. "Narcissa LeStrange."

Teenette and Darrek shook her hand, and the silence fell on them again. A subtle glance around showed most of the attention was on this encounter.

"So a new colony world. And you founded it all by yourselves. That must have been challenging," Narcissa said before things could get too uncomfortable.

"Very challenging, but luckily Totalia is well in the goldilocks zone. Totalia City is built in a short sleeves zone right from the beginning. Creating a proper Earth-like environment from there was straightforward, but very laborious," Darrek explained.

"Very lucky for your ancestors. Still, maintaining a tech level must have been difficult, considering when you left. Did you lose space?" Chip asked.

"Lose space? Oh! You mean access to space? It was close, but no, we kept most of our colonization fleet in orbit and used that to build from," Teenette explained.

The Keplerians exchanged looks, their expressions staying neutral. Still, Darrek had the feeling they got more out of that sentence than the Totalians had wanted to give.

"That is good to hear. A healthy space industry is important for a healthy colony. It can make up for many things a planet might lack, or otherwise make hard to get," Narcissa said. "Asteroid mining, energy collection, zero-g production."

"We don't do as much as we should, admittedly. But we do some back home. And with what Zharus is selling us, we'll be ramping up quickly I'm sure," Darrek said, trying not to say much.

Chip nodded. “Still, space is a dangerous place. You’re getting quite the leg up package from Zharus, but might you consider other offers? Kepler is well known for direct energy devices, and missile technology. Suitable for civilian and military purposes.”

“So I’ve heard. I’m afraid I’m not cleared to negotiate on military matters on this trip,” Darrek said, keeping his voice cool and level.

“A pity. Still, you’ve waited for centuries already, a few more years won’t hurt much. Enjoy the rest of your time on Zharus. I look forward to seeing Totalia myself soon,” Chip said, lifting his glass to them. He turned away from the Totalian party, followed by Narcissa and the unIntroduced man.

Teenette shuddered once they were out of earshot. “Ugh, I see-”

Before she could finish, Barbaretta twitched, bumping into a tray of drinks floating past them. The flutes tipped over, splashing over Teenette and Darrek.

“Oh my! I’m so clumsy!” she exclaimed. “Here, let me get that,” she said, fusing over Teenette.

Arca appeared at Darrek’s side, napkins in hand. She was mopping up the drops that hit him before he could react. “Shhh,” she whispered, running the cloth over his arms and hands even where the liquid hadn’t splashed. His hands tingled after a moment, the hair on his arms standing up with an electrical charge.

“What was that about?” he whispered when she was mostly done.

She smiled and looked him over, before giving him a quick kiss. “They bugged you. With the handshakes. Two sets of nannies, inert so they get past the mansion security. When you shook their hands, you got a dose of both, and they were starting to activate. You’re clean now.”

Beside them, Barbaretta defused, letting Teenette out, her dress spotless and her hair and makeup tidied up. She glared at the backs of the Keplers and shuddered, rubbing her bare arms. “What *slimes!*” she hissed in frustration. Darrek nodded in agreement.

Zane sighed and shook his head as he and Rhianna wandered back to the Totalians. “Good thing the fleet is almost fully kitted out now. We’re going to have to triple our scans on everything coming in now, make sure they don’t slip in any surprises.”

“Did we have to invite them?” Teenette asked.

“If we don’t invite them overtly, they’d just sneak in covertly. Better to have them in the spotlight now, then to try and spook them out later,” Zane noted.

“How big is the risk? How bad off are we when their pirates show up?” Darrek asked.

Barbaretta looked thoughtful a moment. “Honestly, not as bad as you might expect. They have a tech edge for now, but you have that surprise that mostly negates it.”

“And once you start modernizing with our help, you’ll show any pirate navy who’s boss in the Totalian system,” Arca noted. During some of their downtime between tours and events, Darrek and her had sketched out some plans for upgrading the Cosmy’s ships with modern Zharusian tech.

“Assuming we still have a Cosmy back home to upgrade.” Darrek felt a surge of homesickness and worry wash over him. The distance from home and not knowing what was going on there often snuck up on him, catching him by surprise.

“We’ll have to be careful, and keep an eye on the message torpedoes. Once we get to Totalia, you can be sure they’ll try to get the location home. Either piggy-backing on one of our torps, or by sending one of their own,” Rhianna noted. “Of course, even if they fail, they’ll get the word out as soon as they get back, but we can’t count on them failing. They haven’t gotten where they are without being very ingenious.”

“Just one more thing for the list,” Zane sighed. “Well, we knew this one was coming. It’s the main reason we waited so long before throwing you to the political dogs.”

“It’s not as if we’re going to keep the location secret for much longer regardless. We don’t have to make it easy for them, but it’ll get out one way or another,” Madison noted.

“In any case, how about we go hang out with some nicer company?” Teenette asked. She nodded to a group hanging by the windows overlooking the lawn and the large bay.

Natasha and Ivan waved them over. They were grouped with the delegations from Zheng He, Ibn Rushd, Eridani, and Wednesday.

“I feel like spending the rest of our time here with friendlier faces,” Teenette said, waving back. “Preferably somewhere more comfortable. Too many daggers around here, waiting for a back to bump into them.”

“Wonderful idea,” Arca said. “You know, I know of this great little brewpub nearby that does a killer nacho plate. Maybe we should invite them along.”

Zane grinned. “Sounds like a plan. No reason we should stand on ceremony. Let’s see what diplomats are like after work.” Decision made, he strode forward. “Hey, guys, we had a great idea...”

Chapter 7

September 9, 158 AL
NuJose, EvoLimited

Dr. Darrek Sigurdssen, Totalian-at-large, stood in front of the holorecorder in the EvoLimited campus office. After several weeks of touring the planet he and Teenette were accustomed to this. But this was a rather special report. Darrek and Arca decided now was the right moment to reveal her true nature. “In the closing segment of our report, I would like to reintroduce a friend of mine. She will be coming with us when we return to Totalia. Arca?”

The woman took the seat next to him. She wore a 1960s red Gogo dress with thigh-high leather boots, and a dark brunette flip hairstyle. She smiled and waved at the holorecorder pickup. “Hello, Totalia! Can’t wait to meet you all in person.”

“In the last section of my report we explored EvoLimited, met its Integrate founders, and a few Emergent Intelligences, cousins of RIs. Well, Arca is also one. But she’s unique. Since coming into the ‘Real’ she’s been living in a human body replacement prosthesis. How long, Arca?”

“Oh, years. Mom and Dad—that’s Argon and Luke—bring new sprouts into the Real by putting us into ‘droid bodies for a week, so we know what being human is like,” Arca said. “Since these are meant for humans who can’t get a new body cloned, or simply for lifestyle preference, they’re as human as can possibly be. I eat, drink, sleep, everything an organic must do in daily life.”

“So, why would you do that?” Darrek asked.

“I...like it.” Arca was actually blushing. “A lot of us end up in vehicle shells, or a *locus*, but when I tried them it just felt like something was missing. At first I thought I wanted to be a RIDE, but I was always unsatisfied. I kept coming back to this. I honestly think of myself as human...though I can’t say I really *want* an organic body. I’m a human born of a codeseed, grown on the Grid, now a happy woman in the Real.”

Darrek grinned. “No impulses to, say, take over the world, or enslave organic humans to do your bidding?”

Arca grinned back. “Only on Mondays.”

“Well, that’s understan—hey, wait a minute, you don’t *have* Mondays here.”

Arca laughed. “Bright boy! Are you a PhD or something?”

“As it happens, I am.”

“Well, good to know that fancy education pays off.” Arca chuckled. “Yeah, I know all about your cultural paranoia of aliens and AI. I understand that, before they actually invented the real thing, they had it here, too. But familiarity breeds contempt. A bit too much contempt, actually. But luckily the pendulum’s swinging back the other way now.”

“Indeed.” Darrek stood up and walked around in front of the table, then leaned against it. Arca joined him to his right. “I’d like to conclude this report with something... a significant speech. Some pithy phrase. Something they’ll still be quoting hundreds of years from now. But Teenette and I think it speaks for itself.” He gestured for for her, the leonine Barbaretta Hansom, and Madison Brubeck to join them.

“Teenette and I thank the Totaliment for this honor. Our time on Zharus hasn’t

always been smooth, or easy, but our neighbors are by and large good people. Humanity and its children and grandchildren would continue on without us, should we decide to resume our isolation. But in light of what we've seen and experienced the last few weeks, how can we possibly *not* be a part of this adventure?"

"And...cut!" Rufia announced. "That's a wrap."

The others in the room applauded, then added a few whoops as Arca gave Darrek a big, not-at-all chaste kiss.

"At least you waited until they stopped the camera this time," Darrek said, once they were done.

"That's okay. I still have the first three takes on record," Rufia said with her trademark smile.

"So much for being 'uncorrupted by Zharusian technology,'" Teenette quipped.

"She's an extraordinary woman," Darrek said. He reached out and took Arca's hand, then kissed the back of it. "I can stand a little corruption."

"As one of humanity's 'grandchildren' I say, thanks, gramps." Arca laughed, then gave him another kiss on the cheek.

Madison chuckled. "And you'll never have to worry about buying a car again."

"Can't wait to take my lightrunner shell for a spin through Totalia City," Arca said. "It shouldn't look that out of place. It actually has wheels."

"They still barely touch the ground with the lifters off," Darrek said. After they'd met outside of Nextus, Arca had been assigned as his designated EI guide through the NuJose region since Rufia's crew didn't know the Laurasian city as well as those on Gondwana. The tour of Laurasia had been filled with a number of heart-pounding moments, both in her car shell and out.

He wouldn't necessarily call their blossoming relationship love at first sight, but they were both willing to explore their feelings, wherever they led.

"So, that's the last thing you needed? You're all ready to send off the report?" Madison asked.

Darrek nodded. "If we're going to make the torp's launch deadline, it'll have to be. I've already assembled the rest of our final report. I'll go over it one more time to make sure everything's there, then pfffft! Off it goes. It'll be there in a couple of weeks to let 'em know we're *finally* on our way."

Madison sighed. "I wish *I* were there."

Teenette grinned. "Surely you wouldn't want to deprive *us* of the pleasure of your company..."

Madison rolled her eyes. "Meh, I can't win."

"It's not as if we won't be there soon enough. Or at least leaving to go home soon enough. Just over a week to go," Darrek shook his head. "Where did the time go..."

NuJose HoJo Hotel

Darrek found Arca in the hotel garage, sitting in her lightrunner, eyes closed. He studied her for a few moments, trying to get a sense of what she was feeling. He concluded that there was something bugging her.

"Hey there, what's on your mind?" he asked, climbing into the passenger seat.

She honestly looked startled. "Oh! I didn't realize you were around. I'm just thinking of the trip. Excited to be going, and to see your home."

“I’m excited to be going home too. But is that everything on your mind? You seem disappointed too.”

“Disappointed? No, I’m excited!” She paused. “Well...I’m just thinking of some might-have-beens.”

“Might-have-beens?”

Between them, the dashboard lit up with a fanfare and a bodiless voice started speaking.

Congratulations Arca! You’re the Speed Racer! You have qualified for the Alohan Invitational Grand Prix as part of the Naming Day celebrations!

“Congrats! I take it this is a big thing?”

“One of the biggest races on Gondwana. Invitation only, top racers from around the planet, and only if you’ve been racing for the past year. I’ve been trying for years to get an invite and was doing great this year. Then I ran into you, and with everything else...I guess my record was good enough even with the last few sprints I missed.”

Darrek leaned over and hugged her. “That’s great!”

“No, it’s horrible. The race is a couple of days after we leave.”

“Oh? OH! Ouch...yeah that...” Darrek trailed off, not sure what he wanted to say.

“That sucks royally yeah. So close, yet so far.” She sighed and smiled at him, “Still, it’s an annual event. I’m sure I’ll be back eventually, ready to reclaim my title.”

“True. I’m sure you’ll come back with enough Totalian records to qualify automatically.” Darrek wasn’t actually sure there *was* that much rally-style racing on Totalia, come to think of it. *But if there isn’t, I’m sure the appearance of such an exotic vehicle and its exotic driver will jump-start interest in one, so that’s something.*

“Exactly,” she said, not sounding entirely convinced. “They do have interplanetary invitations ready for suitable racers from the other colonies.”

He let her go and smiled. “Dinner’s happening as soon as you’re ready.”

“I’ll be up in a few more minutes. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

After Dinner

Teenette knocked on Darrek’s door before walking in. She found him going over his notes and presentations. “You wanted to see me?”

“Hey there. Yeah, I did. How eager are you to head out to Cerberus?” he asked, shoving his notes to the side.

She shrugged and flopped onto the couch near his desk. “Somewhat eager. Hard to believe these are our last days. Why?”

“I’ve got a bit of a conundrum, with Arca.” He outlined the invitation the EI racer had received, and the timing problem. “I’ve checked; if we wait until after Naming Day, we can still make it out there a few days before Launch. It’d be tight but doable. But I don’t want to bring it up without you on board.”

“You figure they won’t leave if both of the Totalians aren’t there,” Teenette noted, grinning at him.

“Uhm, yeah, more or less that I suppose. We’d probably miss the launch of the Barsoom fleet, but shouldn’t slow things down too much.”

She pondered it a moment, scratching her ears. “Naming Day is one of their big parties in Aloha right? Let’s go for it.”

“Thanks, I’m glad to have you on board.”

He tapped on the screen and soon a familiar tiger Integrate was on the screen.

“Hey guys, how’s it going? Excited to be heading home?” Zane asked.

“Very, but we do have one final request before we leave,” Darrek said.

“Sure, just name it. If we can do it, we will.”

“We want to stay a few more days and do a final trip to Aloha,” he requested.

The tiger’s eyes widened. “Aloha? During Naming Day? That...might be difficult.”

Darrek’s face fell. “Oh, I thought we could delay our shuttle a few days but still make—”

Zane waved his hand, “The shuttle? That’s *easy*. In fact we’ve got a crew we can call in for the pickup and get you back before the Barsoom fleet leaves. The hard part is finding you rooms in Aloha over Naming Day.”

“Really? That’s the hard part?” Teenette asked.

“It would be great if you can find something. I wouldn’t mind camping if I needed to. Arca would be thrilled to be able to run in the Invitational.”

“Arca got an Invite? Fantastic! Give her my congratulations. If *that’s* the case, I can see why you want to stay longer. Wouldn’t dream of making her miss out on that chance.” He considered. “Hell, the way these things usually go, we probably won’t be ready to leave right on time anyway. I’ll take care of shifting your ride out to Cerberus, and finding you a place to stay down there.”

“Thank you, Zane. She’ll be thrilled.”

“Tell her my money’s on her. Good luck, and have fun.”

“You interested in coming to watch too?” Teenette asked.

Zane shook his head, “Wish we could, but we have too many other things going on to get this fleet ready for launch.”

Darrek felt guilty at his request. “You don’t need us to help, do you?”

“Nope! To be frank, you guys would just get in the way right now. Easier to keep everyone focused without the guests of honor around. Go enjoy the race, we’ll be watching on the ‘nets.”

Darrek found Arca fiddling with one of the lifters. He tried to keep his expression neutral as he walked up. “Whatcha up to?”

“This lifter’s a hair out of tune, didn’t want to get worse while we’re in transit.”

“Good idea. Is it race-worthy?”

She pulled out an assembly and turned it over in her hands. “Pretty much. Not that it’ll be racing any time soon.”

“Funny, I didn’t think two days from now didn’t count as ‘soon’”

She stopped and looked up at him. “Whatcha talkin’ ‘bout, Darrek?”

“Well, if we’re going to get to Aloha in time, we’re going to have to get it loaded on the Sub in a few hours.”

“And why do we need to go to Aloha?”

“For the Invitational of course.”

Arca was speechless for a couple of minutes. “Our flight to Cerberus—”

“Was delayed for a couple of days. Zane’s working out all the details for us.”

The lifter assembly dropped to the floor and she threw herself onto him. “Really? Thank you, Darrek! You’re wonderful!”

He hugged her back, “Considering you would have missed it because of me, it was

the least I could do. Now, what do we *really* need to do to get this race-worthy?”

September 11, 158 AL
Seahaven, Aloha

Darrek was overwhelmed. Months ago, when they had arrived at Aloha, he had thought the polity was crowded, but he could handle the numbers. Today, it seemed like the entire planet was trying to reach the resort polity, and it was still the day before Naming Day. They had only passed through it briefly on the way to Seahaven for the race start. He didn't know how he would handle it when they went back there.

He shoved those thoughts to the side and lifted his camera again, filming the race pit area. Fifty racers of all sorts had answered the invitations and they were all gathered under the Arch to the Dry.

“The Alohan Invitational is a rally going from Seahaven to Aloha via the Maasai Plains. Seventy-five invitations are sent out every year to the top racers of all sorts in the system. Usually around fifty are able to accept and participate,” he narrated as he recorded the crowd. “Race officials are inspecting the vehicles and bodies of the drivers to make sure they are within the race limitations. Even with those limitations, the variety of vehicles is astonishing. Looks more like *Wacky Racers**, doesn't it?”

Darrek paused, then made a footnote. **See Cultural Notes, Appendix C: American Cartoons of the 1960s.*

The camera stopped on Arca's lightrunner as she spoke to a pair of race officials, a man and horse RIDE. On the other side, Teenette and Barbaretta stood, wearing pink *Speed Racer* caps for Arca's race team; a team of just one racer but numerous sponsors. Brubeck Limited's badge was recently added, next to the *Speed Racer* logo, opposite the EvoLimited badge. He put the camera down and walked over to join them.

“Crowds, ugh. It's worse being in this frame,” Barbaretta noted. “I'm keeping my lifters running just to make sure I don't step on anyone's toes.”

“Just a couple more days and we'll be out of the crowds. Isn't all this exciting?” Teenette said.

“It is. I wonder if there's any place in particular we should go for the start?” Darrek said.

“There are bleachers over there, or you can stay here. Barbaretta can lift you high enough to get a good view,” Arca said, joining them. “We check out, and we're clear for racing.”

“Great! So we should let you be to get the car in position. Why don't we head to the bleachers to claim a good spot?”

Arca grabbed Darrek's arm. “You aren't going anywhere. You're my navigator after all.”

He blinked, his mind hiccuping. “Huh?”

“I signed you up as my navigator. Don't worry, I handle it all internally, but it lets me have a passenger. Come on, we need to get you suited up.”

“Buh—but I haven't been checked,” Darrek protested not sure if he wanted Arca's gift or not.

She hauled him to the car and pulled out a helmet and other gear. “They could tell you're bog-standard; no worries there. Put these on, lifter bracelets, hardlight shields, comm gear and so forth.”

Teenette laughed, “Go on Darrek, it’s a great opportunity. We’ll meet you back in Aloha.”

“Right...” he said, snapping the gear on. He kept the helmet off. “It will be quite the experience to report on. And it is safe, right?”

“Absolutely. Outside of the retro leagues, there hasn’t been a major injury in decades.”

Arca opened the canopy and motioned to Darrek to get in. He waved to Barbaretta and Teenette. “I get the feeling that if the others realized what I was doing, they’d be blowing a battery.”

Barbaretta chuckled, “No doubt. But we’re your handlers for now, and we’re allowing it.”

He climbed in and Arca belted him into the seat. He felt it mold around him, providing support and extra protection. On the other side, Arca climbed in. Instead of belts, the seat melted around her, surrounding her until she was barely visible. A helmet covered her face, her arms staying at her side. She and the racer were one.

“Powering up. System checks are green,” she said, her voice coming from all around him. Nothing changed on the console, but the vehicle rumbled to life, lifting off the ground. “Put your helmet on. Don’t worry, it won’t bite.”

Darrek put the helmet on. There was a moment of darkness before it lit up, letting him see again. A heads up display identified the other racers, including indicators for who was behind her.

“Impressive,” he said, trying to sort out the icons and arrange them.

“Be more impressive if you had the proper implants, but this will cover the basics,” Arca said. He looked over and saw a hologram of her overlaid on her seat. Outside, they were inching through the crowd to the starting line, escorted by a fused Teenette and Barbaretta.

Five minutes to start time. Please clear the track area. A voice announced over the comms and loudspeaker.

Darrek’s window opened and a lioness head poked in. “Good luck guys!” Teenette said cheerfully. “We’ll be watching.”

“Thanks,” he said, “I almost wish I was just watching too.”

Arca glanced over and frowned faintly. “Do you want out? You don’t *have* to ride along. I just thought you might enjoy it.”

“I’m here now, let’s do it,” he reassured her, heart pounding with growing excitement. It was the good kind of excitement, rather than the bad kind associated with the rescue from political prison what seemed like a lifetime ago. “See you two back in Aloha.”

The lioness waved and backed away. The window closed, and Darrek watched them leave the track area with the rest of the support crews.

“Two minute warning,” Arca warned him. “You can see the route on your lap. We’re starting towards the back of the pack, but there’s lots of time to move up.”

He looked around and saw a diorama style map on his lap, showing a bird’s eye view of the route. The rest of the icons were simple information icons whose purposes were fairly obvious. “Oh, neat. The lap, on my lap.”

“Feel free to narrate the race for your records. I’ll be handling the actual navigation of course,” she said. “Eyes front, here we go. Go Go Speed Racer!”

He looked up just in time to see a green flag drop from the top of the arch. As

one, the racers lurched forward, accelerating fast through the tourist city. Inside, protected by the inertia fields, he barely felt a thing.

Maasai Plains

Darrek looked across the endless sea of grass and shook his head in amazement. Scenes like this really showed him just how *big* the planet was. The other thing that got him was the lack of any sign of man. There were no roads, no power lines, nothing but the occasional locator beacon. All the racers were running on lifters for this part of the race. He watched a herd of bison take off, startled by the lead racers, and corrected his mental notes. There were no signs of man, other than the fact that the entire landscape and the creatures within it had been created by man's machines. Two centuries ago, an entirely different sort of life had dominated this landscape. He shoved those morbid thoughts to the back of his mind and picked up his narration.

"Two hours into the race, we're about halfway through the Maasai Plains section of this Grand Prix. The lakes of the Serengeti Resort will be where we turn around and start the sprint back to Aloha proper. The Serengeti Resort is primarily an Integrate village, publicly known before Integrates revealed themselves, but isolated enough to hide their true nature. When Astranikki returned, she and her family helped protect the Integrates that founded this lakeside resort village from discovery and from other Integrates who disliked them being so exposed.

"At this point, Arca and I have worked our way up to the Top 10, with our sights on Top 5 by the time we reach the resort village. Five racers have dropped out for various reasons, and six more are effectively out of the race."

"On your left," a voice said over the comm.

Darrek paused his narration and looked around. Coming up behind them, on their left, was a 1930's style open-wheeled race car, driven by a single person. The ERA R6B's wheels spun uselessly in the air as it was under lifter power. It had a red white and blue paint job, complete with what seemed like a target on the driver's side of its nose; red and white rings with a white star on a blue background for the bullseye.

"We see you Steve, go ahead. We'll pass you on the turnaround." Arca said, their own vehicle moving to the side.

Darrek called up the racer's info for his narrative. "That was Steve Rogers that just passed us. He is a normal human, or at least as normal as humans get in this league. He has a full suite of implants. He has neither RI nor EI partner on board, so everything is controlled by him, with the implants giving him reaction speeds comparable to the Intelligence controlled competitors.

"Considering his style, he looks more meme-infected than some Integrates we've met. He's 'Captain America.'"

"He's good; gonna be tough to get by him again," Arca said. "Turnaround coming up. Hang on tight. The dampers are on full."

Finish Line, Aloha

"Here they come!" Teenette shouted. She was sitting on Barbaretta's shoulders with the crowd at the finish line. Huge screens gave them views of the race progression. The lead cars were just dropping down to the ground near the Alohan airport for the

final leg of the race.

“This is where it gets interesting,” Barbaretta said. “They can’t go more than 50 centies above the ground from here on out, and everyone is going to be jockeying to get in the lead.”

On the screen the first racers touched down on the road and sped through the empty streets. Alohan traffic control had already cleared the route, and hardlight fields would protect spectators and pedestrians on the walkways as the race roared through the city streets.

“There she is! Seventh place!” Teenette shouted, pointed to the familiar white coupe. Two more landed just behind her before there was a noticeable gap.

“Nine in the front pack, not bad. At least I think it’s a good sized bunch. I’m just skimming old races as we go,” the lioness scout said.

The views focused on the leading nine. The vehicles tore through the streets, mere centis separating them as they took the corners.

“Those turns look impossible. They’re 90’s and they aren’t even slowing down.” Teenette was shouting from the excitement reverberating through the crowd.

“Experience and tech. But it’s right at the edge of the tech; any little flaw and—” Barbaretta was interrupted by a gasp from the crowd.

On the screen, the third, fourth and fifth racers came a hair too close to each other and clipped. The vehicles tumbled, crashing into the hardlight field centimetres from the crowd. The spectators and pedestrians ducked and ran instinctively, but the fields held, flaring brightly to shed the energy of the high speed impacts.

Steve, in sixth place, was forced to slow and swerve to avoid the debris. Arca in seventh, had enough time to plot her path through without slowing. She smoothly slid around the corner and passed the red, white and blue racer.

“Is she?... She is! Woohoo! You go girl!” Teenette shouted, raising her arms and cheering.

The final minutes of the race were tense. Arca closed in on the lead pair, and Steve closed in on her. Had the race been longer, she might have had a chance to move up or slide back. As it was, three seconds separated first from fourth as the racers crossed the line.

Barbaretta fused around Teenette and the pair took off to the winners circle. They got through the crowd just in time to see the passenger door open. A helmeted figure rolled out and seemed to hug the ground before unsteadily getting to his feet.

The driver got out soon after. Arca’s face was flushed red with excitement, and she waved enthusiastically to the crowd. She hopped over the hood and scooped Darrek up in a hug. “Thank you. Thank you! Thank! You!” she exclaimed, spinning him around.

“Arca, you might want to stop. He’s looking mighty green,” Barbaretta said.

She stopped and tugged the helmet off. Darrek’s eyes were unfocused for a moment and he looked on the very edge of hurling. He somehow managed to keep his breakfast down.

“You—you’re welcome. Glad to give you the chance. And to have the opportunity...” he stammered out, leaning against Arca for support.

“On your left,” a voice called out. Steve walked up, wearing a blue jumpsuit with red and white stripes and red boots and gloves. A blue cowl covered his head down to his eyes. A white ‘A’ was on his forehead and a white star adorned his chest.

Arca all but shoved Darrek to the fused lioness, and shook Steve’s hand before

hugging him. "Great race, Steve! Especially that end. A half second and you would have had me."

"I know. All the luck of the race. I look forward to racing you next year."

"Next...erm, yeah, I look forward to next year too."

He saluted her and waved to Darrek. "Great race. Congratulations. She's a fantastic driver."

"That she is. I think most of me is still back on the Maasai," Darrek said.

Steve grinned. "In any case, you're being called to the podium. See you later at the Checkered Flag?"

"Of course!"

Chapter 8

September 13, 158 AL
Toptown Charter Departures

Darrek, one arm wrapped around Arca's lithe waist, looked out at the curve of Zharus spread out below them. Next to them, Fused, were Teenette and Barbaretta, tail swishing thoughtfully. Teenette—presumably—sighed. Darrek glanced at them. "Hmm?"

"Just wishing we had more time," Teenette said. "It's going to be great to go home and all, and I know they need us back there, but I feel like we've barely even scratched the surface here. We can come back again later, but it'll be such a long trip..."

Darrek chuckled. "Believe me, I know *just* how you feel. I've learned so much from my peers here, and after being able to talk to them on the spur of the moment it will be hard having to wait weeks for replies to my correspondence. Still, we *are* the first of our people to set foot on another world in generations. It seems ungrateful to want even more."

"I *really* hope they haven't screwed up my ship too badly," Barbaretta muttered. "It's probably in a few thousand pieces by now. Damn them! I had the Drive Ring tuned just right. Squeezed another point-five past lightspeed out of it."

"Meanwhile, I'm going to be the first of *my* kind to set foot on your world. Or one of the first, anyway," Arca said. "I'm looking forward to that."

"One of the first indeed. Who knows, I might beat you down there," a new voice joined in. A silver-skinned Spacer man and red and white gynoid walked out of the crew section of the lounge. The man had glowing blue tattooed lines visible on his hands and arms, disappearing under his shirt.

"Sky!" Arca squealed, rushing to her sister and tackling her with a hug.

"Arca! How have you been? Still in the meat suit I see," Skyfire greeted her, spinning her seedsister around.

"Still in it. I did borrow a page from your book. Just wait 'till you see what's in my luggage. What *are* you doing here?"

"We're your ride out to Cerberus," Skyfire said, releasing her sister. She turned to the Totalians and bowed to them. "Sorry for ignoring you; I just had to greet my sister. I am Skyfire, and this is my partner Yuri. We'll be taking you out to the Fleet."

"Wonderful to meet you, Skyfire. Arca speaks highly of you," Darrek said. He offered his hand to Yuri. "And you're her partner...sir?"

"And not a woman, yes," Yuri added, answering the question that most people had upon meeting the two of them. "It's complicated."

"Actually, to use the vernacular of some acquaintances of ours, it's *Science!*" Skyfire corrected him. She looked between Arca and Darrek and smirked. "Mom and Dad might want to look closer at our seeds. We both picked cross partners it seems."

"Cross partners?" Darrek asked, then blushed a little. "Ah, I see what you mean."

"What do you mean? I've got a meat suit. I can't—"

Skyfire brushed between her sputtering sister and her sister's stunned partner, and held her hand to the fused pair. "Greetings. I assume the other Totalian is in there

somewhere?”

Teenette shook the hand, the lioness paw-hand engulfing the EI's. “I am. Teenette Clarke. Good to meet you.”

“Scout Captain Barbaretta Hansom,” the lioness said, still shaking the hand.

“A pleasure to meet you both as well,” Yuri said, his own hand getting similarly shaken. “I’m afraid the Caravan isn’t the most spacious way to travel in system, but it is the fastest. Most of the time RIDEs travel outside, but since it’s just the four of you, I’m sure we can squeeze you inside,” he said, addressing the RIDE.

Barbaretta nodded, the Fuser’s stance shifting. “It is just the four of us. Everyone else has other transport arranged. I would have offered to take them out myself, but since my ship didn’t make it back from Totalia, and they really wanted to see Naming Day, you helped make everything work out. If it is too cramped, I can ride outside; I’m a Scout, Space doesn’t bother me. Especially not in this body.”

“We’ve got room, just need to pump the balloons a bit bigger.” Yuri looked at her puzzled. “I didn’t think RIDEs were Scouts yet, let alone coming back from Totalia. Or rather Samantha was the only one to come back, sort’ve.”

The lioness grinned. “Oh, I wasn’t ‘born’ a RIDE. I’ve opted to upload, for various reasons. We can go over it en route, I’m sure.”

“Upload? You—” Skyfire said. She blinked, looking distant for a moment while catching up on the implications of that term. “Oh. Wow! Well. You’ll have to tell us about this during the trip out.” Speechless for a few microseconds, Skyfire looked back at Arca, “You...you said something about your luggage?”

“Yup! I’ve got my own armor. It’s a modified multi-mode lightrunner. I couldn’t completely give up the speed after all. Designed it myself.”

Darrek coughed. “I can vouch for the speed part of that. Third place in the invitational a couple days ago.”

Arca grinned and looked at the Rangers. “Is it here yet?”

“All your luggage came up earlier. It’s stored down below. If you need anything now, you might want to get it; once we’re going, it won’t be as accessible,” Yuri explained.

“No, we’ve got it all,” Darrek said. “At least enough for a day trip. You can really get to Cerberus in time?”

“Fastest man-rated ship in system,” Skyfire said proudly. “We’ll get out there before you know it.”

“Another long story we can cover en route,” Yuri explained. “Getting out in time will be a bit tight, but well within our capabilities.”

“We’ve been in and out so often, we’re going to open a burger franchise,” Skyfire said. She saw the puzzled looks and shrugged. “Tough crowd. The Zharusians get it.”

“Usually we go Cerberus to Rhodes and back. Even with DINcom, the Engineers don’t like virtual. They aren’t satisfied until they touch steel. And with the amount of material going out for the Western and the fleet, that’s a lot to touch.” Yuri continued.

He motioned to the airlock. “If you’ll come this way, I’ll show you the Caravan.”

He led them through the airlock into the ship. Most of the expanded module was open living space, with a couch and kitchenette. One door lead towards the bow. A short hall had two side doors and a door at the end. Yuri turned to start pointing things out, but was interrupted by the lioness pair.

Fused together, the lioness was a tight squeeze in the space. She had to duck and

turn sideways just to make it through the locks, and even inside she couldn't stand fully upright. Realizing the problem before Skyfire did, the Fuser opened, releasing a young woman with lioness tags. But rather than dropping to four legs, the RIDE compressed herself and remained bipedal. "There. More headroom," Barbaretta said, standing fully upright, her ears a few centies from the ceiling.

"Neat trick," Yuri said after a moment. "I didn't think that was possible."

"My understanding is that it was partly adapted from EI Fuser armor frames," Teenette said.

"Makes sense. Those limits you had seemed rather arbitrary to me," Skyfire said, the airlocks sliding shut behind her. "In any case, as Yuri was about to say. Cabins are on either side of the hall. Both are identical, so take your pick, two bunks to a room. Head's at the back. Cockpit's up front. That area's off limits supposedly, but knock first and we can let you in if you want to see."

"I'll be spending most of the trip fused, or in here being a host. If you need anything, just ask," Yuri added.

"So are you going to do one of those sneaky escapes with us and tell us we're already away?" Darrek asked.

Yuri triggered a few views on the walls. One showed they were still connected to Toptown. "It was tempting, but we figured we'd give you the chance to cast us off."

"Besides, Polestar hasn't given us clearance yet. It'll take us about an hour after that to get far enough out to kick off, and traffic over Aloha is a nightmare," Skyfire explained.

"You know, Totalia is going to need a space elevator," Darrek said, wandering to a screen and looking at the view of the elevator. "if we're going to get serious about space."

"Well, cavorite makes them moot more or less. Aloha's elevator, they mainly use it to bring things up, and to power the polity. Coming down, it's faster to just drop it on an A-G sled. Still, it is great for the tourists," Skyfire said. "There we go, we're cleared to cast off. Care to do the honors?"

Teenette and Darrek looked at each other, then at Barbaretta. "Honors?" Teenette asked.

"Take us out, Captains," Barbaretta said as explanation.

Skyfire snapped a salute to the lioness. "Aye aye. Releasing from Toptown, and breaking orbit.."

"I think I'm jealous," Arca said, smirking at Skyfire.

"It loses a smidge of its excitement when you've do it dozens of times in the last few months," Yuri noted.

The only hint of movement was from the screens. They pulled away from the station and started climbing. Space was crowded with moving objects, most too small to see as more than a point of light.

"So what way are we going? Just straight to Cerberus?" Darrek asked once they were well on their way.

"We have a little side trip planned. Our speedy engines have some specific requirements. We can't get too close to gravy sources. Zharus, Colossus and Cerberus are in a close enough alignment, we can't go direct." Yuri explained. The lights dimmed and a model of the Pharos system lit up. "Even though Cerberus is off the ecliptic, the direct route is close enough that Colossus is in the way."

Skyfire nodded and a line lit up, heading away from Zharus, not quite going

towards Cerberus. “So we’re doing two jumps basically, heading away from everything, and then taking a direct route to the Fleet.”

The Totalians and Arca nodded, while Barbaretta looked curiously at the Rangers. Darrek spoke up before she could ask anything.

“Arca mentioned you’re not from Zharus right? From Rhodes?”

“That I am, from a spacer family going back to Earth’s original orbitals.”

“I wish we could have been able to make it out there. There’s just so *much* here to do and so little time to do it in. The scale of everything here is so big, it’s hard to wrap your mind around.”

“Size, distance, number of people, it has been quite daunting. Still, we did our best to get a slice of culture to bring back home with,” Darrek said.

“Did you spend any time off planet? Z-Space has a lot to see by itself, even if you can’t leave orbit,” Yuri asked.

“Not since we were picked up. Barbaretta was in rough shape so we came right to the planet and didn’t leave until now.” Darrek saw Yuri’s expression and continued quickly. “I see now it was a mistake. A bad mistake. Back home, we only have a few tens of thousand people living in space. Most of them aren’t even permanent spacers. You’ve got millions of people out here, people who have never tasted open air. It’s a slice of culture we didn’t realize we missed.”

“Damn right it’s a slice. We *built* this planet—”

“—on rock and roll. Calm down Yuri, it wasn’t intentional. There’s only so many hours in a day, even one as long as Zharus’s.” Skyfire interrupted, trying to calm her partner.

“It’s a shame we didn’t make it out there. You’ve still got your original space stations right? I think I read that Rhodes is one of them,” Teenette asked. She sighed wistfully. “Be nice to take a look at it. Might feel a bit familiar to see something that came from Earth around the same time we did; tech with the same Sol-roots.”

Barbaretta laughed. “If you’re looking for that at Rhodes, you’re in for a big disappointment. It’s been rebuilt and rearranged through the centuries; now it’s just a glorified space truck stop.

“Now, if you want a classic station, you want Xolotlan. That place was mothballed for decades and is barely touched now. Sadly, even Skyfire’s speeds can’t make that sort of side trip in the time we have. It’s on the opposite side of the system we’re heading towards.”

“You’ve been peeking, haven’t you?” Skyfire grinned at the lioness. “And yes, Xolotlan is way out of range. I’m just trying to see if I can crunch the numbers for a flyby of Colossus at least, but orbits might not work out.”

“If you can make it work, please do,” Darrek said. “We still have a few days, and seeing Colossus up close would be a great send-off. And partly fill in a gap in our culture report.”

“Oh yeah!” Teenette said.

“I don’t know, are you sure you want to see a ‘space truck stop’?” Yuri asked with more than a hint of bitterness.

Skyfire shook her head and bumped her partner as she headed to a door to the cockpit. “Ignore him. His home-station pride is showing. I’ll go put on my bodies and see what I can work out with TraCon.”

Barbaretta smirked to herself and stretched out on the couch she had claimed.

“Sure you need to work something out. Did you even bother going towards that fake route?” she whispered to Skyfire.

“And waste the fuel? If they hadn’t asked, we had an ace up our sleeves; Goldie was going to send in a pickup request to justify the diversion. Technically this is a slower route, even if we don’t stop, so we did need some justification.”

“But practically, it makes no difference, and now they have some more for their reports. How long can you give them at Rhodes?”

“A few hours at most, maybe half a day. Takes longer to coast in and push out of Colossus compared to Zharus.”

“That’ll do for now. Quark’s still rigging the Dabo tables?”

Skyfire laughed, “They’re still as bent as space around a black hole.”

Isaac’s Way, Rhodes Station

After a whirlwind tour of the station’s historical sections, the Totalians and their escorts were taken to *Isaac’s Way*, one of Rhodes’ higher class restaurants. They had a chance to relax in a private room with drinks, while waiting for the rest of the dinner guests.

“My apologies for the delay. Snow Squall and the Captain are both on their ways now,” Rodney explained. Rodney was an athletic metallic blue man with a classic grecian look. He wore a sky blue cloak and loin cloth, sandals and a crown. The crown silently burned with blue flames on his head. He was also the recently installed *genius loci* of Rhodes Station.

“No problem. A bit of down time is appreciated, especially after the past few months,” Teenette said.

“We realize our arrival was unplanned. That they can take the time out of their busy days to see us is appreciated,” Darrek added.

Rodney stood up and headed to the door. “They’re just entering now.”

By the time he reached the door, everyone else had stood up and moved to place the table behind them. Rodney glanced around, then opened the door. “Presenting Bruce Markov, Captain of Rhodes station, and Snow Squall, CEO of Talon Enterprises.”

The man that entered was normal looking. Markov was short, barely 150 centis tall, and completely hairless. His pale skin had the sheen of vac-resistance, but otherwise he was unremarkable. He was dressed in a simple blue business suit.

Behind him, the griffin integrate made up for the Captain’s unremarkability. Standing a little over two metres tall, Snow Squall was a mix of human, snow leopard and gyrfalcon. Mostly grey-white feathers transitioned to grey fur at his belly, just above the waistband of his pants. His wings, with black and white feathers that gave a hint of a checkering pattern, were pulled in tight to his back. His curved beak was black at the tip, fading to grey like his feathers near his nares. His hands were grey scaled like his feathers, tipped in black talons. He swished his long leopard tail slowly behind him while he waited for introductions.

“Thank you for coming to see us on such short notice,” Darrek said once the introductions were done and they were settled around the table. He found himself sitting across from Snow Squall, while Teenette sat across from the Captain at the other end.

“Thank you for the consideration of inviting us. I only wish you could stay longer.

I assume Rodney has been making the best of the short time you have to visit?" Captain Markov said.

"He certainly has. The museum section especially; it reminded me a little of home, of pictures I've seen of Cosmy ships," Teenette said. "Not that they're *that* primitive. It's just, the tech from back then is closer to ours," she corrected herself quickly.

Snow Squall chuckled, "I have seen the reports on your space technology and resources. The comparisons, and differences are valid. Adapting our gifts to what Totalium can provide is going to be some interesting challenges. Challenges I'm looking forward to tackling."

"You're looking forward to it?" Darrek asked.

"Yes indeed. Talon Enterprises is part of an alliance of Colossus and Zharus companies that are providing the gift of the four industrial ships. Unlike those companies, I and the rest of T.E. will be moving to Totalia with the ships. We hope to reincorporate there once things settle."

Darrek found himself momentarily speechless. He'd been so busy on Zharus, he hadn't closely followed what the fleet plans were. "That... is interesting," he stammered out.

"What are your intentions with Totalia?" Barbaretta asked, a touch of suspicions in her voice.

"Only the best, I assure you. The opportunity it provides is just too juicy to ignore. The Industrial ships are effectively seed ships, much like the one in the centre of Rhodes here. They're meant to grow into a proper spacer civilization. Unlike those older ships, these ones contain modern technology, improvements the original Spacers couldn't even dream of. In some ways, Totalia will be a safe test bed for seeing what works and doesn't work."

Teenette put the pieces together first. "That implies you're thinking of colonization."

Snow Squall sipped his wine and nodded. "In a way. Not of the Totalian system, but beyond. It has been decades since a new system was settled. The populations of the colony worlds continue to rise, and even Earth's population has stabilized. As Zharus and the rest of the colonies mature, people are going to get itchy feet again, to get a desire to find someplace new. With the long life I have to look forward to, it's inevitable that I will see another colonization wave start. It's only wise to keep those skills sharp and modernized."

"Wow," Arca said.

Further discussion was interrupted by a soft knock at the door. A second later, it opened and waiters brought in trays of food and fresh drinks. Darrek saw a large salmon steak, with a fried kraken side dish, put in front of Snow Squall and had a moment of worry. He was relieved when a real steak with mushrooms, potatoes and other vegetables was placed in front of him.

"I made sure they knew your preference," Arca whispered to him, winking and stealing a plump mushroom from his plate. "No seafood."

"Thanks," he whispered back, and dug into the food. He studied the meat chunk on his fork, trying to decide if it was real or fabbed.

"Isaac's Way only serves natural food, grown in the gardens and water tanks of Rhodes or shipped live from Zharus," Markov explained, as if reading Darrek's mind.

“Most of our food is fabbed, but even we like to treat ourselves occasionally.”

“Make sure you enjoy it. You’ll be on fabbed food for the next 4 weeks. Unless you break into the Ark and go hunting. Noah wouldn’t like that,” Yuri said.

“The Ark?” Teenette asked.

“Another gift, no strings attached. It’s a gene bank to help fill in any ecological gaps on Totalia. It also has numerous biomes already active. Noah is an EI who tends it all.”

“Wow, we’ll have to check that out when we get out there,” Teenette said. She took another bite and mmmmed. “Fabbed or not, this is fabulous.”

“Chef Isaac is the best on Rhodes, and one of the top in the system,” Snow Squall said, savouring his own dish.

“Well earned,” Darrek agreed. “I’m being spoiled by all this. When we get back to Totalia, we’re just going to be regular folk again, having to live off our own budgets.”

“Don’t remind me,” Teenette groaned.

“Considering the friends you’ve made, I doubt you’ll be ‘regular folk’, even back at Totalia.” Barbaretta noted.

“No matter what, you will always be guests of honor here,” Bruce assured them.

“Thank you,” Teenette said. “I hope we can get back to take advantage of your hospitality. We haven’t even scratched the surface of what we could see here.”

“Not bad for a ‘truck stop’,” Yuri noted, before getting elbowed by Skyfire.

“Now, about all this new technology, you’re providing us...” Darrek said. “I assume you’re sending along means to train us to use it?”

“Most of the personnel with the industrial ships will be for training your own people; we’re barely bringing along enough to run it. To properly use our gift, we’re going to need many more people, preferably Totalians,” the griffin said. “The objective is self sufficiency for Totalia. Not to mention to see what you might come up with on your own based on what we teach you. New perspectives result in new technologies, after all.”

“New technologies you’ll control?”

Snow Squall smiled and shook his head. “Only partially. We are reincorporating in your system. Over half of Talon Enterprises will be owned by Totalians if our plans go well. So you’ll control what we get. We’re just giving you what you need to rejoin us on equal footing.

“I understand very few Totalians actually live in space; even your Cosmy regularly cycles people back to the planet. When we arrive, your first permanent off planet habitats will be built. Built with your help, and the supervision of one very talented horse Integrate.”

“Impressive plans. We’ll see what we can do to make them pay off,” Darrek said.

“Ugh, I’m absolutely stuffed,” Arca said, leaning on Darrek and rubbing her belly. They were wandering slowly back to the docks.

“But damn, that was good,” Teenette agreed. “Going to take me weeks to work this off. Unless you want to help me?” She grinned at Barbaretta.

The lioness shook her head and laughed. She carried a parting gift from the restaurant; a tub of hand made ice cream, an apple pie and chocolate cake. “Only if you let me share this with you. All this fine food you’ve been served almost makes me miss my soft body.”

“Well the food coma’s we’ll all be in should make the next stage of the trip go by faster,” Yuri said. He opened the airlock and stood to the side. “After you.”

Darrek paused and looked back. He could just see the Promenade at the end of the corridor, the flashing lights and music shifting as the crowds walked by.

“Thanks for hosting us again,” he said to Rodney.

Rodney shook his offered hand, “My pleasure. Good luck with your home. I look forward to seeing you return with good news.”

“We look forward to bringing it back,” Teenette said, shaking the EI’s hand as well. “Once we get home straightened out, I can’t wait to come back and see all we missed.”

“I’ll send you a suggestion list,” Rodney said. He stepped back while they stepped through the airlock. He waved at them until the hatches closed, sealing them off from the station.

Chapter 9

September 15, 158 AL

Cerberus

Eight light-hours out, Pharos was a very bright point in the sky, visible through the physical dome of Lassie, one of the three “heads” of the plutoid where the Totalia Relief Fleet had set up their staging area. The other two, Pluto and Scooby, housed the different contributors to the Fleet—Spacers, Zharusian military, Rangers, Scouts, Marshals, and more. *Thousands* of people.

Darrek was awed, and more than a little humbled. Skyfire had shown them the half-dozen ships being readied. The *Great Western* was about the size as the Cosmy’s standard system patrol ship. Her unfinished hull was covered with a seemingly haphazard collection of habitation modules, a number of smaller docked ships, and materiel intended as the first gifts to Totalia.

Zane had provided detailed status reports during the planetary tour, including ship manifests, holo, and some personnel profiles. Darrek had spent the last few hours reviewing them. The majority of the fleet was just there to support Zharus’s operations in the Totalian system. The rest were gifts for the Totalians. Snow Squall’s industrial fleet would be huge, but they would arrive weeks later and set up out of sight of most of the planet. The Ark on the other hand...Darrek was positive that was going to be the biggest gift as far as the people were concerned. Which was why he had insisted they stop there first, even before going down to the habitat domes, or up to the *King of Hearts*.

Lush gardens seemed to fill the Ark from end to end. “Strawberries... These are strawberries,” Teenette gasped, bending down to pick a couple. She’d eaten more than her share during her time on Zharus, but here they were. “You’re giving strawberries to Totalia.”

“Strawberries, kiwi, bananas, and other fruits and vegetables I understand didn’t make it with your original colony ships,” Noah said. He was the Ark’s *genius loci*, presenting in the body of an older man with a long grey beard, dressed in simple linen robes. A leashed goat nibbled at the grasses next to him. “We’re also providing livestock, like these goats, and other animals and plants that don’t exist on Totalia.”

“No strawberries or bananas? The smoothie market is going to explode when we get there,” Arca said.

“This is too much,” Darrek said, looking around. The Ark had other sections for forests, swamps, plains and even a small ocean biosphere zone. So much in such a small space.

“We understand that Totalia has had very little in the way of terraforming. The Ark Lander is Zharus’s gift to Totalia. Rather symbolic, given the rest of the assistance. But I think necessary. You can use the genetic material and seedstock to fill in the gaps in your ecology.”

“But a gift? You’re just giving this to us?” Teenette said.

“Totalia has proven itself as a viable colony world. We want to make sure it will

stay viable on the long term. Another world of Man will benefit everyone in the end.”

“Oh behalf of Totalia, I’m honored. We accept this gracious gift,” Darrek said, glancing at a couple of bird-sized drones that were rushing towards them.

On Zharus, their cover had miraculously stayed intact, so they hadn’t needed to watch for the fifth estate. Out here at Cerberus, everyone knew of the Totalian mission and especially who they were. The press had been caught by surprise when they stopped at the Ark first, a surprise they were getting over.

“We are pleased to gift this to you. If you’ll come this way, I’ll take you to the plains. We have a half dozen bison there, ready to release on your world—and frozen eggs and sperm enough to create thunderous herds given a few years.”

Darrek fell back as the tour continued, noting the press drones flittering around the group. He wrote on his notepad for the final dispatch to the Totaliment. *Now this... media circus. Fitting, I suppose, since we’ll be living on a circus ship.*

“Okay, everyone. Give them some breathing room,” a tiger Integrate said, coming out of an access entrance with another feline integrate. Zane Brubeck shooed the media floaters aside, Madison next to him. “You’ll have plenty of time for interviews during the jump.” He waited for them to back away to a somewhat polite distance, then extended his handpaw towards the Totalians. “Nice to see you all again.”

Darrek and Teenette shook it in turn. “Doctor Livingston, I presume?” Darrek said.

Zane grinned. “Quite. So, how was your trip out? We expected you a day ago.”

“Ah, we insisted on taking the long way,” Darrek said. “Skyfire swung us to Colossus. Technically a brown dwarf, isn’t it? The name is very fitting. We stopped briefly at Rhodes to recharge, and met some people there.”

“That’s understandable,” Madison said. “Rhodes was my first stop in the *Daydream Believer* on my shakedown.”

“And our home. Was good to stop in for a visit before leaving,” Yuri noted.

“The Mads gave us the go-ahead to push their experimental STL drive a *little* harder,” Skyfire said. “Now they’re going to want their data.” She looked to Zane and smiled. “Since I assume you have a ride from here, Yuri and I are going to head to the *Heart of Gold*. They’re going to want to retune the Caravan after this little jaunt, before we leave the system.”

“Sure, we can handle it from here out. Just make sure to send their luggage over to the *King*,” Zane said.

“Of course.”

“Thanks for the ride out,” Teenette said. “I guess we’ll see you *en route*?”

“We’ll be aboard the *Great Western* with most everyone,” Yuri said. “So we’ll talk again sometime. Nice meeting you.”

“Wait until you meet the Mads,” Skyfire added. The red-and-white gynoid smiled at her old friend. “See you on the Grid, Arca.”

Arca smirked. “Not if I see you first.”

The spacers left, passing more of Zane’s group on the way. A she-elk Fuser wandering about, looking up at the transparent physical dome rather than the crowd around her. Rufia and Yvonne had had some final business to take care of before leaving Zharus and come out with their own ride. “This is all just pure *awesome!*” Rufia said.

“Over here, Rufe!” Teenette shouted, waving her over.

Darrek nodded to her. “Hey, Rufia. When did you hit the station?”

“Just a few minutes ago. Caught a lift with Marcus, heard everyone was stopping at the Ark, figured I’d come by too.” She smirked. “I had no idea how *roomy* those scout ships are. Especially the bed.”

“Roomy?” Teenette said. “Roomy, she says.”

Darrek grinned. “Well, if the bed was the only part she got any use out of...”

“This is really something, huh?” Rufia said. “This’ll be the first time I’ve been out of the system since Ryan and I came to Zharus...what was it, ten years ago? Time flies.”

“First time I’ve been out of the system at all,” Yvonne said. “Makes me kinda nervous and excited at the same time.”

“This time *we’ll* be giving *you two* the Grand Tour,” Teenette said. “I can’t wait.”

Rufia nodded. “It’ll be a learning experience, that’s for sure. And not just for me. Rhianna dragooned me into setting up a tour guide school for Totalians. You haven’t exactly had the need for a tourism industry so far, but unless I miss my guess you’re about to in spades.” She shook her head. “Sheesh. I still can’t believe there’s a whole wildcat colony out there that actually survived.”

Zane padded over from Noah, who he’d been chatting with. “Hello, Rufia, Yvonne. Glad to see you made it.”

“Damn glad to be here, Zane,” Rufia said, giving him a friendly slap on the shoulder. “How long we have left?”

“About five days. The Barsoom Fleet mining ships are leaving tomorrow. Maddie’s closeted with their captains for some last-minute consultations.” He waved a hand in the general direction of the residential section of the station. “Let’s get you all settled here. The accommodations are rather spartan, but we won’t be here long. We’ve already started moving the last equipment and personnel to the *Great Western’s* habs and *King of Hearts*. We’ll be a *lot* more comfortable once we’re aboard.”

“I hope to meet as many of your brave soldiers as I can before we reach Totalia,” Darrek said in his best Ambassadorial voice.

Barbaretta, currently in bipedal Shell mode, snorted. “Trust me, you’ll have time to meet every one of them.”

“Dunno what *you’re* complaining about,” Teenette said. “You got to sleep all the way through the last trip. As I understand it, you could sleep through this one if you wanted, too.”

Barbaretta snorted. “What, and miss all the fun?”

Zane chuckled. “Right this way, folks. Your rooms are ready. Maybe the press will even leave you alone long enough to do touristy things tomorrow, if you want. But don’t wait too long. Cerberus is getting shut down as soon as we’re loaded.”

“Gotcha,” Rufia said. “Say, where’s Rhi and Kay? I have a bridal shower gift for her.”

“She and Kay are deep in a rather spirited ‘discussion’ with the scientist crew of the *Heart of Gold*.” Zane grimaced. “Never met a group of more meme-infected Inties. I’ll let her know you’re around.”

“All right. Guess we’d best get on to our quarters. See ya later!” She paused. “Hey...I don’t s’pose it’s gonna be an open marriage?”

Zane rolled his eyes and pointed. “Get outta here.”

September 19, 158 AL

“Closing time, open all the doors and let you out into the world...” From the *Daydream Believer’s* bridge, Zane watched the lights go out one by one in the three domes of the Cerberus asteroid station. He could have used the ship’s sensors to follow it, but his Integrate eyes were able to zoom in far enough to make out the details.

Cerberus was closing down. Every last human, RIDE, Integrate, EIDE, and other person had packed and left, and the last of multiple sweeps and double-checks had been performed to make sure no one was left behind. Now the facility was being mothballed. It might see some other use later on, but for now there were already plenty of deep-space stations and settlements in the area. Cerberus had been built specifically to bootstrap the Totalia fleet supply effort, and the plan had always been to fold its personnel into the fleet when that was over. And the plan had worked—though there had been some serious logistical hurdles along the way.

“That’s that,” Madison reported. “The decom team’s shuttle’s launched. All Cerberus systems are in cold standby. Shall we beat feet back to the *G.W.*?”

Zane nodded. “Might as well.” He glanced back to the trio in the bridge’s jump seats. “What say you, Ambassadors?”

“I guess we’ve seen enough,” Darrek said. He reached over to give Arca’s hand a squeeze, then nodded to Zane. “I can’t thank you enough for...I don’t know, saying ‘the help’ or even ‘the warm welcome’ seems inadequate.”

“I can’t believe our trip is over,” Teenette said. “I wish we had longer. It still feels like we’ve barely scratched the surface of Zharus and the space settlements.”

“Not to mention the other colonies?” Barbaretta said. “I still want to show you around Zheng He, you know.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Teenette said.

“And I’m looking forward to seeing *your* home,” Arca said. “I hope we can free it quickly, without further bloodshed.”

“That makes...well, *all* of us,” Madison said.

“Let’s head back to the *Great Western*,” Zane said. “It’s time to get underway.”

Fleet Launch: T-12 hours

The *Great Western* had been equipped with the very latest technology in modular docking tackle. The hull was studded with adjustable ports, grips, and clamps, so attaching any given ship to any given section was more or less an exercise in sticking it into place. It was like starship velcro, or maybe LEGO. Of course, with this many ships involved, they couldn’t just stick them on any which way. Working out the most efficient arrangement had taken a considerable amount of time.

Smaller ships, like Rochelle and Uncia’s Maxima, Joe Steader’s Pan-Am starliner, and the group of generic shuttles Camelot had pitched in, were mounted toward the front, for easy access to the *King of Hearts* and the Hab Module. Once they got to the Totalia system, they were expected to be in and out a lot.

Being midway in size between these small ships and the larger cargo craft, the three Scout ships were clustered together right behind them, connected to the *Great Western’s* main transport shafts with flexible docking tunnels. To conserve space elsewhere and increase the amount of personnel intermingling during the voyage, the three Scout ships had agreed to bunk a few extra passengers for the duration of the jump. They’d find other places to be after arriving at Totalia.

At the moment, a number of these ships were in the process of arriving and docking for the last time before departure. Joel thought it looked kind of like a slow-motion explosion in reverse. Instead of parts flying off every which way, they were slowly flying in from all directions instead.

:MOOOOOOOOB!: Zach sent cheerfully.

:Huh?:

:That's the sound an explosion in reverse makes! Or would, if there was sound in space.:

:Heh.: Joel reached up and gave the hardlight ferret on his shoulder a scratch behind the ears.

"Hey, look, there's the DDB!" Zach said aloud, for the benefit of their guests on the bridge. Marcus had been wanting to get a good look at a sneakship like the *Satellite of Love* for some time, and this had been the first good opportunity to have him and his new crew aboard.

Marcus watched the ship slowly maneuver into its docking slot to the SOL's port side. Reaction thrusters flared, pushing it gently into place. "A sweet little ship, that. Of course, she doesn't have the classic lines of the older generation of vessels." He nodded toward the *Turbinia*, to starboard.

"Of course," Joel said dryly.

"So that's the white knight who came to your rescue, huh?" Gatsby said. "Somehow I expected it would be bigger." The griffin RIDE was seated on one of the bridge's jump seats in shell mode, shuffling real playing cards on the console for dexterity practice.

"Size isn't everything," Sinewave said. "In fact, rather the opposite. I was afraid I would have to settle for a huge cargo hauler, and instead look at me—I get to be a scoutship!"

"That reminds me," Marcus said, raising his newly cat-like ears. "Do you two plan on recruiting an EI to run this ship?"

"Well, you know, sneakships rarely drop planetside," Joel said. "Might not be fair to them to have to stay cooped up with us all the time."

"And it depends if a prospective EI shares our tastes in entertainment," Zach added. "It would be kind of nice to have a 'real' Magic Voice, but we can't exactly recruit someone just for that."

Madison's voice came over the comm. "Hey, you guys! Okay, we're here, they can start now."

Joel grinned. "Hey, Madison. Glad you could join us."

"Oh, you know. Didn't have anything better to do. My social calendar was completely blank."

"And you know, we don't really see that changing for the next few months," Zane added. "Looks like we're going to have a lot of time to sit around and play cards."

Gatsby perked up. "Did someone mention cards?" He riffled the deck together, flipped it over, and fanned it out—shuffled into perfect order. "Poker, gin, spades, Uno..."

"Bridge?" Zach put in.

"More sort of a flight deck, really, ship this size," Gatsby said.

"You've been *waiting* to use that one. Haven't you."

Gatsby smiled. "We can also play Magic: The Gathering, Munchkin, Cards

Against Sapience, Cripple Mr. Onion, Sabacc...we'll have plenty of time and lots of potential players. In between training exercises, of course."

"I guarantee that nobody's going to be bored on this trip," Zane said. "I want you all on the bridge of the *King of Hearts* when we submerge, too."

Joel chuckled. "Sure thing, boss. But I'll see you on the *SOL* later for movie night."

"Wouldn't miss it. We'll bring the Steaders."

"Joe Steader. In *our* theater!" Zach said, nearly swooning. "I'll find our very *best* movie cheese for riffing."

"Looking forward to it, Mr. Brubeck, sir," Joel said, snapping an ironic salute.

"I wonder if Mikel's as enthusiastic about B movies as his brother?" Zach speculated. "And there's that Julius cat, too."

"Well, we've got stuff to do on the *King*, and I imagine you've all got your own ducks to hoe. I'll see you once we're all in jump," Zane finished.

"Looking forward to seeing you guys again!" Madison added before breaking the connection.

"This is going to be the most crowded voyage we've ever been on," Joel said. "There's what? Nearly ten thousand aboard the *GW*, all told? *Rickenbacker* has another couple thousand..."

Zach giggled. "The *LOOOOOOOVE* Boat!"

"Do we have time for perhaps one hand of something short?" Gatsby pleaded. He started shuffling the deck again. "How 'bout something simple? Go Fish?"

"A *little* obsessed with card games, eh?" Zach said.

"A guy's gotta have a hobby, right?"

"Set up the table, Cadet," Marcus said.

"I'm game," Sinewave added. "I'll put up my standard handicaps when I play with organics. No offense, sir."

Marcus laughed. "I just realized I'm the only plain human here." He flicked his rather small wings. "Well...sort of."

Joel shrugged. "That's all right. Nobody's perfect. Anyway, we can spare a half hour or so in the Real. I've rezzed up the card table in the Theater."

Gatsby put his deck of cards under a chest panel then dropped to all-fours, wings held tightly against his flanks. There was a glint in his sea eagle eye. "Don't worry, everyone, I'll go easy on you."

Joel chuckled. "You'd better. Your hands aren't quicker than *our* eyes, you know."

Gatsby smirked. "Oh, is that a *challenge* I hear? Heh heh heh..."

"Ever see *Maverick*? We catch you cheating, we throw you off the boat."

"If you *catch* me cheating, I'll deserve it."

Marcus shook his head. "All right, let's see if you really do know when to hold 'em. Loser takes the first maintenance shift after we enter jump."

"You are *so* on."

They filed out of the bridge, Joel leaving last to dim the shipboard lighting. He glanced out at the stars one last time, and smiled. "Gonna be an interesting trip."

Part Two: Clementine

Foreword

Here, as promised, is part two of *Totalia: Parallels*. Remember that this story takes place simultaneously with the other two parts, though some parts of it take place after parts of the previous one. (In particular, an early scene with Zane here picks up right after a scene with Zane in “Visitors” ended.) As with the other two parts of *Parallels*, this picks up where *Totalia: Prelude* left off; you might want to re-read it to catch up.

Remember when you read the dates in this story that the Zharusian calendar consists of not twelve but ten months of thirty thirty-hour days each, named for Earth months but missing February (because it’s shortest) and August (because, really, who cares about August?). This has the side effect of making September, October, November, and December actually match up to the 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th months for which they were originally named. So just remember, on Zharus, March comes after January, and July jumps right into September.

You might wonder why we used Zharusian dates even for the parts that take place on Totalia. The answer to that is, we haven’t figured out a way to keep track of calendar dates from two star systems simultaneously, and for the sake of figuring out when everything was happening within the story (especially given that we’d split it into three chunks), we had to settle on the one dating system. Maybe someday if we ever get the means to sync dates, we’ll revise it. For now, if you’re not happy with that, we’ll give you double your money back, guaranteed!

Enjoy!

—Robotech_Master
5/15/2015

Prologue

January 4, 158 AL (Totalia Equivalent)
Totalia City, Clarke Residence

Sitting at the breakfast table, First Speaker Raph Clarke once more reviewed the video records of the former First Tranche's escape. His breakfast cooled, congealed in the bowl, pancakes and eggs uneaten. The sight of a man *flying backward*, firing beams from the palms of his hands and somehow shielding the bus. The tiny Zhaursian ship easily taking out their fighters and a detachment of troops on the ground. Then the worst, the mutiny of several Cosmy ships a few days later.

Clarke's aide, Mehl Gerent, stood fidgeting by the side of the table, a tablet clutched in his hands. "Sir, please. You've lost another half kilo. You *must* eat something. Nectar may be good for the soul, but it's a poor substitute for actual food."

"I thank you for your concern, Mehl, but I am quite healthy," he replied coolly. Clarke picked up his cup of moderately alcoholic nectar. The drink was made from a sweet native plant that supposedly resembled strawberries in taste, though certainly not in raw form. Not that Totalia had that particular crop. Clarke's own grandfather, bless his soul, had been one of those with enough clout on Earth for the fleeing colonists to bring the major cultivars with them. Corn, wheat, rice, apples, oranges, tomatoes, potatoes, carrots, and a few others, combined with some genetically engineered versions of the native primitive plants. Said plants were pulped, turned into a semiliquid, then printed by foodlathes into somewhat appetizing shapes. "What's on the agenda for this morning?"

"There's good news and bad news. Which would you like first?"

Clarke sighed. "The bad, I suppose."

"Second Speaker Quincy's making another fuss about how we should be 'tightening the belt,' imposing martial law, and going all out to find the Traitors and wipe them off the map." Gerent rolled his eyes. "I honestly think that if we hadn't suspended them for the duration of the emergency, he would have called at least three votes of no confidence on you by now."

"Just as well for us that we *have* suspended them, then." Clarke sipped his drink again. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to put another bee in General Tilson's bonnet about expanding reconnaissance flights. Maybe that will placate him for a while. I do wish imposing martial law *were* as simple as Quincy seems to believe, but it wouldn't work. It was bad enough keeping it in effect for two weeks after we took over. The people would storm the Totaliment by nightfall if we tried it again."

"Yes, sir."

Clarke shook his head, dismissing it. "Let's have the good news now. What is it?"

"Latest weapons reverse engineering report from the labs, sir," Gerent said, handing him a tablet.

Clarke gulped down more nectar and read the report, flipping through photos and some video. The captured Traitor weapons had proved quite easy to reproduce, and R&D were already making rapid improvements. The phrase "massive scalability potential" caught his eye.

He authorized R&D to follow up on that, and marked it Supreme Urgency. *Let the Traitors keep up with that, no matter what 'help' they may have gotten from that... whatever that was.*

Thinking of the First Tranche's Zharusian rescuer and its ship, he called up the after action report on that again. Video from the fighters' gun cameras showed something armored and obviously *not* human, performing incredible maneuvers and firing blasts of energy from his hands.

"It's a giant metal ferret, sir," Gerent said. "I had a ferret as a pet as a child. It's definitely a ferret."

Clarke glared at his aide. "If I want your opinion, I'll ask for it."

"Never stopped me from speaking my mind before, sir. That's why I'm your aide."

When they had left Earth in search of a new home, the Totalian colonists had brought ferrets instead of cats. They were understandably popular pets. Totalian land-based animal life were insectoid with a few pseudo-reptiles. For this alien to show up in the guise of one seemed a remarkable coincidence, at the least.

Clarke sighed. "What can be the significance of such a thing? I suppose the escaped Scouts sent back notes on our culture. Were they attempting to send some sort of message with this?"

"It's probably pointless to speculate without further information."

"I suppose it won't be long until we can simply *ask* them," Clarke said dryly.

"Make sure R&D is exploring all possible avenues of use of this new weapon technology, including scaling it up. We'll need every advantage we can get when they come."

Southwest of Totalia City

Breaking-and-entering is a three year minimum sentence, former SWAT Lieutenant Beck Hensley thought. The Cyclone's on-board computer, better than anything from his own world, broke the weak encryption on the datacenter's lock in seconds. "You're clear, Sims," he whispered to his partner-in-crime.

Technical Sergeant Merie Sims nodded and slipped inside while he stood guard. The Cosmy Marine was one of the dozen the Zharusian Scout had brought with him from the *Kybalion*. She and the other eleven Marines were doing their best to turn a rabble of a Resistance into a reluctant fighting force.

These are people we will have to live with again after the war is over. Whoever won—though Beck was certain it would be the Loyalists—preventing a permanent division amongst his fellow Totalians was a monumental task. One that still lay in the future, though possibly not that far in the future, if they managed to dislodge the Zealots before the Zharusians arrived in force.

"I've got the repeaters wired in," Merie reported over the encrypted comms that had been another gift from Joel's ship. "Both the clunky obvious one and the sneaky one. Hopefully it'll give us at least two bites at the apple."

"Good. Come on out. We should be clear to—hold on. Picking up something." Beck double-checked to make sure the arm-mounted pulse cannons were set to heavy stun, then moved to the corner of the building and reached around, the periscopic lens on the bike's armored gauntlet relaying the image of a half-dozen SWAT cops moving up. *Aw, shit. Some of 'em could be old buddies of mine.* That was one of the most un-fun things about this gig, the people on the other side.

There were probably the same amount coming around the other side of the building, too. And they were carrying bulky rifles of a sort Beck didn't recognize, but had some guesses about based on their configuration. "Shit. Whole SWAT squad. They've got pulsers. You run for it, I'll try to draw them away."

"But if there's a whole squad of them—"

"That's an order, Sergeant. I can take the hits, you can't. Go."

"Sir." Merie dashed through the door and broke into a run, while Beck stepped out into the open and triggered the Cyclone's PA speakers.

"This is Beck Hensley, formerly of Totalia City SWAT. Some of you might know me. I respect you for doing your jobs, but I don't respect the assholes who seized power, so I'm afraid I'm going to have to make your jobs harder. So either you drop those guns and retreat, or I will open fire."

The pulse blasts started coming before Beck had even finished his speech. "That's the way you want it, eh? Well, don't say I didn't warn you." Beck marked all the SWAT troopers with the armor suit's eye-tracking targeting system, set the pulse intensity to maximum stun, and then pulled the trigger.

Kybalion, Approaching Isis

Captain Sandeep paced the bridge nervously, watching the violet ice giant grow on the screen. This meeting had been months in the making, mostly through coded messages exchanged with the Loyalist forces on Totalia. A group of low level officers on the *Seed of Truth* had had enough of the Zealots' zealotry, and had taken over their ship. Now they were waiting in Isis orbit for the *Kybalion* to arrive and the first face to face.

"Still clear," the tactical officer called out on the quarter hour.

Sandeep nodded his acknowledgement of the report and forced himself to sit down. Every spare eye was watching the sensors, alert for any sign they were walking into a trap. He wanted it to be true, to have another ally out here, to show the Zealots weren't winning everything. At the same time, he wasn't naive enough to trust something so awfully convenient.

"Relay spotted, exactly where they said they would leave it. Shall I signal?" the communications officer asked.

"Go ahead."

"*Kybalion to Seed of Truth. We are approaching Isis. Please acknowledge.*"

The bridge was silent in anticipation, the minutes ticking by slowly until a response came through.

"*Seed of Truth to Kybalion. We receive you. It's good to hear from you. We're more than a little nervous about this.*"

The voice that answered sounded young and nervous. Sandeep could relate; the officers that had lead the revolt were all young, fresh from the Academy. That they had the nerve to stand up to their seniors like they did spoke much of them.

"This is Captain Sandeep. To whom am I speaking? Sandeep asked.

A few minutes later the answer came in. "Lieutenant Roswell, sir. And may I say, you've been a hero of mine for years."

"No need for the hero worship, lieutenant. History will sort that out when we're done. Now this is a secured line, why don't you send us some rendezvous coordinates and we can figure out where to go next."

“Aye-aye, sir. Coordinates being sent now.”

Sandeep looked to his navigator, who nodded. “A bit closer to Isis than I might like, but they’re valid.”

“Set course and take us in,” Sandeep ordered. “Lieutenant? We’re on our way. See you soon.”

“Thank you sir, we’re looking forward to it.”

A few hours later, the Loyalist Cosmy ship was decelerating into an orbit around the ice giant. They had spotted the *Seed of Truth*, and were able to communicate directly.

“We see you Captain. Won’t be long now,” Lieutenant Roswell reported soon after they saw him.

“So do we. How are things aboard ship? The Zealots giving you any trouble?” Sandeep asked.

“A little. We caught the senior staff by surprise, got most of them in the brig before they realized it. Here’s a live shot from the brig to show you what we have,” Lieutenant Roswell sent a video file along with his voice signal.

Sandeep looked at his comm officer. “It’s clean,” the officer reported before showing it in a corner of the screen. The video showed a crowded brig filled with angry men and women, most of them in night clothes. The rebellion had happened late in the night shift when most of the senior staff was off duty.

“Looks like you have your hands full there. We’ll help you sort things out soon,” Sandeep reassured the young man.

“Thank you sir, we can use all the help we can get.”

Sandeep muted the signal and glanced around the bridge. “How does it look? Any threats?”

“None we can find. No sign of anyone here but us and the *Seed of Truth*,” the tactical officer reported.

The communication officer looked up with a frown. “Sir, there is an incongruity with the video signal. They said it was a live feed, but the metadata in the file says it was recorded five days ago.”

“He’s young and inexperienced, and thrown into a bad situation. Maybe it’s the wrong file.” Sandeep gave the resistance fighter the benefit of the doubt. “Any change with the *Seed*?”

“Nothing obvious... but I don’t like this, something feels wrong.” The tactical officer keyed some instructions into his console. “I’m not getting any target locks, but watch its orientation since they saw us.”

The screen flickered and centered on the view of the other Cosmy ship. When they had first seen it, it had been in a standard orbital orientation. In the time since it saw the Kybalion, its orientation had been slowly shifting.

“It’s pointed right at us.” Sandeep sighed, his hopes crushed in the core of the gas giant.

The tactical officer nodded sadly. “They’re almost in an optimal firing position now.”

“It could be a coincidence. Helm, jerk us away a little. Like we’re dodging a rock.”

“Aye sir.”

The Kybalion shuddered as its engines burned, pushing it to starboard. Almost

immediately, maneuvering thrusters on the *Seed of Truth* flashed, turning it to keep a soft lock on it.

“Roswell to Captain Sandeep. Is everything alright?”

“We’re fine Lieutenant. Just dodging some invisible rocks.”

“Understandable, sir. Can never be too safe out here.”

Sandeep muted the connection again and looked around. Part of him wanted to believe that the *Seed of Truth* had truly flipped. Every other part of him was acknowledging the truth; they had waltzed into a trap.

“Bring us around slowly, main weapons to bear on the *Seed of Truth*. And keep your eyes peeled behind and around us. I don’t think we’re alone.”

The mood on the bridge turned grim as the crew geared up for battle. Sandeep waited until his ship had a soft lock on the *Seed of Truth* before speaking again.

“Sandeep to *Seed*. Congratulations on such a well-constructed trap. We waltzed right into it. Our mistake—one you can be certain we won’t make again. Rest assured, while we walked into your trap, we *will* walk right out of it. Stand down and let us leave and no one needs to get hurt.”

“A trap, sir? I don’t know what you mean.” Lieutenant Roswell sounded puzzled.

“Play dumb if you want. Don’t think we didn’t notice the soft lock you have on us. We’ve got one on you too now.”

“Targeting systems just went live. We’re painted,” the tactical officer called out. “I’ve lit them up as well.”

“Start evasive maneuvers. Don’t fire unless they fire first.” Sandeep strapped himself into his seat and waited.

A new voice spoke from the *Seed of Truth*. Sandeep recognized him as the *Seed’s* captain, Bilko Marnais; not quite a friend to him even before the rebellion, but an associate nonetheless. “I’m sorry, Captain Sandeep. We had hoped this could have gone more easily.”

The *Seed’s* weapons lit up, blaster fire shooting across space and scraping the side of the *Kybalion*. The *Kybalion’s* weapons lit up in return, a volley of missiles following the blaster shots. As the flagship of the fleet, the *Kybalion* was able to give considerably better than it received. Moments later, the tactical computer downgraded *Seed of Truth’s* status to non-threat as it lay there, engines down and leaking air in a dozen places.

The tactical officer whipped his head around to look to his captain. “We have movement behind us. Two more targets.” On the Captain’s small screen, the targets lit up. The new ships were in higher orbits and behind the Loyalist ship. Sandeep felt a chill run down his spine, but he kept the fear from showing on his face.

“Full power to engines. Get us out of here. Fire on targets of opportunity. Keep them back.”

“Aye sir!” echoed around the bridge, and the great ship shuddered from the impact of more weapons. Sandeep stayed quiet, at the mercy of orbital mechanics and the skill of his crew now.

The good news was, they’d forced the trap to spring early. If they’d come in fat, dumb, and happy all the way to the end, there would have been no escape. But breaking off this early, there was still a window they might be able to squeeze through, if only barely. Even so, they were going to come within range of the other ships’ heavy guns for a good couple of minutes before they could break away. Murmuring a prayer to

whatever Totalist or other powers might be listening, Sandeep clenched his fists around the armrests and waited for the end.

Chapter 1

January 13, 158 AL

Brubeck Mining Corporate Headquarters, Uplift

Zane found Madison and Agatha in the executive lounge, competing on the replica Dance Dance Revolution machine in the corner. Madison was holding her human shape, and barely holding her own against her sister as “Kick the Can” played, accompanied by a rapid-fire series of arrows.

Finally it ended, with Agatha winning by a hair. The sisters high-fived each other, then stepped down and turned to see Zane. “The winnah!” Zane applauded. “Funny, I’d have thought Integrate reflexes would make this game too easy.”

Madison shook her head. “It takes a *lot* of concentration to hold shape still. That’s why I’m doing this. Practice. If I can hold my shape *and* play DDR...”

“When she does it in her normal shape, she beats the hell out of me. And she’s getting better game by game. I’m probably gonna lose the next one, so maybe I should quit while I’m still ahead.”

Madison pouted. “Awww, don’t deny me my victory! Anyway, what’s up, Zane?”

“Another torp just came in from Captain Roberts and the *SOL*. And I just had a visit from Commander Lee.” He chuckled. “Given how much you’ve been seeing of her already, I figured it was kindest to leave you out of it. Anyway, here’s the data.” He held up his arm and flashed a signal across from his DIN to Madison’s.

“Thanks...give me a sec to spend a couple hours reviewing it.” Madison relaxed into her natural shape, fur sprouting, tail and muzzle growing back.

Agatha sniffed. “Cheater. I’m surrounded by cheaters.”

“Oh, *oh God*. Barb...” Madison gasped. “And Joel’s a... Well, um.”

Agatha frowned. “Can I have the executive summary, please?”

Zane nodded. “Joel Roberts’s ship got hit by an invisible space rock, he made contact with the Resistance—or the Loyalists, as they call themselves—helped rescue a whole bunch of them, and is bringing some home to meet Mama. Oh, and he’s a secret humaniform Integrate himself. Not so secret anymore, though, to us *or* the Totalians. And Barbaretta got seriously injured in a Resistance op, so he’s bringing her home, too, in cryo.”

Agatha raised an eyebrow. “Well, that’s certainly a summary.”

Madison tilted her head. “You know, from what everyone says, Joel was always a little weird. Talked to his ‘Magic Voice’ a lot. There was that Mystery Science show obsession. I suppose it makes sense in retrospect.”

“Disappointed you’re not going to be the first Intie in the system after all?” Zane asked.

“Well, I was never going to be *the* first Intie. Not when I arrived at the same time as you and everybody else. I suppose it’s a bit of a relief I’ll have less explaining to do when I get there. Maybe I learned this whole shapeshifting thing for nothing.”

Agatha patted her on the shoulder. “Come on, Maddie. Learning a skill like that is never for nothing. Keep at it.”

Samantha spoke up. “*We* will. I want my four paws on the ground in the Real

again.”

“All right, all right.” Madison chuckled. “We’ll work on that next.” She shook her head. “It’ll be nice to see Teenette again. She was really disappointed Samantha wouldn’t Fuse with her. And Darrek is the one who gave me the idea of looking for Kendlen Canton in the first place.”

Zane nodded. “So you said. I’m looking forward to meeting them in person, too. Our first honest-to-goodness Aliens from Beyond Known Space. Even if they are human ones.”

“And Barb *should* be fine. If nothing goes wrong when they tip her into a shell.” Madison chuckled. “Man, I’ll bet she’ll be pissed off about losing all her ink. I showered with her—it was the only way we could talk privately in the prison. She had planets from her neck to her knees.”

“Given the alternative was to lose her *life*, maybe she won’t mind so much,” Agatha suggested.

“I don’t think I can really guess at that without asking her. Anyway, I’d better go hunt up Marcus and give him the news. He’ll be glad to know both the others survived... for some value of surviving. Hamner didn’t exactly come off so well either.”

“Better than they could have been, in both cases. Yeah, let him know. We’ll be wanting you both on hand when they get here.”

Madison snorted. “Oh, then I’d better hurry. We’ve only got, what, *six months* to get ready?”

Agatha smirked. “And isn’t that time *just* gonna fly?”

“I guess I should let Clementine’s bunch know about this,” Madison said. “They’re our main expert consultants on matters of Integrates and space travel, after all.”

Zane nodded. “They already know pretty much everything else, and they’re good at keeping secrets, so yeah. Next time you see them, I guess?”

Madison nodded back. “I was going over there for more shapeshifting practice this afternoon anyway.”

“It’s finally *my* turn to get a new shape!” Samantha added.

Madison turned back to the DDR machine. “Buuuut, we’ve still got an hour or two. ‘Twilight Zone?’” She took a deep breath and shifted back to her human appearance again.

Agatha rolled her eyes. “Yeah, *soooo* gonna lose this one...”

Later that afternoon, Madison dropped through the dorsal cargo hatch and headed to the dojo where Eva was already waiting, seated in the lotus position in meditation. “Hey,” Madison said.

Eva opened her eyes. “Hello, Madison, Samantha. I take it you’re ready for today’s lesson?”

“Boy, are we!” Samantha said.

“But there’s something we need to talk to you about, first. You’ll probably want to get Wilma and Ghostie in here for this. We’ve had another message torpedo.”

A few moments later, Wilma van Dalen and Ghostate strolled in, and Clementine’s holo-avatar appeared. “What’s happening?” Clementine asked. “More news from Totalia?”

“Is there ever.” Madison uploaded the data packet to Clementine, who passed it

on to the others.

Eva blinked. “Well, that’s certainly an...eventful scouting trip.”

Wilma facepawed. “So much for being the first Intie scouts. What does all this mean for the fleet, though?”

“Full legitimacy, for one thing,” Madison said. “There’s a world of difference between, ‘We should go and do something about that, because reasons,’ and ‘Hey, these guys are *asking* for our help.’”

“But we’re *months* before the fleet is fully prepared and ready to fly, and since the *SOL* is coming home that leaves them with no coverage,” Clementine said. “I really don’t like the idea of leaving the Resistance to fend for themselves for that long.”

“Maybe they can send a single ship, right now?” Eva said brightly. “It’d show that we have a commitment to follow through on their request. And maybe by the time the rest of the fleet arrives they won’t really be needed for shooting things. Captain, what do you think?”

“I think we need to go chat with Zane and maybe Commander Lee,” Wilma said. “We should also put together a team of infiltration experts and some war materiel for the Resistance. If we can get our hands on a mil-spec fabber...”

“Don’t get too carried away,” Ghostate advised. “Or we might not be ready to leave very long before the rest of the fleet.”

“Well, draw up whatever plans you need to, and we can talk them over,” Eva said. “But right now, it’s time for Maddie and ‘Mantha to have their next lesson—which is more important than ever if we’re not going to be here much longer.”

“If you’re really going to try to head to Totalia, I’d love to come with you,” Madison said. “Of course, I know I can’t. I have to *motivate* people here.”

“Speaking of motivations, I promise we’ll have you on four paws before the morning’s over,” Liis said. Her form shifted until she was nearly a physical double of Madison’s base form, except for her spot pattern. “Since we may not be here tomorrow. Shall we?”

“Please,” Samantha said, turning her hands into forepaws. “Now, how do we get the rest?”

“Pay close attention, and I’ll show you,” Eva said. “We start like this...”

January 17, 158 AL

Scout Headquarters, Uplift

The older Brubeck siblings were the last to arrive for the hasty meeting in Commander Lee’s office with Captain van Dalen and her crew. A System Security Committee representative was also present.

“Oh good, you’re here,” Lee said to Zane and Agatha. “Now we can really get started. Go ahead, Captain. Give them the same proposal you just gave the rest of us.”

“Our aim here is straightforward,” the arctic vixen said. She had rezzed a Starfleet dress uniform for the occasion. “We send one ship able to bring enough personnel and materiel to Totalia to show their legitimate government that we mean what we say. The way things are going it’ll be September before the main fleet even leaves Pharos space.”

“That one ship being the *Clementine* and your crew?” Commander Lee said.

“We have the space, the speed, and the means,” Wilma said. “We can take up to

eighteen more Integrates and humans with us, and more RIDEs who are willing to come.”

“This was a *lot* simpler when we were only going to be sending the one fleet, all at once,” Commander Lee said dryly.

“No plan ever survives contact with the enemy, Commander,” Zane said cheerfully.

“We just need people with the right skillset for infiltration and military training,” Eva said. “After what happened with Captain Roberts, the Zealot government will have some idea what we can do, and will be working hard to produce countermeasures.”

“My chief concern is how this is going to look—both there and here,” Commander Lee said. “History is replete with examples of governments secretly trying to topple other governments, and eventually getting exposed amid great scandal.”

“I’m inclined to give this my stamp of approval,” the Committee representative said. He gestured at the recording bird on his shoulder. “This is a military operation at the behest of a government-in-exile that asked us for assistance. We are recording everything for posterity and it will be declassified in due time.”

“I’ve stated my objections,” Lee said. “But I’m not prepared to veto it if the rest of you feel it is a good idea. For what it’s worth, I hope you’ll do some good out there.”

“I’d like to be in subspace in ninety hours,” Captain van Dalen said. “We’re fully armed. We just need the supplies and materiel, and probably a message for their government.”

“We’ll have that part ready for you,” Zane said. “I’m calling in Socah Gates for military advice. She can help you pull together the right people we already have on the fleet. As for materiel...most of the supplies won’t be a problem—you can pick them up at Cerberus. Now, RIDEs...we don’t have anything like enough time to winnow down candidates to send with you on such short notice. Unless...well, I’ve already arranged with the folks who operate RIDEalong Manufactory and Nextus Mechanicals to take along a few hundred of their new units in the fleet. We already have the first batch warehoused.”

“Uh...” Wilma said, taken aback. “Huh. I’d say it’s not an *ideal* solution, but with those specs we could take a couple dozen in passive storage.”

Madison blinked. “I’m missing something here, aren’t I?”

“Well, you already know most Ris these days are born in the creches rather than made,” Eva said.

“Most? I thought they all were,” Madison said.

“There’s still some people—RIDEs themselves, mostly—who think RIDEs are best made the old way,” Eva said. “The RIDE part of all of us Integrates here—including your Samantha—were built to a personality template and essentially ‘born’ mature.”

Madison nodded. “I’ve got ‘Mantha’s memories of that, I know that part.”

“Well, there’s a couple of RIDEworks still making them that way,” Eva said. “The RIDEs who run them call themselves ‘Mechanists.’ The idea being that RIDEs are not natural and shouldn’t pretend to be. They want to stick as close to the ‘old ways’ as the law will allow, which includes pairing up RIDEs with humans from the get-go because that’s what they were ‘made for.’”

“Of course, the RIDEs they make have the same rights as any newborn RIDEs do,” Zane said. “But they have to pay back the cost of their shells the same as creche-born, and the state of the law does allow indenture contracts. Not so much a concern

with ours, of course; I'm not gonna ask them to pay me back. The one thing is, the RIDEworks ships them so the only way to activate them for the first time is to Fuse with them."

Eva rolled her eyes. "They want to be *sure* their RIDEs start out with a human partner, just as they did. And the thing is, until the RIDEs *are* actually activated, the RIDEworks owners are the legal guardians of record and officially entitled to make those decisions."

Madison frowned. "Hold on. Do we even want to deal with that kind of thing?"

Zane shrugged. "Well, once they've woken up and all, the RIDEs themselves are generally as well-adjusted as any made the old-fashioned way ever were. And they *are* people, who deserve a shot at being alive just like anybody else."

"And they can't say no thank you to being bundled off to another planet," Wilma said dryly.

"I'm not entirely pleased with it myself. But when I told the RIDEworks' directors why we were looking for RIDEs in large quantities, they said that this would basically make the RIDEs Totalian 'natives' with no question of divided loyalties—and they *insisted* I take them along, to spread the RIDE species to another world and so on."

"Who's to say they're wrong?" Samantha put in. "I can't imagine what my life would have been like if I hadn't started out partnered up. My first partner and I learned a lot from each other."

"We seem to be getting off on a tangent," Commander Lee said.

"We'll be happy to take them," Captain van Dalen said. "Whatever qualms we might have with their manufacturers, you're right—it is simplest overall, and at this point the simpler the better."

"Socah's on her way," Zane informed. "We'll work out the logistical details with her, get the *Clementine* supplied, then send you to the fleet for personnel. All within sixty hours."

"Works," Wilma said. "We'll be ready."

January 18, 158 AL

Planetary Advisory Assembly Building, Zharustead, Laurasia

Diplomatic Attache Booker Albescu was deep into his daily review of the day's message torpedo dispatches when the door to his office opened without a knock. The voice of authority spoke—someone a couple levels over his immediate superior. "Grab your go-bag and meet us at the secure elevator in two minutes."

"Yes ma'am," Booker dutifully replied, standing up. She closed the door behind her as he went over to a storage closet then swung the duffel bag inside up over his shoulder. That he had a go-bag to begin with was something of a new thing. His actions at the Zharus Consulate on their sister colony of Wednesday had earned him a promotion. And a promotion meant he would be sent where needed. Which meant he had to be ready to leave the planet at short notice.

The sound of little hooves at a trot joined him in the hallway. "So, where we off to, you think?" the little animal mecha said. "Ibn Rushd? Zheng He?"

Booker smiled and gave the grey tufted deer a sideways look. He was the size of a medium dog, and had fangs instead of antlers. A tuft of gray fur stood up nearly straight atop his head. "No idea, Grey. But it's better than sitting in an office, right?"

January 20, 158 AL
Uplift Aerodrome

“I can’t believe you’re just *leaving* me here,” Geena grumbled. “I’ve been part of your crew for months!”

Eva sighed. “We went over this, Geena. Traveling around the planet and the system is one thing, but I don’t think your Aunt Aeri would appreciate us taking you thirteen light-years away.”

“She’s not *really* my aunt,” Geena insisted earnestly. “She’s just the woman who raised me. Anyway, we could ask her! I’ll bet she’d say yes! It’s not like she needs me to help run the business, what with Oralie’s selves helping out...”

“Geena, you’re still legally a minor,” Ghostate pointed out. “Even by Alohan standards. Even if we wanted to let you come along, it would look pretty bad to the Council. We’re not just going to another star system, we’re going into a *war zone*.”

“Besides,” Liis put in, “Madison here is still going to need someone nearby to help her with the finer points of ‘shifting. She can’t always be flying out to New Olympos to see Boston.”

Geena pouted. “Aw, c’mon, that’s just make-work! She’s doing just fine on her own.”

Madison shook her head. “We really would be glad for the help, Geena. We’re still finding feral form a little tricky, but you do it so well...”

Geena sighed. “Thanks for trying to make me feel better about it, but this is still really annoying. A whole new colony, the best kept secret in two hundred years, and I don’t get to go see it!”

“We’ll send back plenty of pictures and video for you,” Eva promised. “But that’s the most we can do.” She turned to glance beyond Geena and Madison. “Oh, there are the blank-slate RIDEs we’re taking along.” A skimmer forklift was pushing a lift barge laden with the huddled forms of inactive RIDEs.

“Not entirely blank slate,” Ghostate said. “They had their First Boot and some basic personality assessments at the factory, so they can at least theoretically be matched to humans who’ll get along with them. But yeah, they’re noobs.”

“They’ve got some amazing tamper-resists on them, too,” Wilma said, joining them. “I looked them over. Very latest DINsec spec and everything. I suppose the Mechanists know how much it galls the activists to make them *require* a human partner for activation, and want to make sure nobody can meddle with how *they* want things done. Can’t say I’m terribly thrilled with it myself.”

“But once they’re activated, they can make the same decisions any RIDE can,” Eva said. “Up to and including deciding they don’t want anything to do with that human after all. At least the Mechanists are just as down on fetters as everyone else.”

“Thank heavens for small favors,” Wilma muttered.

In all, on very short notice the *Clementine* mission was still able to recruit almost two dozen people. They were mostly Integrates, a few human/RIDE pairs, and some human infiltration specialists. Some of these had already been sent ahead to the new Fleet staging point in the outer system, and they would pick them up on the way out along with the rest of their supplies. Others had already boarded and were settling in. The ship being as small as it was, many had elected to enter cryo-sleep, passive mode, or

the Integrate equivalent for the duration to stay out of the way, and most of those were already down and sleeping.

“I wish I were coming with you,” Madison said.

“Not half as much as *I* do,” Geena muttered.

“Anyway, we’ll pass on your message to Kendlen when we see him,” Eva said.

“Won’t he be surprised?”

“I’d hoped to show him ‘the new us’ in person, but...” Madison shook her head.

“If he’s going to hear about it anyway from the news-and-info package we’re sending, he should hear about it from me first. Tell him I’ll see him in a few months.”

“Will do, Scout Pilot Brubeck,” Wilma said.

“Cargo secure, Captain,” Clementine announced. “We’re ready for dustoff.”

“We wish you the best of luck, Captain van Dalen,” Samantha said, shaking Wilma’s hand.

“And thanks again for the ‘shifting lessons,” Madison added. “You’ve shown me some pretty amazing stuff.”

“The galaxy is full of amazing stuff,” Liis said. “And thanks to *you*, we’re going to get to go see some more of it.”

Geena grumbled again. Wilma grinned at her. “Be good until we get back, kiddo. There’ll be other trips, I promise you.”

Geena sighed. “All right, fine. Good luck with it.”

“Thanks.” Wilma nodded. “Let’s be on our way, then.”

As Wilma and the others headed up the boarding ramp, Madison put a hand on Geena’s shoulder. “Come on, we’d better clear the runway.”

“I *really* wanted to go along,” Geena sighed, following her.

“You’ll get to, sooner or later.”

“I want it *sooner*, not later. You know, I could *look* older if I needed to.”

Madison rolled her eyes. “You heard what Ghost said. They can’t bring a minor into a war zone.”

“But only half of me is a minor! My RIDE half is fully-grown. I could be her instead...”

Madison just shook her head. They turned to watch the *Clementine* rise majestically into the air and exit the dome. “Good luck, guys. See you on the flip side.”

“Is there anything else you need, Ambassador?” Clementine asked inside the somewhat cramped quarters. “Are you certain you want to stay out of cryo the whole trip?”

“This’ll work just fine, Clementine. Thank you.” For the next ninety days this would be Booker’s place to study Totalian culture. Bed, desk, charging nook for Grey, and wardrobe. His two assistants were already sawing logs in cryo, and Booker envied them that a little. But given his overall responsibility for the diplomatic mission, he couldn’t afford to waste a moment of time to bone up. He would dine with the crew and the few other passengers who had decided to remain awake.

As if Clementine had sensed his thoughts (and who knew? Depending on how well she read body language, she might have), she said, “The Captain sends her compliments, and wants me to remind you we’ll be eating in the mess in 45 minutes.”

“Thanks. We’ll be there.”

January 21, 158 AL
Cerberus

“Not really much here yet,” Clementine reported. The plutoid in the space before them had one completed dome about a kilometer in diameter, built in one of a close-set trio of craters. The other two glimmered with pinpricks of light that showed welders in action and constructors hard at work.

“Not too surprising. They only started planning this, what, last month?” Eva said. “I’m surprised they’ve even gotten this far building the infrastructure.”

“No kidding.” Wilma considered the dome thoughtfully. “And we’re supposed to complete our crew here?”

“Well, the crew won’t be actually dirtside yet, but they’ll be in one of the ships serving as temporary barracks nearby until the domes are ready for offloading. We’ll be docking with some of them later.” Gigi glanced at her console. “And I’ve got a line on the last of the supplies we need. We’ve got clearance to snag the crates directly out of their parking orbit. Hobnobbing with CEOs hath its privileges.”

“We have a communication request from the dome,” Clementine reported.

Wilma nodded. “On screen.”

The caller was an older man with slightly slanted eyes, wearing a Colonel’s boards. “Colonel Nguyen,” Clementine explained while keeping it muted. “Supervising officer, Cerberus base.” She unmuted. “Go ahead, Colonel Nguyen.”

The officer looked vaguely annoyed. “Captain van Dalen?”

“Yes, Colonel. Thank you for meeting us on such short notice.”

“I understand you are here to retrieve supplies and personnel. We only just received word, and I must say, this is highly irregular. This sort of request should have come through channels instead of just being dumped in our lap at the last moment.”

“It was a last-moment sort of mission. I’m sure you have ample experience by now of just how scrambled the chain of command can be sometimes,” Wilma said soothingly. “Believe me, it caught us by surprise, too. Forty-five hours ago we were in Zharus atmosphere.”

The Colonel seemed slightly mollified. “Yes...well. We’ll do our best to have you on your way quickly. Let us know if you need anything.”

“Will do, Colonel. We’ll let you get back to your work. I’m sure you must be very busy.”

Nguyen nodded, and the transmission flicked out. Once he was safely off the screen, Wilma rolled her eyes. “Petty bureaucrats are the same the galaxy over. If we didn’t need their cooperation...”

“Your rigid self-control is an inspiration to us all, Captain,” Liis deadpanned. Wilma rolled her eyes again.

Clementine coughed. “Wilma, I’ve been checking their manifests. They have a mil-spec compact fabber—just ten cubic meters—that will *just* fit in the cargo space I have remaining.”

“Is it on the list of material we’ve been cleared to take?” Gigi asked.

“Well, no,” Clementine admitted. “But it’s a Sampo MR6. It can make everything from foodstuffs to DE parts. And it’s just the right size for Resistance needs based on Captain Roberts’s report.”

Wilma nodded. “Snag it if you can. We’ll be gone before they know it’s missing.

We can ask forgiveness later if need be—but odds are, they’ve got at least two dozen of those things floating around and will probably never miss one.”

“Not much organization out here,” Clementine commented. “They’re just dumping stuff into a parking orbit and leaving it. With a plutoid this size, it doesn’t take much to fling anything past escape velocity.”

Wilma frowned. “This late in the game? I don’t know if that bodes well for the fleet getting left on time. If we weren’t on a tight schedule ourselves...” She shook her head. “Drop a note to Zane suggesting he should have someone look into it.”

Clementine nodded. “Will do, Captain.”

Wilma shook herself. “Let me know when we’re ready to dock to take on crew. I’ll be in my ready room.”

“Affirmative, Captain.”

A few hours later, Wilma and Liis were waiting by the airlock as it unsealed to admit the first of the rest of their crew, boarding from the Nextus ship *S.S. Montefeltro*. First to come aboard was to all appearances a generic cervine Integrate—a stag with a pair of swirling hardlight lenses on his hips. As he approached, that image shimmered and shrank into an equally nondescript young human man.

“Bit of a showoff,” Liis said quietly.

“Hey, Captain. Permission to come aboard?” he asked.

Wilma nodded. “Granted. Welcome aboard the *Clementine*.”

“Thanks. I don’t know if you remember me, but we met briefly in the aftermath of the whole Fritz thing. Though I was in a different body then. Quantum Silver Star Bernie Thompson, Marshals. Undercover specialist.”

Wilma nodded. “I remember you. You were on the team they sent in to inspect the Coffeehouse after we secured it. Brainboxer, aren’t you?”

“I *was*.” Bernie grinned. “Thanks to one of my fellow Marshals, not anymore. I got a full RIDE scholarship!”

“Uploaded to a core?” Wilma said.

The hardlight skin flickered off, leaving...a rather unorthodox metallic skeleton, studded with compact emitters. When the skin came back on, a woman stood there. She smiled. “Like I said, undercover specialist. The name’s ‘Brooke’ when I’m like this, by the way. Or just call me ‘B’.”

“I can relate, B,” Eva said.

Liis laughed. “Intie-grade hardlight shapeshifting, eh? Well, we’ll see how to work that into our plans. Welcome aboard, Marshal Thompson.”

“Thanks. But I’d better get out of the way and let the rest of the gang stomp aboard in their big stompy boots.”

“I can show you to your quarters, if you like,” Eva offered.

“I just need a place to plug in. I’ve always lived more inside my head than out.” Brooke changed to a doe form, much like Eva’s. “Lead on.” They stepped away, leaving Wilma alone at the hatch.

Next to come aboard were a group of four soldiers wearing combat fatigues, carrying duffel bags over their shoulders. Their leader had lieutenant’s bars. Behind him were a sergeant and two corporals. They saluted. “Permission to come aboard, Captain?”

“Granted, Lieutenant...Rowcliff, was it?”

“Yes, ma’am. This is Sergeant Stebbins, and Corporals Cramer and Skinner. We’re the infiltration specialists you requested.”

“Very good. Is that all your equipment?”

“Yes, ma’am. Our specialty is making use of the resources we find within enemy territory. Carrying too much gear would just slow us down.”

“Great. We’ll show you where to stow it, and get you settled in. Is anyone else coming behind you?”

“No, ma’m. We’re the lot.”

“Good.” She pressed the switch to seal the airlock, then keyed the intercom. “Van Dalen to Clementine. Everyone’s aboard; release the clamps and we’ll be on our way.”

“Affirmative, Captain,” Clementine replied.

“Now, if you soldiers will follow me...” Wilma led the way into the ship.

The leopard-woman on the screen shook her head. The blocky video compression artifacts around her flickered with the movement. “Sorry, Booker, one of the things we didn’t get to do was attend any sort of Totalist religious service. We didn’t want to risk too much interaction once we’d escaped—”

Booker waved a hand. “I know, I know. I don’t blame you, Maddie. It’s just something I’d hoped to have someone’s perspective on, rather than just what I could read out of the books you scanned. I’m glad you saw as much of their culture as you did.”

“Is there anything else I can tell you? You’re jumping in half an hour. I’ll be out of reach ‘til the fleet gets there.”

Booker chuckled. “I’m sure there are whole *volumes* you could still tell me. I really wish someone had figured out ahead of time that any ZDC diplomats who could be sent that way might need more time for briefing. But I think we’ve covered enough that another half-hour wouldn’t make a lot of difference. Wish we could have gotten together in the flesh, though.”

Madison nodded. “Mantha and I would have liked to meet you in person, too. If I’d thought of it—”

Booker shrugged. “Who knows; if you had, maybe they’d have assigned someone else and we’d miss the chance. Just have to take a rain check on that ‘til you get there. If everything goes smoothly, I’ll be buying you dinner in Totalia City in a few months.”

“And if it doesn’t go smoothly?”

Booker grinned. “Then I’ll have to let *you* buy *me* dinner, because I probably won’t be able to afford it.”

They shared a laugh over that, then Booker said, “Much as I wish we didn’t have to go, Captain Van Dalen promised me I could say a few words before we jump about the importance of the mission. If I don’t want to miss my chance, I’d better do that now. It’s been a real privilege talking with you.”

“Same goes for us. Good luck with the mission. Break a leg, or whatever it is they say in diplomatic circles.”

“I think the proper expression is ‘Don’t cause an interstellar incident.’” Booker chuckled. “We’ll do our best.”

“I have every confidence in you. See you on the flip side.” The signal cut out, replaced by the standard “Clementine” screensaver.

Booker took a deep breath, let it out, then stood up and straightened his jacket.

“Well. I guess that’s that.”

“Yep.” Grey nodded. “That is definitely that. They don’t get any more thatter.”

Booker snorted. “That’s not even a word.”

“Sure it is. You use it yourself. Now ‘thatter’ is another story...”

Booker swatted the little deer lightly on the back of the head. “C’mon, let’s go give the pep talk.”

“Like they don’t already *know* how important the mission is.”

“It’s not really about lecturing them. It’s about getting acquainted now that the pressure’s off to get us out of the system. But then, you already darned well know that.”

“Yeah, but like most diplomats, you like to hear yourself talk. So I try to give you every opportunity!” Grey dodged out of the way before Booker could swat him again.

Chapter 2

May 6, 158 AL (Totalia equivalent)
Totalia, Outer System

“Captain, we have realtime connection to the sensor probe network,” Clementine announced. For the occasion her holotar was in Vulcan mode. “Data is coming in now.”

“Thank you, Clemmie.” Captain Wilma van Dalen shifted position in the Captain’s Chair, staring ahead at the viewscreen. “Now we see if the mods we made to the Scout survey probes actually work.”

“No anomalies so far, Captain,” Clementine said. “DINcom bandwidth is holding steady at 56k baud. We can hold that bitrate for weeks if need be.”

The *Clementine* had jumped in a week before, hopscotching from a preliminary entry point a good distance outside the Ra system to a new point about a quarter of the way around the system rim. This was the same spot that the Zharus fleet would use when they came in. It was hoped this would put them out of range of any Zealot patrols that might be expecting new arrivals to use the same entry point the Scouts had.

Since then, the *Clementine* and her cobbled-together crew had put into motion the deployment plan they’d developed before and during the voyage from Zharus. Their equipment was a mix of modified Scout gear—like the cloaked System Survey Probes—with bits and pieces from the Rangers, Marshals, Integrate Enclaves, and various Gondwana militaries. In addition to the probes they’d dispatched in all directions, they had also left DINcom-equipped communication beacons for instant communication with the *Great Western* or any other Zharusian ship that might arrive.

First order of business was to rendezvous with the *Kybalion* and Captain Sandeep, but they had to find the ship first. With the Totalium-coated hulls, even Integrate-enhanced sensors were having trouble. There were signs of a major battle around Isis, the outermost gas giant. But judging from the debris trajectories, that had been weeks ago, with no evidence of which side had won.

“If we can’t find them, they’ll have to find us,” Wilma decided. “Joel said he’d left modern Scout comm gear with them. We should be able to transmit on frequencies they can pick up but the Zealots can’t. Use the probes to echo the signal; they might be closer to one of them than us.”

Clementine nodded. “Opening hailing frequencies now, Captain.”

“Right. So now we wait.” Even if they were relatively close to one of the probes, it could still take minutes for the light-speed signal to reach them, and minutes more for a reply to come back. Assuming they were even still out there at all.

The next half hour was a fairly tense one on the *Clementine*’s bridge. If the *Kybalion* wasn’t still around, it would throw their entire main plan into doubt, and they would have to figure out some other way to contact sympathetic forces in the system. Fortunately, after twenty-eight minutes had passed, Clementine reported, “I’ve received a communication from the *Kybalion*, via one of our probes. They’ve sent coordinates for a rendezvous near one of Isis’s moons.”

Wilma nodded. “Excellent. Lay in a course. What’s our ETA?”

“At our best in-system speed, and given our stealth requirements, we’ll make it in

just under two days.”

“Good, plenty of time to get the rest of our diplomats out of cryo and bring them up to speed. Eva, Liis, see to that.”

The winged deer Integrate nodded. “Aye, Captain.”

“Did Captain Sandeep or Fleet Admiral Frankel include anything about their status?”

Eva grimaced. “They did. It’s not pretty, Captain. They need our help.”

“I’ll see what they need the most and warm up the fabbers,” Clementine said.

Wilma sighed. “Something tells me this is going to be a long two days.”

They had closed to within two light-seconds of distance before the first video comm request came in. “It’s a fairly low-powered signal, even by our standards,” Clementine reported. “Either they do not wish to risk detection, or the battle damage to their ship is preventing them from transmitting a stronger signal.”

Eva nodded. “Or could be they just wanted to wait until we were close enough to talk in near-realtime, and are using just as strong a signal as they need. So...do we pick up, or let the machine take it? No offense, Clemmie. I don’t know if it’s a good idea to reveal ourselves yet.”

Wilma frowned. “We knew we were going to have to face them sooner or later. And we agreed that using human disguises would likely rebound to our disadvantage when the truth came out.”

“Ugh, I’m still not sure if I should be in a mammal form,” Ghostate said, changing to female cheetah, then back to barn owl again. “This face is going to creep them out.”

“We’ve gone over this, Ghostie,” Liis said. “You’re fine in that form.”

Clementine shrugged. “Given their society’s incipient xenophobia, I imagine it would probably not make much difference either way.”

“Right. Well, the longer we put it off, the longer they have to wonder what we have to hide.” Wilma waved a hand toward the main viewscreen. “On screen.”

In a flicker of static, the image of the ruggedly-handsome captain of the *Kybalion* appeared on the screen. There were a few differences from the images included with Joel’s report, however—most notably the patch over his left eye, and the scar that led through the eye and down his cheek.

:*Wow, Captain Harlock much?*: Liis sent along a sideband.

:*Shush*,: Eva replied, with a chuckle emoticon.

“Hello, Captain Sandeep. I’m Captain Wilma van Dalen, and this is my crew. We were just in the neighborhood and thought we’d stop by.”

For four seconds, Captain Sandeep’s expression didn’t change, then his remaining eye widened. “You’re, ah, more than welcome, Captain van Dalen. As you’re aware, our ship has been extensively damaged. We’ve had word the Resistance on Totalia itself has had mixed progress as well. How many ships have you brought with you?”

“Just the one right now, I’m afraid,” Wilma said. “The main fleet was still being organized when we left. They hope to be ready in just a few more months.”

Four seconds later, Captain Sandeep nodded. “Ah. Bureaucracy is universal.”

“Just like hydrogen,” Wilma agreed. “But that being said, we brought a team of diplomats, a team of special forces infiltrators, and certain...specialized equipment with us. We might not be able to win your war single-handedly, but we can start laying the

groundwork for a peaceful solution.”

“And we have some decent medical equipment on board, as well,” Liis said. “I don’t know if we can fix your eye, but we could replace it with cyber until the bigger ships get here.”

After the communication delay, Sandeep waved a hand dismissively. “A number of my crew are much worse off than this. Perhaps if there’s time after you see to them.”

Wilma nodded. “We’ll be delighted to, Captain.”

“Well. Good, then.” Captain Sandeep cleared his throat, visibly nervous. “Ah...you do realize, you’re...not exactly what we were expecting. Captain Roberts was quite remarkable on his own, but...” He trailed off.

“But at least he still *looked* human?” Eva chuckled. “Yes, we know. You grow up on movies featuring bug-eyed alien invaders, and here we are, obviously not quite human anymore.”

“We considered adopting disguises, but we thought it would be best to get the shocks out of the way as quickly as possible,” Wilma said. “But don’t worry, we have regular humans with us, too, including our diplomats. We’ll let them do most of the heavy lifting as far as face-to-face contact is concerned. Just as well to ease into things.”

“And just as well it happens now,” Ghostate put in. “The fleet is going to have plenty more of us.”

“I...see.” Sandeep mulled that over for a moment, then nodded. “Regardless of how you might look to us, you have extended the hand of friendship, whereas the ‘pure humans’ of the Zealots have enslaved our planet. I have little doubt there will be some who are...not as flexible as we might hope, but I think most will be glad enough of your help.”

“We’d like to offer the services of our fabbers and crew to repair your ship as much as possible,” Wilma said.

“We will be glad for *any* help you can offer,” Sandeep said emphatically. “But we can discuss that in person when you arrive. At your present trajectory, that should only be a matter of hours now.”

“We’ll look forward to it, Captain. *Clementine* out.”

The ship that was waiting when they matched orbits was considerably more battered and scarred than the version from Joel’s report. Several gun turrets were unpowered or outright missing, and whole sections of hull were torn open, the deck inside exposed to space. Ghostate shook his head. “Even with the supplies we have, they’re going to need the services of a shipyard to fix everything.”

“It’ll be better than nothing, anyway.” Wilma looked to Clementine. “Have they sent docking instructions?”

“The hatches are blown on that docking bay the *Satellite of Love* used,” Clementine informed. “We have adaptive docking gear that will work for one of their standard ports.”

“Dress uniforms, everyone,” Wilma said, rezzing her own Scout-style uniform. The *Clementine* and her crew had been made honorary Scouts for this mission after some fast-time simulated training. She suspected it was a matter of saving face for the Scouts, given that the *Clementine* was going regardless—so they might as well be Scouts while they were there. The past few days had seen a lot of preparations, getting the Totalians used to the idea that most of who they were about to meet were no longer

human. “With all due respect to Joel, we’re essentially in a First Contact situation,” Wilma said. “Unless there is a security risk, no disguises. We are what we are.”

“Repair teams are ready, Wilma, just give the word,” Liis said.

“What about our diplomats?”

“Ambassadors Albescu and Grey are waiting in the ready room,” Clementine reported. “I’ve been keeping them briefed, per your standing orders.”

Wilma nodded. “Then let’s go and introduce ourselves.”

Captain Sandeep awaited them by himself on the other side of the airlock. He offered a crisp salute as they boarded, which Wilma and the other crew returned. Ambassador Booker Albescu nodded politely. “Welcome aboard the *Kybalion*, Captain van Dalen, Ambassador Albescu. I wish it could be under better circumstances.”

“As do we,” Wilma said. “If I might be candid, I’m surprised you didn’t meet us with an honor guard.”

Sandeep shrugged. “I wanted no misunderstandings, and a platoon of armed men would send the wrong message, even if their uniforms were bright and shiny.”

“We appreciate that,” Booker said. “There’s plenty of potential for misunderstandings already, the situation being what it is.”

Sandeep nodded. “Besides, I honestly don’t have the people to spare. The able-bodied are all on damage control and repair teams.”

“We’ll be happy to lighten the load for you there,” Eva said. “This is an amazing ship. We’ve all seen Joel’s reports, but I’ve been looking forward to seeing it in person.”

Sandeep smiled tightly. “I assure you, she *has* been more amazing than she is now. But come, let me show her to you.”

“I’ve never seen a ship this *big* before!” Clementine said. She had sent along one of her holotar probes. She grimaced. “These damage reports...ugh. Wilma, I’d like to get started as soon as possible with my repair drones. I can use wreckage or junk for fabber matter. The moon down below has some raw materials I can use, too.”

“This young lady is...?” Sandeep said, looking closely at Clementine’s pale skin and neon blue hair.

“I understand Joel briefed you on ‘Reticulated Intelligences’,” Wilma said. “Perhaps he didn’t mention our AI cousins, the Eis. This is Clementine.”

“The ‘E’ can stand for ‘Enhanced’ or ‘Evolved’, for preference,” Clementine said in her most friendly tone.

Sandeep raised an eyebrow. “Since you have the same name as the ship you arrived on, I assume you operate the ship in question?”

“Yes, sir,” Clementine said. “Actually, I consider myself to *be* the ship in question.”

“Your type of AI is fairly common in fiction at home,” Sandeep said with a note of skepticism.

“And usually ends up trying to take over the world, right? It’s a trope dating from the mid-twentieth century when computers were invented. Your culture seems to share a number of common ideals with Earth of that era.”

“I have seen some of the films from back then, courtesy of your Captain Roberts. I can see the resemblance.”

“Luckily, a lot of that paranoia turned out to be dead wrong in the long run.” Booker reached down to give Grey a scratch behind the ears. “But it took them a while to

get there. Hopefully it doesn't take your people that long."

"I've called my Senior Staff together to meet with you after the tour." Sandeep glanced at the small animal he suspected was anything but. "The faster you can start your repairs, the better shape we'll be in. Our tactical situation right now is a stalemate. Your arrival tips the balance in our favor, so we should exploit that while we can."

"If you'll put me in touch with your Chief Engineer, I can begin coordinating the repairs as we tour," Clementine offered. "I have plenty of attention to go around."

"Right now it's important for my crew to just see you for what you are." Sandeep gestured down the docking tunnel. "So please, this way."

Wilma nodded. "We're right behind you, Captain." They followed Sandeep into his wounded ship.

Dressed in his best Zharus Diplomatic Corps outfit, Booker Albescu walked alongside Captain Sandeep deep inside the massive ship, where the three members of the Totaliment-in-Exile (which included their Fleet Admiral) resided. The crew of the *Clementine* followed just behind.

:Wow. She really took a beating.: Grey sent over secure comm to his implant. The crewmembers hard at work making repairs hardly gave the LRIDE a glance, given the motley zoo that marched along with them. A few of them were too shocked to even salute their Captain, dropping their tools.

Sandeep led them into a wood-paneled conference room, where sat two older men and one woman behind the table. The eldest, who appeared to be in his late sixties by Old Earth standards, rose to greet them.

Captain Sandeep saluted, then gestured at each in turn. "Admiral, I would like to present Ambassador Booker Albescu of the Zharus Diplomatic Corps, Captain Wilma van Dalen of the *Clementine*, her First Officer Eva Dorset, Second Officer Ghostate, and in a fashion, the *Clementine* herself."

Booker noted that he did not introduce Liis, Eva's body-mate. But such concepts would have to come at a pace the Totalians could handle.

Frankel surveyed the trio of aliens before him, eyebrows raised. "Well...as much as Captain Roberts tried to prepare us for this meeting, I fear that now that the reality is here, we're *slightly* flummoxed. Welcome to the Ra system, Zharusians. I had hoped we could give you a more formal welcome, but the flagship is *slightly* the worse for wear at present."

Wilma nodded. "I offer the resources of my ship and crew to make repairs, Admiral."

"Sir, I have as large a mil-spec fabber we could fit in my cargo hold," Clementine said. "And with the right materials I can fab a *bigger* fabber for you."

"So quick to offer gifts," Frankel said with a note of skepticism.

Booker raised a hand. "If you want to pay us back for them later, you can. The equipment has standard prices, and there are standardized rates of interest on loans. These things can be worked out, once we settle on a rate of currency exchange or other form of trade. What's important right now is getting you on the best footing we can to take back your world." He grinned. "Believe me, I understand your position. Your whole culture was founded on breaking away from a culture that was increasingly hostile to you. Ever since then, without any outside contacts to tell you otherwise, you've gotten more...*concerned* about the motives of anyone you don't know. And you just have the

word of a few people to tell you what we're about. We get that. We're willing to do whatever we can to show our good faith."

"We don't want to become dependent on outsiders," the second Totaliment speaker said. "Although, in this specific case, getting the *Kybalion* back in action is not optional. Wouldn't you agree, Admiral?"

Frankel grimaced. "That practically goes without saying."

"Our tactical situation is best described as a stalemate," Captain Sandeep said. "After the last engagement with us, the Zealots have lost enough ships that they barely have space superiority over Totalia itself, let alone the rest of the system. But they control most of the manufacturing in system, both on Totalia and the Bastet Shipyard. The main thing holding them back is manning the ships. They're all on skeleton crews."

"Attrition has whittled down the Cosmy to the bare minimum," Frankel said. "Seven ships. Of the two ships that defected to our side during Captain Roberts's escape, the *Foucault's Pendulum* was retaken by the Zealots and the *Law of Learning* is keeping busy elsewhere. After this is over, replacing the lost ships—let alone trying to integrate your new technology—will be top priority. Regardless of how 'open' we become to the rest of the galaxy.

"Our request for help was genuine, Ambassador Albescu, but not at the cost of our independence," Frankel said. "We're not foolish enough to think there are no strings attached."

"Gentlemen, we're going to try to be as transparent as we possibly can here. We don't want to overwhelm you. We just want to give you whatever help you're comfortable with, and no more than that. Any repayment we ask for will be out in the open, at fair rates agreeable to both of us. No nebulous future 'favors,' no 'offers you can't refuse,' and no contracts or agreements loaded with weasel-words. Just help. That's all."

"Ambassador, you and I know that you're catching us at our most vulnerable."

Booker grinned again. "I know it looks too good to be true, but look at it from our side of things. Earth hasn't gotten any better over the centuries. Just look at me—my family hails from Endurance, a wildcat colony that wasn't quite as lucky or smart in where it set down as you guys. Earth scooped us up and dumped us on Zharus with all the rest of their garbage." He shook his head. "I don't *think* Earth would be inclined to try to pull the same thing on you guys this late in the game, but they will find out about you sooner or later. Probably sooner—the Zharus fleet is going to include diplomats from every colony, and it would be a pretty big insult if they left Earth out of that. To be honest, we're more worried they're going to be moving on *us* soon, given that even they don't have some of the same tech we're showing you. Totalia is no threat to them—yet. *We* are."

He spread his hands. "Trust me, it's in Zharus and the other free colonies' best interest to have strong allies—especially ones who've developed the kind of radiation-shield tech you have. And it's also in our best interest to make sure they can't steamroller over you and take your Totalium if they *do* decide to try. So if you're concerned we're helping you too a bit too much out of the goodness of our hearts, without any obvious thing we're getting out of it, believe me when I say that there's just as much in it for us as for you. For *all* of the other colonies, not just Zharus."

Admiral Frankel glanced at his two First Tranche comrades, each giving him a nod. "Well, Ambassador, my colleagues find your answers adequate for now. Captain

Sandeep, what's your assessment?"

"The old saying goes, don't look a gift horse in the mouth. Although I have never seen a horse in person," Sandeep said. "We need their help if we're to get the *Kybalion* on his feet again. If there was a time and a place begin earning our trust, this is it."

"Captain Sandeep, it would be my pleasure," Clementine said.

"Permission for my people to come aboard?" Wilma said. "And, Captain, I should say that you *are* about to see a horse in person—or at least, a reasonable facsimile thereof. We've got a horse RIDE among our technical staff."

Admiral Frankel glanced to Sandeep. "We have no objection. Captain?"

Captain Sandeep nodded. "By all means. Please begin right away."

"I'll warm up the fabbers," Clementine said. "We'll get the big guy fully spaceworthy again in no time."

A three-kilometer battleship like the *Kybalion* had a crew numbering several hundreds. The vast majority of the interior space was taken up by reactors, pre-cavorite gravity generators and inertial damping, thorium reactor clusters, fuel stores, support machinery, and engines. "Just imagine what they'll be able to do with all the extra space once they have cavorite and sarium!" Clementine said.

"Right now we need to ensure what's inside stays there," Wilma said. The three attacking ships had raked the battleship with lasers, making hull plating blister and burn, opening interior spaces to space, taking out a number of laser clusters. There were charred areas from missile hits, pock marks from railgun slugs. The Zealots had thrown everything they had at the flagship, but the "Big K" as the crew called it *refused* to go down.

"You know, we can fab decent amounts of cavorite ourselves," Clementine mused. "No reason we shouldn't replace these damaged gravity generators with modern alternatives, is there? It would actually be faster and easier than assembling and installing their spares."

"You should probably run that by Captain Sandeep first," Wilma said. "It is his ship, after all."

"We don't want to leave them anything they won't know how to repair themselves," Ghostate pointed out. "And now isn't the time to teach them."

"They've still got their spares. If they have to, they can put them back in instead, later," Clementine said. "Now *is* the time to get them operational again as fast as possible. You never know, another attack could come at any time."

"Ghostie, we're already upgrading some of their lasers to pulse cannons where we can to give them an edge," Liis pointed out.

The barn owl shrugged. "Fine. If Sandeep signs off on it, sure."

"Great. I'll append the request to our next report." Clementine nodded. "Now, about this ruptured secondary reactor coolant pipe...it would probably be simplest to rip it out altogether in favor of increasing the throughput of the undamaged tertiary system..."

Captain Sandeep stood in what had been an empty cargo bay in the heart of the *Kybalion* and peered up at the humming boxy machine that now occupied about half of it, and the large cylindrical tanks that took up much of the rest. A pair of Zharusian technicians were hard at work. One of them was a raccoon that strongly reminded him

of his favorite character from *Darla's Front Door*—the imaginatively-named Mr. Raccoon. Though this version had a pattern of glowing lines under his fur and wore a rather utilitarian gray jumpsuit.

It was a rather inelegant machine, with a large door three meters on a side where the final products for large items were output, and some smaller trays on one side. It looked rather oddly like some kind of commercial kitchen appliance.

“Initial calibrations are nearly complete, Captain,” the raccoon said. There was a beep, and a tray slid out, revealing a number of perfect solids—spheres, cubes, pyramids, and others. “Ah! Wonderful. All within tolerance.”

“Thank you, Grant. What’s next?” Wilma said.

The fastidious Integrate rubbed his hands together. “We need to work with Totalium to see how well the assembler nannies do with it. Should be only a few hours before we get the knack, then we can fab replacement parts for the Big K’s systems with confidence.”

“Very good, Grant. Carry on.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Wilma nodded, then walked over to Captain Sandeep. “What do you think?”

“So this is the ‘economy-sized’ version of the ‘fabber’ device that Captain Roberts’s ship carried?”

“That’s about the size of it,” Captain van Dalen said proudly. “With this, you can crank out pretty much any repair part you need—or any consumable, though using it for TV dinners is kind of overkill. You just have to have the fabber matter supplies for it.”

“And when we run low, without you to resupply us?”

“In a pinch, you can make fabber matter out of raw materials, of which you have plenty in abundance out here. Nickel-iron meteors, water ice, hydrocarbons...for that matter, you could also throw in worn-out ship parts, garbage, even sewage if you like. Just dump it all in that big recycler tank over there, and the specialized nanites will break it down to its component materials and recombine them into fabber matter, which it will pipe to the storage tanks.”

“Impressive. But if these, ah, ‘nanites’ get out?”

“They shouldn’t, the way these things are built. Even if they do, they can only survive within the tank’s special environment. Take them out of it and they break down right away. No ‘grey goo scenarios’ here.”

Sandeep smiled. “Giving us all this...you are much too kind.”

Wilma shrugged. “Eh...not at all, really. On Zharus, any well-equipped machine shop would have something like this. Maybe not one quite so big, but exactly the same in every other way. It doesn’t cost any more than, say, a mid-range luxury skimmer car. And we’re adding it to the bill we’ll present your government after all this is over, so they don’t have to feel beholden to us.”

“I see.”

“Also, added to the one on the *Clementine*, it lets us crank out repair and upgrade parts for your ship twice as fast, so we can be on our way twice as quickly, so there’s a touch of self-interest involved, too.”

Sandeep chuckled. “As you say.”

“We’ll be leaving a couple of technicians to maintain it, and train your crew in how to service it themselves. We can pick them up again on the way out, or they can go back with the *Great Western*.” Wilma led the way over to a row of what looked like four

crates along the wall. “And we’re also leaving you these.”

Sandeep raised an eyebrow. “These are four of the RIDEs you brought, aren’t they?”

“Yes. Female fox, male tiger, female horse, male mountain goat. Along with deep space oxygen, maneuvering, and tool paks—and with the fabber, you can make other paks at need. We’ve uploaded the personality specs and surveys to your computer, so you can find the closest matches among your crew.”

Sandeep knelt and ran his hands along one of the compact metallic boxes. “Shouldn’t you save these for our compatriots on-planet? I would not wish to take resources they could better use.”

“We’ve got twenty more for them. But this ship is important, too, and trust me—RIDEs are just as good in space as on the ground. Back home, they didn’t catch on as fast as they did on the planet, but lately we can barely keep up with the demand from the Spacers. They’re strong, sturdy, maneuverable, and versatile—great for damage control operations, internal security, and shipboard maintenance.”

Sandeep inclined his head. “I see. Very well, I will make the quiz available to any who might wish to try. Bear in mind that there may not be many takers.”

“They’ll keep. Once someone goes first, and everyone else sees how well it works out, you’ll get more volunteers, I’m sure.”

Sandeep straightened back up. “We shall see. Is there anything else?”

“There is...one more thing, actually.” Wilma averted her gaze for a moment, then brought it back to Sandeep’s eyes. He raised an eyebrow. It seemed she was about to broach a difficult subject. “One thing we haven’t gone over so much...is something about us. Integrates, I mean. You’ve already seen that some of us can shapeshift. We have other abilities, too. In particular, something about the quantum-organic nature of our processors means that it’s very hard to keep us out of any computer system. Including your shipboard computer systems.”

Sandeep nodded. “Captain Roberts mentioned something to that effect. He explained it was how he was able to escape so readily from *Foucault’s Pendulum*.”

“Yes, though I don’t know if he gave you the whole story. Captain Roberts could literally have taken over your ship’s entire computer system with a thought. So could I. At least, until now.”

Sandeep raised *both* eyebrows. “Indeed? Ah, I do remember just how easily Captain Roberts hacked the *Pendulum*, and got into our own systems as well. The technicians did say he left it in better condition than he found it, but...” He gave her a rather penetrating look—with his new cybernetic eye, likely on several wavelengths. “I suppose this comes very easily to you.”

Wilma sighed. “Yes. To be brutally frank, far too easily. Zharus has had its share of Integrate troublemakers over the last few decades. These abilities caused a lot of trouble back on Zharus, until someone invented these a couple of years ago.” Wilma held out her hand, on which nestled a couple of small devices. “They’re called DINsecs—because ‘DIN’ is what we call the network interface Integrates use. They will block any Integrates—us or anyone else—from accessing your systems without authorization. Like any security measure, they can be hacked around, but it takes skill and effort. We’re equipping your shipboard systems with these as part of the upgrade process. And you can fabricate more of them with that—” she jerked her thumb at the fabber “—and send them to your allied ships. We brought a thousand kilos of qubitite with us just for this.”

“I see. So you are essentially locking yourselves out of our computers.”

“As we’ve said, trust is important. Of course, you do only have our word for it right now that these things do what we say they do—but sooner or later your people will be able to go to Zharus to make their own investigations. So we want to make sure you find out *then* that we were completely straight with you *now*.”

“Impressive.” Sandeep turned away to look at the giant boxy structure of the fabricator, while he gathered his thoughts. “You realize,” he said at last, “that with that sort of power, you could effectively *conquer* our world. Or at least the technological part of it. Shut the Zealots down completely.”

Wilma sighed. “Believe me, I *know*. It’s part of why we’re working under tight restrictions as to what we can do. We don’t *want* to come in and just...*take over*. We want you to work this out among yourselves.”

“But if it could prevent more needless loss of life...”

“It could also make us look even more like the evil, meddling alien invaders your culture fears so much. That’s not a great way to start interstellar relations.” Wilma shook her head. “That kind of decision is, thankfully, made well above my pay grade. Maybe the leaders on board the *Great Western* will have other ideas when they get here. Until then...our job is to build trust. And part of that trust involves giving you the means right up front to protect yourselves *from* us. We’ll be doing the same for the Resistance planetside, when we get there.”

Sandeep nodded. “I understand. Thank you for being frank with us. I can see that I have much to think about, and discuss with my advisors.” He stood a few more moments in silence. “Is there anything else you need to go over now?”

“Not really—I’d best get back to Clemmie. Now that we’ve got this new fabber online, the repairs can really ramp up. And we have something like a thousand DINcom pairs to install in the new communication array.”

“As many as that?”

“We have no idea what kind of situation we’ll find on the planet, or whether we’ll even be able to make it back out here before the *Great Western* arrives. As cheap as they are to make, we thought it best to err on the side of caution. We already left a pair of beacons with a couple hundred each out near our arrival point, so when the *Western* arrives, they’ll be able to talk to us; we’ll be giving you half of those DINcom pairs, too.”

“A wise decision, I am sure. I, too, should return to my bridge. Thank you, Captain. I see now, more than ever, we are in good...paws.”

Wilma chuckled, and offered hers for him to shake. “Whether it’s a paw or a hand, we’re glad to lend a helping one. Let us know if anything else comes up.”

Repairs progressed well over the next few days, especially once the second fabber was fully online and cranking out parts. Given that it was about twice the size of the one on the *Clementine*, Wilma’s estimate of doubling their part throughput had actually been on the pessimistic side. They had closer to tripled the speed at which parts could come out—and between the Kybalion’s crew and the technicians the *Clementine* had brought, they were getting repairs completed almost as fast as they could have in a shipyard.

Meanwhile, the diplomats hadn’t been idle. Booker Albescu had reported cautious optimism from the talks with the Totaliment aboard the flagship, but it would be some time before they could agree upon the infiltration strategy. Ultimately it was

the Totalians who would decide what the Zharusians could and could not do on their world.

The main holdup seemed to be that Booker had firm orders from his superiors back home to try if at all possible to open talks with the current government and see if some peaceful resolution could be achieved. Given all that they knew about the Totalians' cultural paranoia, they wanted to do everything they could to avoid coming off as the sort of forceful alien invaders the Totalians so feared. Booker was trying to get a commitment from the Totalians to that effect, but they were more interested in hearing about the Zharusians' offensive capabilities and how quickly they could take down the Zealot forces.

Wilma was more in sympathy with the Totalians, and wanted to be on her way with the rest of her passenger manifest, but all the same it was hard to blame the diplomats for wanting to engage in diplomacy first. After all, that was the entire reason they'd spent months flying out here. And Wilma would have preferred a peaceful solution just as much as anybody else. But if the people who knew the planet best didn't think that was possible, who were the Zharusians to argue with them?

Fortunately, the overall authority for the mission rested with Wilma, and she had dropped some none-too-gentle hints in Booker's ears that she was willing to take matters into her own hands if they didn't get the lead out. Not that they were really called for. She had more than enough experience with bureaucracy to know how these things worked. Booker was just as eager to get on and meet the rest of the Totaliment as she was. He just had to give it a good try for the sake of his performance evaluations when he got back home. She suspected they would probably reach an accommodation before too long. Once the DINcom relay was set up at the Loyalist base they could come to a final agreement.

Despite the delay, it was at least getting the *Kybalion's* crew over the shock of their "alien" benefactors that looked more like the anthropomorphic animals in their favorite children's show than the bug-eyed monsters in their xenophobic movies. A number of them had come by to meet them and tour the *Clementine*. A few had even come more than once—Wilma suspected they might have been furry fans if they'd even known there was such a thing.

That extended to the RIDEs they'd left, too. More crewmembers than Sandeep might have expected took the survey, and so far there had been two very good same-gender matches for the fox and the goat. They'd gone ahead and Fused, and were getting used to their new partners and their new duties aboard the ship. Wilma didn't doubt that the other two would be snapped up before long. She promised all the disappointed crewmembers who didn't rate close enough that there would be plenty more RIDEs on the *Great Western*, and they'd send the survey results back to Zharus with their report by torpedo to ensure the *Western* brought suitable partners for them.

The delay was also giving *Clementine* a chance to get to know the *Cosmy* ship. In directing the repair teams, she'd amassed a knowledge of its design second only to its original architects. She could often be found examining the schematics holographically or in her VR, mooning over them like a smitten teenager. "I know a half dozen sprouts back home who'd *love* to have something like the Big K as their own," she mused. "Much of the tech might be a bit out of date, but I've never *seen* so much raw power."

"Which tends to come with the tech being out of date," Wilma said dryly. "What they lack in finesse..."

“I know, I know. But imagine in a few years, when we can retrofit them completely with modern tech.” Clementine’s eyes sparkled. “All that power... There won’t be a cosmy in the ‘verse that can stop them! Can you imagine what they’d do to an Earth ship?”

Eva frowned. “I hope we never have to find that out.”

“Well, yeah, me too,” Clementine admitted. “Still...*wow*.” She stopped and shoved the blueprints into nothing. “Captain, we’re being hailed. Looks like Booker finally came through and hashed out a preliminary agreement.”

“That is really good news, Clemmie. Thanks. Please make sure our report for back home is up-to-date, and load it onto one of our torps. As soon as the repair teams are finished with their tasks, get everyone together in the Holodeck for a Roll Call. Invite Captain Sandeep and Fleet Admiral Frankel as well. I’m sure they’ll want to say a few words before we depart.” Wilma stood up and did a Picard tug on her uniform.

“Time to get this show on the road,” Ghostate said.

When the call came that the *Clementine* was finally getting ready to leave, Booker was lying in bed, trying to relax after a grueling multi-hour marathon of negotiations. The *why* he’d been assigned to this mission had been apparent after he’d read his orders. It was all about his family history with Endurance. The last wildcat colony uprooted by Earth over forty years ago. It gave him some real empathy for the Totalian colonists who had left Earth so long ago—empathy he’d *hoped* had come across as genuine to the Totalians.

“If you don’t get up I’ll have to stand on your chest,” Grey said. “Maybe dance a little. With my pointy little hooves.”

“Okay, I’m up,” Booker said, levering himself to his feet. “Where are Tweedledum and Tweedle-dee?” The nicknames weren’t exactly complimentary, but it was so hard to remember his assistants’ real names, or even tell them apart, that he couldn’t think of any more apt. They were every bit the bland cookie-cutter career diplomats on which the embassy system thrived. *More power to them*, Booker thought. *And if I ever start to look that way, someone please put one right between my eyes.*

“I’m going over the preliminary Joint Forces Deployment Agreement one more time,” Grey said. “Which we still have to pitch to the rest of the Totaliment once we get on the ground.”

“If they get the DINcom set up we’ll be able to coordinate everything with the Cosmy in realtime,” Booker said. He scratched the stubble on his prominent chin, then started getting dressed. The stubble was an affectation he’d picked up after a visit to Cape Nord in his misspent youth, as far away from home as he could afford.

He had roamed from one end of the planet to the other over several years, always getting along with people, getting rides from one polity to another for free due to some kindness, learning how the different cultures on Zharus got along with one another—or didn’t. Along the way he had spent five years as a woman named Bianca Heron, just for the experience. When he got sick of wandering and decided to at last look for a career, he had happened to be in Zharustead during the last expansion of the Zharus Diplomatic Corps.

The prospect of seeing the other Colonies had sparked more wanderlust. He had applied for a low-level position, similar to the one his two assistants had, and things had snowballed from there. Ironically, he never had gotten around to visiting the other

colonies (besides Wednesday, which scarcely counted). This would be his first offworld assignment as a full Ambassador.

Because everyone more experienced was already somewhere else. No doubt they'll replace me when the Relief Fleet arrives. Yet, that prospect was still months in the future, and this would still be a nice feather in his cap whatever happened. *Assuming I don't totally screw it up. Which is still an option.*

"Hey, I know that look," Grey said. The little tusked deer had been his LRIDE assistant since he'd joined the ZDC. 'Dee and 'Dum had theirs as well, a pair of white rabbits as generic as they were. "Buck up. I think you're doing a bang-up job so far. Admiral Frankel's got a good head on his shoulders, and so do you. You get along."

"Yeah, well, I've still got to meet and impress his bosses in the rest of the Totaliment." Booker shook his head, buttoning the coat of his less formal outfit with the ZDC's logo on the lapels. "Which could still go completely sideways."

"We'll pull it off somehow," Grey said. "We always have. We always will."

"Wish I had your optimism." Booker grinned. "I suppose it's just as well one of us does. We pull this off, I am so getting you that full-sized shell when we get back."

Grey shuddered. "What, are you trying to get me to *sabotage* this now? The day I share brainspace with you..."

Booker chuckled. The full-sized shell was a running joke between the two of them. Grey swore up and down that the only way Booker would ever get him into one involved manacles and a can-opener, but Booker privately suspected he protested a bit too much. Of course, he'd never go through with it without an *explicit* okay from Grey—and for that matter, he wasn't sure how he *really* felt about the idea, himself—but that didn't stop him from teasing the little Asian deer about it.

"Well, I guess we'd better re-pack our bag and get back to the *Clemmie*. It's been fun, but I won't be sorry to bid this ol' tin can goodbye."

Grey gave him an affectionate head-butt on the leg. "Me neither. It'll be nice to set foot on a planet again."

"Our very first—other than Wednesday, of course." Booker stepped into the bathroom (or *head*, he reminded himself) and dropped razor, toothpaste, and brush into the toiletry kit and zipped it up. He brought it back in and dropped it in the suitcase, then started pulling his few clothes out of the dresser. "Can you credit it? No *ordinary* colony for the likes of us."

"No ordinary *anything* for us. We're weird."

"Damned straight."

For the occasion, the Holodeck emulated a Second World War naval briefing room. Captain Sandeep stood up front, peering at the hardlight walls with his new cybernetic eye. Fleet Admiral Frankel and Wilma stood nearby in-uniform, waiting for everyone to arrive. Once the room was full Wilma cleared her throat. "That's everybody. Captain, Admiral, it's all yours."

Frankel surveyed the room, looking from Integrate, to human, to RIDE. When the *Clementine* first arrived he had done the same thing, with a lot more suspicion and skepticism. Now, with the *Kybalion* in better repair, and having spent as much time as possible interacting with the strange Zharusians, he was a lot more friendly. "How did that song go, Captain van Dalen? You can't always get what you want?"

"But if you try sometimes you just might find you get what you need," Wilma

filled in.

Frankel nodded. “You certainly delivered that. I am still amazed at how much you were able to accomplish in such a short time.”

“And thanks to Clementine here, we should be able to help keep the jump point clear when the rest of the Fleet arrives,” Captain Sandeep said.

“More than happy to help,” Clementine said. “I don’t know how long we’re going to be on the ground helping the Resistance. I’ll have room for those spare reactor cans you want to lend me once we’ve offloaded the supplies, but no guarantees we’ll be able to get back out to pick them up any time soon. They’ll probably need a lot of help on the ground.”

“And we’ll make sure the messages you’ve given us for the rest of the Totaliment get delivered,” Booker promised. The little deer beside him nodded. “Of course, once we get the relay up, you’ll be able to deliver future ones directly in real time with no interference.”

Frankel nodded back, then turned to the group again. “Zharusians, I’m the first to admit that I was a skeptical man when you arrived. My first sight of Captain van Dalen and her crew made me re-examine my expectations. I honestly thought Scout Captain Roberts was overstating the transforming nature of your technology. I see now I was mistaken.

“I don’t envy the job you have in front of you, but I am confident you will succeed.”

Wilma nodded. “Thank you, Admiral. Then let’s get started.” She turned to address the others. “We’ll be heading in-system within the next fifteen hours. The plan is to land as stealthily as we can and make contact with the Loyalist Resistance led by Kendlen Canton. We will remain on-site and provide them with as many resources as we can, to help them hold out until our fleet arrives.”

Ghostate stood up and faced the infiltrators. “To that end, our job is primarily to collect intelligence. How we go about that will be the hard part. We’ve all watched Totalian movies the past few months. Lately the Totalian Zealot government has pumped up their anti-alien propaganda. Unfortunately our infiltration will use many of the tactics the aliens in their films do. *More* unfortunately, we can’t avoid this problem.”

“Remember, you are to stay out of non-military systems,” Frankel said. “Or anything that could indirectly cause civilian collateral damage. Unless the Totaliment on-planet countermands that, of course. We’re going to need all those systems once the Zealots are removed and arrested, in any case.”

“We’ll make our final deployment plans with the Resistance and the Totaliment once we’re dirtside,” Wilma said. “May the wind be at our backs. Dismissed.”

Chapter 3

May 16, 158 AL (Totalia equivalent)
Totalia Low Orbit

“That’s strange...” Ghostate peered at the sensor readings.

Wilma glanced at him. “What is it?”

“I’ve been monitoring comm traffic on the long-range receivers. We’re getting a lot more signal degradation from the planetside transmitters than we ought to be. It’s as if something’s blocking part of the signal.”

“Something, huh?” Eva said. “Captain, I think we probably ought to send a probe or two ahead before we start entry. Just a thought.”

“My preliminary analysis indicates Totalium sensor scattering,” Clementine said in full Vulcan mode. “This is consistent with the orbital clutter data provided by the Cosmy, though it’s on the high side. This system is rife with Totalium, from dust grains to asteroids.”

“Any sign we’ve tripped the Zealot gravitic sensor nets?” Wilma said.

“Cloak and silent running still engaged,” Ghostate said. “I have detected no military comms, and I’ve looked in civilian transmissions for anything encrypted. After what Joel put them through they’ve likely made comm protocol changes. There’s nothing I can hack into from orbit.”

“So if they’ve detected us we won’t know until they let us know,” Wilma said. “Begin de-orbit burn, Clemmie. Let’s get dirtside.”

The *Clementine* began to slow below the speed needed to maintain orbit. Her nose dipped below the horizon as she eased into the proper trajectory. Almost immediately, they began to hear a slithering, rustling noise, like sand sliding along the hull. Wilma frowned. “Clemmie, what’s that?”

Clementine frowned. “It appears to be fine grains of Totalium striking the hull. This is necessarily an inference, since they do not appear directly on my sensors. I have attempted to capture some for later analysis—though since I cannot sense them, I am uncertain whether I have succeeded.” The rustling grew louder, punctuated by occasional pings of larger objects against the hull. “This is unusual. Neither Madison nor Joel reported encountering Totalium debris on landing or launching.”

“Are you all right?” Wilma asked. “Should we abort the landing?”

“If it holds at current levels, there should be little danger. Though my hull is going to look like it was sandblasted. So much for the new paint job. There do seem to be a lot of volatiles in the mesosphere; perhaps it’s just an enriched comet that passed recently.”

Soon enough the soft slithering and pinging faded away, replaced by a subsonic rumble as the ship dived into the atmosphere. To minimize the risk of detection, Clementine came down on the opposite side of the planet from Totalia City. She lowered herself slowly to minimize the friction heat and to not show up as a fireball. She levelled off a few kilometers above the ground and headed towards the location they’d been given for the Loyalist base.

“Now comes the fun part,” Clementine noted. “A planet with only a few dozen

spaceworthy craft total, and I'm still have problems finding a parking spot."

On her screen, she showed a view of the Loyalist base from a fast probe they'd sent out. It showed a thick hybrid forest around a man-made lake. The base itself was hidden in the support structures of the semi-abandoned concrete dam complex.

"Admittedly, most places don't usually have parking spots available for ships the size of a city block," Wilma said.

Clementine made big shocked eyes at her. "Are you implying I'm fat?"

"Uhm..." Wilma paused, not sure how to escape.

"No handy Golden Gate Park to set down in," Eva said, scanning the night-dark, partly terraformed landscape and providing Wilma an escape route. The vegetation was a combination of Earth and native, with Totalian treestalks mixed in with young oak and maple. "Ideas, Clemmie?"

"It looks like our only choice within fifty kilometers is an old-fashioned splashdown in the reservoir. I can modify the cloaking field for underwater work."

Eva nodded, changing into an otter. "Good thing I packed my swimsuit."

Wilma nodded. "It should also provide some added concealment from above, if they have satellite overwatch or recon flights. Go ahead."

Clementine nodded. "Aye, sir. Beginning landing sequence."

Nectar River Terraforming Facility

Kendlen Canton's nights had been restless ever since first meeting Madison Brubeck and Samantha. When the coup happened it only made matters worse. He was the closest thing to a leader the burgeoning Resistance had. Even after rescuing the Totaliment, he continued in that capacity, a sort of civilian general to the troops. (Trilby had offered him the Fifth Speaker position in the Totaliment-in-Exile, to replace one of the traitors who had joined Raph Clarke, but he'd turned it down. He felt completely unqualified to play at being a "real" politician.)

The upshot was, he slept lightly, if at all. After lying awake for hours, he was finally drifting off to sleep in the manager's office-turned-bedroom. It had bare concrete walls and a leaky roof that allowed in night smells from the damp landscape outside. The roar of the spillway waterfall provided a steady white noise.

Then sleep was snatched away again. Kendlen groaned, and pushed the covers off. He sat on the edge of the bed in the darkness. *Does the First Speaker have as much trouble sleeping as I do?* Kendlen had a few precious sleeping pills, but only used those when absolutely necessary. They were in short supply.

For a moment, Kendlen couldn't figure out what had woken him up this time. Then he became aware that the white noise of the waterfall had grown significantly louder. *Oh hell, is that old dam finally breaking up?* But no, now it seemed to be falling back to the usual level.

Curious, Kendlen got up and threw on some clothes, then made his way outside. In the moonlight, he could see that the spillway from the dam was wet from edge to edge, though the runoff was back to the trickle it had been. *Hmm.*

Kendlen looked up at the top of the dam, shading his eyes. He might just have been jumping at shadows, but the longer they stayed here, the more antsy he got about anything out of the ordinary. There were only so many places outside the city that people could hole up, after all; sooner or later he imagined the Zealots would get around

to looking here.

“Mister Canton...”

The whisper from an unfamiliar woman’s voice made him jump, even with its friendly tone. He looked around, but there was nobody there. “Who is it? Who’s there?”

“Friends,” another woman’s voice said. “From a long way away.”

Kendlen worked out the timing in his head. The *Satellite of Love* wasn’t that fast, but the Zharusian message torpedo Joel had sent ahead with the Totaliment’s request for help would have gotten there weeks before he would arrive. Which would have been a little over a couple of months ago. *That would mean...they sent help very soon after that message got there.* Kendlen sighed. His optimism had given way to more realism as time passed. “Welcome to Totalia. How many ships?”

“Just the one for now. The main fleet’s still being organized, but they wanted to send what help they could right away.”

Kendlen nodded. “I know how bureaucracy is. Well...come inside and we can talk about it, I guess.” He looked around again. “And maybe you can show yourselves?”

“Sure. We just didn’t want to give you too big of a shock all at once.”

“Joel explained the whole ‘furry’ thing,” Kendlen said.

“Explained is one thing. Seeing is another,” a new female voice said. The sound came from a floating sphere about the size of an orange. Its surface glowed, then around it the image of a woman formed. She had neon blue hair and pale skin, and she wore a khaki Scout uniform. “Greetings, Kendlen Canton. I’m Clementine.”

Kendlen rubbed his eyes. The surreality was getting to him. “Clementine? Like the little oranges?” He realized how inane it sounded as soon as he said it, but he never was at his best just after waking in the middle of the night.

The woman laughed. “*Exactly* like the little oranges.”

The second figure to appear was a woman with the head and tail of a white fox, and furred, beclawed hands. “Captain Wilma van Dalen, at your service.”

An anthropomorphic doe faded into view. “Eva, occasionally Evan, and Liis.”

“Occasionally Evan?” Kendlen said, wondering what exactly *that* meant and trying to keep his composure. He fumbled for Joel’s explanation of the process. “And I gather Liis is your...body-mate? Like Zach with Joel?”

“We call it a time-share, but it’s essentially the same thing,” the doe said in another voice.

“Anyone else lurking in the shadows?”

“We are it; everyone else is aboard me,” Clementine said. “We thought the few of us would be enough.”

“Goodness knows we weren’t expecting to see the man we’re looking for so soon,” the white vixen said.

Kendlen nodded, trying to fit the reality before him into a new worldview. *What does she mean by ‘aboard me’? Is she their ship AI?* “I suppose this means your ship landed in the lake.”

“It’s a refreshing bath,” Clementine said, indirectly confirming his deduction. “As the saying goes, ‘Eureka.’”

“Well...at any rate, we’d better go wake the Totaliment.” *Lord, I hope some of them don’t have a heart attack.*

Wilma nodded. “While you get them up, we’ll tell our chief diplomat it’s safe to come out. They’ll feel better with at least one unmodified human around.”

First Speaker Trilby Whitfield rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and blinked myopically at the five newcomers in the makeshift Totaliment-in-Exile chamber. The other members of the ruling council were in similar states of bleariness. He was tempted to blame the apparitions before him on lingering fragments of a dream, if it hadn't been that he knew he'd never dreamed of anything like that. *A fox, a deer, and a blue-haired space woman walk into a bar...*

At least there was one "normal" human in the bunch, though the small deer at his side was another oddity all its own. He was pretty sure the pictures of deer in the Earth natural history textbooks hadn't included fangs. In his drowsy frame of mind, he wasn't quite sure which was weirder—the fangs, or the fact that it talked.

Seventh Speaker Jassen Baldurson was the first to find his tongue. "If you people say 'we come in peace' I am going back to bed. It's *far* too early for this."

Booker opened his mouth, then closed it and grinned. "While tempting, I'm too professional to open with that. Still, the intent is true."

"Well, it's not the most...diplomatic phrase I would have chosen, Jassen, but it worked as an icebreaker of sorts," Trilby said. "So. Your Scout, Captain Roberts, told us that someone of your nature might appear. I am quite curious to know more about you, but that can wait. Please bring us up to speed on the state of preparations to aid us, and the nature of any material you might have brought along."

"The Zealots reverse-engineered the pulse weapons we built from Barbaretta's schematics," Kendlen said. "We've lost that advantage, and they're making improvements on it rapidly."

"We brought a dozen infiltration experts, plus support staff, mostly Integrates," Booker said. "And a brace of twenty RIDEs, if you choose to partner with them."

"We also have two military-spec fabbers that can build sizable vehicles with the right materials," Eva said. "Not to mention modern-tech weapons that should be better than anything the Zealots can make, and beyond their ability to reproduce."

A pair of drones were busily setting up a console on the meeting table. The First Speaker kept looking sideways at them as they worked with insect-like precision. The space woman smiled at him, then turned to the Captain and Booker. "DINcom terminal online, Captain, Ambassador. I have clear pings from the *Kybalion*."

"The flagship is in orbit?" Kendlen said, brightening. "We actually have space superiority?"

Wilma shook her head. "Not as such, no. The *Kybalion* is still doing repairs out around Isis. The Zealots still hold the skies above us."

"But you said you have real time communication?" Trilby asked, trying to contain his excitement. "Does that mean...?"

"It means just that. We have limited FTL communication capability—a *very* recent invention—so you can speak to them in the outer system with no time lag and no risk of interception. No interstellar capability, so we can't call Zharus, but just for talking in system, it's truly revolutionary, especially in your case."

Booker nodded. "Which means you can verify we told them the same things we're telling you. Among other things."

Trilby clapped his hands and lost all sense of decorum. "*Hot damn!* If you don't mind, we'll call the full First Tranche to order in an hour. After we've had time to put on some proper clothes. It's finally time to put our noses to the grindstone and make Clarke

and his cronies' lives a living hell. Kendlen? What's the latest from the field?"

Kendlen scratched his stubbled chin. "I haven't had time to check the morning reports from Hamner's cell yet, sir. I'll need at least a half hour anyway."

"Of course," Trilby said. "Captain van Dalen, please start bringing your troops and supplies here. We'll let everyone know what to expect before your people arrive so they're not caught quite as flat-footed about your appearance as we were."

Captain van Dalen nodded. "Will do."

"I'll help spread the word on the way to Intel," Kendlen said.

"Ah, yes," Liis said. With the voice change there was a subtle shift in how the doe looked. "Our Intel Chief will be there shortly to coordinate actions. Question. Do you have barn owls here?"

"Our founders were only able to bring a few animals with them, mostly farm livestock," Trilby said. "Owls are not one of them, nor are deer or foxes for that matter, though there are plenty of books about Old Earth with pictures and viddies. If there are any other shocks, Captain, please tell us now. Captain Roberts was quite forthcoming about Integrates when he briefed us."

Booker glanced to the Integrates. "Well, there is the little matter..."

Eva cleared her throat. "Ah, yes. First Speaker, have you ever seen *The Monsters from Planet Thirteen*?"

"No, but I'm very familiar with the genre. What Totalian isn't? That's very the core of our problem. We fear change, and aliens who can change their shape..." The First Speaker raised his eyebrows. "Ah, I believe I see now."

The doe...changed, losing female curves, muzzle, and fur. Very shortly there was a human man there instead. The demonstration provoked gasps and a few Totalians took a couple steps back before the Integrate resumed her previous form. "This doesn't come naturally to us Integrates," she said. "Then again, nothing about us is exactly natural."

Booker nodded. "We don't want to seem like 'invaders.' But then, that's just what the invaders in some of your movies say. As you say, 'We come in peace.' It's a knotty problem."

"If it hadn't been for that idiot Raph Clarke, we wouldn't have *had* to deal with it like this," Baldurson grumbled, gesturing at Eva. "We could have introduced you at a more...measured pace. But thanks to him, it's right on our doorstep."

Eva shrugged. "I'd say that we'll just stick around until you throw the bums out, then be on our way. But by then the damage will already have been done. Besides the three of us here, we have a handful of other Integrate shapeshifters, and a half-dozen RIDE/human pairs. And that's not even counting the twenty 'newborn' RIDEs we brought for your people."

Trilby rose from his chair. "Life isn't perfect. We'll deal with it." He nodded to Wilma and Booker. "We'll see you in an hour."

Booker nodded back. "We'll be here."

"Beck. Beck!" Sgt. Sims awoke her superior with a shout and a shake of his shoulder. "Get up, now! We've got company!"

The urgency in her voice wakened him better than a shot of caffeine to the bloodstream. Then he realized that it wasn't *fear* in her voice. It was excitement. "I'm up, I'm up! What all is happening?"

“Captain Roberts must have gotten away clean, maybe sent some message ahead,” Merie Sims said. “Because some of the help he promised just arrived. First Tranche is meeting ‘em now. We’d better hop to and make ourselves presentable.”

“Great. Uh...do you know if they’ve got the hot water working on the shower yet?”

“Everybody’s heading down to the lake to help them bring in their gear,” Sims said, brimming with excitement. “They landed *under* the lake.”

“So take a bath instead is what you’re saying?” Beck said weakly.

“Oh, uh. Not yet, Lieutenant. Sorry.”

“Have you seen them? What do they look like?” Beck got out of bed and started dressing himself. The Totalian military had always mixed men and women, so nudity in situations like this didn’t even register.

“Furry people, mostly. Like characters from *Darla’s Front Door*.”

“Really? Huh. Used to love that show.”

“Didn’t everyone? I think the captain of the ship is some kind of fox. They wear the same uniform Captain Roberts did.”

“Fox, huh? Didn’t think you were into women.”

“Beeeeck...”

“Right, sorry, couldn’t resist. I know what you meant. I honestly thought Roberts was pulling our legs on that one.”

“Well, he wasn’t. So get ready. They’re going to start briefing us on the new toys they brought as soon as they’ve brought some of them in.”

“New toys? Well, you certainly know how to pique my interest.” Beck finished throwing his clothes on, sniffed experimentally at an armpit, and decided he wasn’t *too* ripe yet. It would do. “Let’s go see what Santa has brought us.”

A few hours later, Kendlen finally had the chance to sit down and relax for a few minutes. He’d been running ragged ever since the *Clementine*’s unexpected arrival, corralling the various members of the Resistance who would be best equipped to deal with their various visitors. The best of their mechanics and technicians would be studying the fabbers on board the ship, their strategists would be conferring with the infiltration experts, and the Totaliment itself was in conference with the Ambassador they’d brought along, using the FTL comm to coordinate strategy with the *Kybalion*. Finally, he had a little time to himself.

Which ended a moment later as Eva knocked on the doorframe of his office.

“Hey. Got a moment?”

“I do if you do. What you need?”

“Didn’t have a chance to mention it earlier, but Madison recorded a personal message for you. She would have preferred to come herself, but the effort to pull the fleet together couldn’t spare her.” Eva held up a media tablet. “It’s loaded onto here, if you’d like to watch it.

Kendlen took it. “Uh...thanks. I’ll do that.”

Eva nodded. “I’d better get back to things. I’ll see you later.” Before he could reply, she was gone again.

“Huh.” Kendlen looked down at the tablet in his hands. “Well, all right...” He fiddled with it for a moment, found the “play” button, and hit it.

A moment later, the tablet lit up with a familiar face. Madison smiled at the camera. “Hey, Kendlen. I wish I could be there to tell you this in person, but things are

what they are. I'd wait until I *could* be there in person, but I expect the news footage they brought along will spill it and I'd rather you hear it from me first." She shrugged. "It's really not easy to say this into a recorder and not know how you'll react when you see it. I hope it doesn't freak you out too badly.

"By now you'll have met Eva and friends, so you know what a shapeshifting Integrate is. What you don't know is..." She paused, and then her features started to blur. Kendlen stared in astonishment and nearly dropped the tablet as her face settled into a leopard's muzzle, with Samantha's markings. "...Mantha and I are one, too. We'll tell you all about it in a bit, but we just wanted to assure you first off that we're still the same people we always were."

She paused, then said in Samantha's voice, "And that goes double for me!"

Madison continued. "It's just one of those things that happens sometimes—*rarely*—when you partner up with a RIDE. It won't necessarily happen to you, if you do...but it won't necessarily *not*, either."

Kendlen smiled despite the surreality. Her tone of voice was almost exactly like his parents had used to explain the birds and the bees. He had seen Eva demonstrate her (his?) abilities a short time ago and kept wanting to ask her to repeat the performance. He was still trying to assimilate it. Now, Madison had also become a shapeshifting Integrate and all he could do was smile. *Down the rabbit hole, Alice.*

"We don't want it to scare you off if you're thinking of hooking up with one of the RIDEs we sent along. As you saw when we were there, if you find the right partner it's a friendship like none you've ever had before. Though we'll understand if you'd rather not risk it." She shrugged. "Anyway, now that's out of the way, I'll fill you in on our trip back and what we've found out since we got here. You'll hear a lot of this from the official briefing materials, but we thought you might appreciate our own spin on it.

"It all started when 'Mantha and I got shot as we were stealing our ships back..."

Totalia City

Raph Clarke looked at the screens, not sure he believed what he was seeing, even though it was right in front of his eyes. The reports from the two spies left on the *Kybalion* had just come in, and he was still trying to process what he was seeing.

The screens themselves showed an impossible thing; strange techno-animal-men walking like friends among the *Kybalion* crew, helping with repairs. Occasionally there were pictures of normal people, usually accompanied by robotic animals. One video showed one of the animals opening up and *engulfing* a human, then standing on two legs in some odd parody of humanity. One report noted that one of the most human looking Zharusians wasn't even human at all; she was an avatar of the Zharusian ship itself. Other pictures and videos showed strange devices floating in midair and somehow repairing some huge machine he didn't recognize.

"We should've taken that ship out when we had the chance, when it was still wounded," Clarke said, rubbing his temples and trying to absorb the new information. Totalia-shaking as it was, the first thought that went through his mind was nonetheless, *When Quincy's bunch sees this, they'll go crazy.*

"We didn't know where it was, sir. Once they got away, they went into silent running while doing repairs; our spies couldn't risk sending any messages until just before the Zharus ship arrived. We were lucky they stayed in the Isis system where our

repeater sats could catch their drops.” Jermy Orinson said, speaking from a window in one of the screens. He was Clarke’s appointed Fleet Admiral of the True Totalian Cosmy, whose flagship was currently parked in geosynchronous orbit over Totalia City.

“Once we did find out where they were, we were getting ready to go after them with everything we had. Then we got the warning of the Zharusian ship’s arrival and decided to hold back in light of their already-demonstrated technological superiority and the damage we’d taken already. If they’re upgrading and re-arming the Big K...well, caution is warranted here.”

Clarke sighed, “And now, the opportunity is lost. Based on what the spies reported, what’s your assessment?”

“The *Kybalion* still seems severely damaged, but it has restored much of its offensive capabilities, boosted further by Zharusian tech. Taking it on would not be wise unless we had some other advantages.”

“Advantages we’re working on. How are the tests coming?”

The Admiral glanced off screen to verify his words. “Still very preliminary, but promising. The technology is scaling well, but we may not have a framework big enough.”

“Good, take whatever you need to make it work. Any sign of where that alien ship went after it left the *Kybalion*?”

“We assume it came to Totalia. We’ve been reviewing sensor logs and there are a few ghost images that might be them, but we don’t know where they went. They are probably in orbit somewhere; they’re too big to land easily.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that. Their Scouts’ ships were almost as large, and they landed easily.” Clarke frowned and forced himself to relax his hands before he snapped another pen. “Find them. Wherever they are, they can’t be up to anything good. I’ll have the media guys isolate these images and release them; show the people just what the so-called *Loyalists* are willing to work with to get their way.”

The Fleet Admiral snapped a salute, “On it, Sir. We’ll find them,” he said. He started to reach for the disconnect and paused. “There’s one other thing we’ve noticed. We’ve detected a few explosions in low orbit around Totalia. Not targeting anything, just random booms.”

“How random? Could it be some Zharusian trick?” Clarke asked.

Orinson shrugged, “I don’t think so, but I don’t know what it is. There’s been a detonation every couple of days or so, and no other effects we can tell.”

“Anything else going on up there I should know about?”

“Well, the levels of Totalium around the planet do seem higher than usual. Nothing dangerous, just something we’re being careful of. Probably why we lost one of the weather satellites last week. We think it’s because we’re passing through Apophis’s tail.”

“Right. Keep me in the loop.”

“Aye aye, sir,” Orinson said, disconnecting.

May 18, 158 AL (Totalia equivalent)
Nectar River Resistance Base

The *Satellite of Love* had left a platoon of a dozen of the *Kybalion*’s Cosmy Marines before leaving for Zharus again. Kendlen had spent as much time as possible

undergoing the same combat training as the rest of the Resistance. He could confidently say he was a better shot than he had been, under Lt. Maxl Beregan's instruction. Beregan was also the most proficient with the micro-IDE Cyclone hovercycle/powered armor Joel had also left with them, with Beck Hensley his close second.

So of course he was the first volunteer for the newly-formed RIDE Assault Team. They met under the shelter of the giant concrete terraforming building. Kendlen was mildly disappointed to see that there were barely a half-dozen recruits, and most of them looked more curious than committed. There were also a dozen or so curious onlookers, including First Speaker Trilby Whitfield himself, but they stayed well back from the RIDEs and the volunteers.

But then, Kendlen realized, *they* hadn't actually met Madison and Samantha in person. Only he, Teenette, and Mikken Fellin had, and Teenette was on another planet while Mikken was heading up one of the Totalia City Resistance cells. Most of the Resistance only knew what they'd seen on TV and what Kendlen had been able to tell them about her, and the weirdness of Joel and Zach, followed by Eva and the others, hadn't been exactly reassuring. *Totalia forbid they find out Madison and Samantha Integrated, that would be all they need to hear.*

"Why am I taking a personality test again?" Beregan asked, scowling at the tablet in his hands.

"Good partnerships begin with compatible persons. You will see, Lieutenant." Brunhilde, the woman in charge of the program, was built like a bear, including her ears, and spoke with a strange accent Kendlen had only heard in Earth movies. Kendlen assumed she had a tail, too, but it felt tacky to ask. Her RIDE, whose name was Chatka, ambled around the training area, chatting with the potential female matches. She was far more friendly than fearsome, like a big Mama Bear out of a storybook.

Over where the RIDEs had been offloaded, Kendlen's current second in command was looking over the ten male RIDEs the Zharusians had brought. Beck Hensley had been instrumental in the First Tranche's rescue and had only gotten better since. The former SWAT officer was awaiting the results on his own personality test to see if any of the RIDEs would work for him.

For his own part, Kendlen was taking a test himself. Partly to show solidarity with his troops, and partly for not...entirely selfless reasons. But there were only twenty RIDEs, and they were needed for combat missions. The Fleet would arrive with hundreds of them. And Maddie would arrive with the Fleet...

"Lt. Beck Hensley!" Brunhilde announced. "We have a match for you!"

"Uh...that's great, I think..." Beck said. "Uh...maybe someone else should go first."

"Oh what the hell?" Kendlen exploded. "You're getting cold feet? *You*, the guy who led the prison raid to rescue the First Tranche?"

Beck looked to him, an almost pleading expression on his face. "I just...don't *know*, Kendlen. I mean...after hearing about what these things can do..."

"They're not *things*, Lieutenant, they're *people*." Kendlen shook his head, then glanced to Brunhilde. "It would have helped if they'd sent along some candidate RIDEs who were actually *awake*, you know."

"Chatka and I were best they could do on such short notice," Brunhilde said. "Am apologising. Are not exactly enthused about RIDEalong's way of doing things ourselves, but if we could not take joke, should not have joined up."

Kendlen sighed. “I had meant to give the troops first go at these, since they’ll be helpful in front-line combat. But if we don’t even have enough interest from *everyone* to partner them all, I might as well lead by example. Samantha and I got along pretty well, after all.”

“*Horosho!* Good!” Brunhilde nodded approvingly. “Of course you know they are not being toys or pets. They are being people and partners. Also are knowing must match sex first, or else *will* match sex after.”

“Uh, yeah...” Kendlen said. “Make mine male, please.”

“Even if you are perfect personality match for one of our girls?” Brunhilde grinned impishly.

“What, am I?” Kendlen said weakly.

“Am not knowing. But could check!”

“Uh, thanks but no thanks. I’ve got enough on my plate already.”

Brunhilde chuckled. “Is fair enough. Let’s see what your quiz results say. Mmm. Ah! Yes. Asante good match for you. Also happens to be leopard.”

“Huh.” Kendlen thought about that. “I could certainly do worse than a leopard.”

“Da. Of course, could do *better*, too. Once have gone *bear*, is never going back.”

“I’ll...bear that in mind. Uh...pun not intended. So which one is Asante?”

Brunhilde pointed to one of the RIDEs stored in cubical transport mode. This one had a clearly feline head and paws, though they were all folded up together at the moment. “That is he.”

Kendlen nodded, approaching hesitantly. *This is silly. He’s not just going to wake up and eat me or something.* Then he remembered what he’d been told about how Fusing was necessary to activate them. *Then again, maybe he is.* “So...uh...what do I do?”

“Be entering proper frame of mind, then pressing glowing button on top. Hold out arms, Asante will do rest.”

“Okay...uh...anything else I should know?”

“Remember, Fusing is sharing,” Chatka put in. “You will share thoughts and memories with each other. Be prepared for that. Some people might find it...off-putting, but most on Zharus hardly give it a second thought.”

“I...see.” Kendlen paused a moment to consider this. Taken all at once, it seemed like there were a lot more drawbacks to this Fusing thing than benefits—and that wasn’t even counting the possibility of Integrating down the road. But Madison had started out aghast at the idea herself, and by the time he’d met her and Samantha just after they’d first Fused, she’d said she wished she’d started months before.

And then there was Asante to think about. After all, the leopard hadn’t exactly asked to be Fused to him. “This situation really isn’t ideal, is it?”

Brunhilde shrugged. “Is being what it is. Hoping you will be happy together.” She looked around. “Is anyone else being ready yet?”

“Done!” Lt. Beregan declared. He tapped a few panels on the tablet. “Results sent, ma’am.”

“Received,” Chatka said. “Ahhh...Brunhilde, what do you think?” The two of them went quiet, apparently conversing over wireless.

The deactivated RIDEs were arranged in two rows. There was a mix of species, with one male and one female bird-of-prey among them, which from Kendlen’s reading would be a hard sell to even the more open-minded, given the physical changes

necessary.

Brunhilde smiled. "I see you have an interest in werewolves, Lieutenant."

"Werewolves, vampires, that sort of thing. I think a set of wolf ears would look pretty badass on me."

Brunhilde gave him a friendly slap on the back. "*Da*, I see. Come, meet Bert."

The Cosmy Marine puzzled. "Wait, a wolf named *Bert*?"

"You were expecting maybe 'Silverfang' or 'Moonmoon'?" Chatka said. "Is short for Bertrand. Good, *stronk* Sturmhaven male name!"

Beregan smiled and chuckled. "I'll take your word for it, ma'am. This is him?"

"All it takes is to push big green button," Chatka said, looking over his shoulder. "There are no guarantees, of course, but you will at least awaken him if match not good. He has only *small* memory of Zharus. He will be *born* on Totalia. The first human mind he will know is *yours*. And this will have great influence on him."

The Marine's indecision faded at that. "Well then, I think I'll get to know Bertrand."

And that galvanized Kendlen, too. Was he going to let a Cosmy jarhead show him up? Before he could think better of it, he reached out and pushed Asante's button right then.

For a moment, nothing happened except the button started flashing. Then the metal cat-cube began to unfold—and then, before Kendlen was quite aware what was happening, it reared up on hind legs, opened up, and surged forward. For a moment, everything went dark.

The darkness lasted only a short time before a landscape began forming around him, first drawn in pencil, then inked, then rapidly filling in increasingly detailed color until it reached full photorealism. *Some kind of virtual reality, I guess*. The air around Kendlen was hot and dry, with a landscape of golden grasses and strange trees he remembered from books about Earth. A huge snow-capped mountain loomed in the distance.

Draped over the branch of a nearby tree, a nearly-black leopard yawned as he awoke. Kendlen stared up at him. "Uh, hello? You must be Asante?"

The leopard dropped to the ground as if pouring himself off the branch, then slunk up towards the human. "I am he," the big cat said. "And you are the one my makers said I would find upon waking. Am I truly on another world?"

Kendlen nodded. "You sure are. I'm Kendlen Canton. Pleased to meet you, and welcome to Totalia."

"You are the first human I have ever met." Asante walked around Kendlen. "But then, I have met no one else beyond my makers. I am *eager* to see the world. My world. Our world. Shall we enter the Real?"

"I assume you mean going back out to the real world? Sure." The savannah world faded out, and Kendlen opened his eyes to look out on the real world again. Everything looked a little odd, and it took a moment for Kendlen to realize that was because he was seeing it from a couple of feet higher off the ground than usual.

"Welcome, Asante!" Chatka said. The she-bear had Fused up with her own partner in the meantime. Nearby, Lt. Beregan had yet to initiate the Fuse on Bertrand. All the Marine could do was stare at both.

"How are you both feeling?" Brunhilde said.

Kendlen raised an arm and looked at it. His forearm had a dark grey pelt with

black rosettes. *Well, that'll be good for night ops.*

"It feels very different from Nature Range," Asante said, looking at the forest beyond the dam runoff stream. "The savannah of my First Boot was very...limited."

"I guess it would be," Kendlen said, having no idea what Asante was talking about. "So, uh, welcome to your life."

:Have I permission to share yours?: Asante's voice came from within. :I have little of myself to share in return, sadly. But this is the nature of Fuse. It is part of my being. If you wish me not to as yet, I will respect your request.:

"Uh...sure. I can't say I'm a hundred percent easy with it, but I knew we'd be sharing when I turned you on. If I didn't want to, I shouldn't have done it." Kendlen smiled shakily. "I knew someone who'd partnered up with a RIDE and they got along really well. I hope we can too."

"Kendlen, you and your friend look badass. Okay, I'm getting in on this *right now*," Beregan said. He slammed the wolf's Fuse button and was also engulfed.

They had begun to draw a crowd now. Word had quickly spread about what Kendlen was doing, which had drawn out the First Speaker and some of the First Tranche, along with Eva and Wilma. Many of them were watching the "werewolf" as Beregan got to know his own partner.

:I will try to be as unobtrusive as I might,: Asante said.

:Uh, sure,: Kendlen sent back. He had no real idea what to expect, but what he got was something that felt a lot like nostalgia. Out of nowhere, he started remembering odd moments from his past. He assumed this was because Asante was accessing them too. Some of them were kind of private. Kendlen didn't imagine he needed to worry about Asante spilling his secrets, but it still felt a little odd to know someone else was learning them.

:If there is anything you want me to forget, I shall,: Asante promised.

:Uh...no, that's okay.: Kendlen shook his head mentally. *:If we're going to be partners, let's know each other fully.:*

:There's not so much else of me to know.: Kendlen got an impression of waking up in a lab, accessing memory banks that gave him a grounding in language, education, the present state of galactic culture, and so forth, before being asked to take an assessment quiz before he even fully understood who he was. Then it was off to sleep again, to wake up with a new partner he hadn't requested or fully understood the need for.

:Sheesh,: Kendlen sent. *:That's not exactly a nurturing childhood.:*

:It is what I have. I didn't know anything different—until now.:

"So, Kendlen," Trilby said. The old man was absorbing all these new things like someone half his age. "Who is your new partner?"

Kendlen chuckled. "I'm still finding that out. For that matter, so is he." He turned to face the audience. *It would be nice if I could let them see my face—oh!* In response to his wish, Asante retracted the head-helmet away. Kendlen blinked briefly in the sunlight, then glanced around at the others and spoke.

"Hey, guys, I know the whole idea of this is scary, like something out of those body-stealer movies you grew up on. But the mindset behind those movies is the exact same one that drove Raph Clarke and his bunch to steal our government and do everything they can to keep us shut away from the rest of the galaxy. What do you think we're fighting against here, huh?" He shook his head. "I'm not going to shove you guys

into doing anything you're not ready for, but I think you should take a look at *why* you're not ready and see if those reasons really hold up." He looked around. "And while you're doing that, I think I'm gonna take my new partner out for a spin." :OK, done talking,: he thought, and the helmet snapped back into place.

:I think skimmer form is appropriate?: Asante said. The RIDE peeled away from Kendlen, changing forms underneath, leaving him in a saddle of a sizable, sleek hovercycle—skimmer, the Zharusians called them. Asante projected his head over the instrument cluster. "Is it satisfactory?"

"Yes," Kendlen said, trying to get accustomed to a tail and a pair of twitchy feline ears. "Yes. Wow."

"Nice look there, Kendlen," Beck said. He glanced over at Beregan and Bertrand. "Wonder what's keeping him."

"Them, Mr. Hensley," Trilby corrected.

Brunhilde grinned broadly. "*Them* is keeping them. Are beink gettink to know each other. Is takink more time for some than others. But is *goot!* Much talk is meanink much in common! Bad match, Bert would spit him out like bad *borscht*."

Kendlen thumbed the starter and Asante rose a half meter over the ground, the field beneath them pushing the carpet of old leaves away. "Perhaps we'll head to the top of the dam first, Asante?"

"I have local maps, but beyond that, where we go is up to you," Asante said. "Everything is new to me. Everything. Show me."

Kendlen twisted the throttle. "Let's go."

They headed up to the top of the dam, and cruised along the walkway along the top. It wasn't in the best of condition, given that the dam hadn't been maintained for sixty years, but Asante's lifters meant they never actually touched the crumbling cement. Kendlen glanced across at the whirlpool that marked the spillway intake, and further back the silhouette of the *Clementine* barely visible below the surface.

From there they moved into the forest, weaving amid the trees. For all that he knew the Zealots didn't have any satellite coverage, Kendlen still felt a little better under the cover of the trees. He was still getting used to Asante's handling. Lifters had a very different feel than the tires all native Totalian ground vehicles had to offer, and the inertial dampers kept him glued to the saddle.

As they drove along, Asante asked things about life on the planet and their culture. He seemed to be an odd mixture of knowledge and ignorance. Presumably he had been loaded up with everything Madison had been able to glean about their culture in addition to whatever he'd picked up from Kendlen's own memories, but there were plenty of gaps in the coverage.

"What is this movie I've seen pieces of in your memories? *Battle Beyond the Stars*?" Asante asked.

"That one? One of the few anti-isolation movies of the last thirty years. Loved it as a child. Still do. Well..."

Battle Beyond the Stars was practically unique. The basic plot was that Totalia decides to take a peek at the rest of human space to see what's going on, and finds that aliens (it's always aliens) have taken over humanity and enslaved it. Using their miracle metamaterial, the plucky Totalians build an improbably massive fleet and kick the complacent aliens' asses six ways from Sunday. The Totalians were greeted as saviors,

and the movie ends with a triumphant return to Earth.

“I think I would enjoy watching that,” Asante said. “It means a lot to you.”

“You have no idea...well, no, I guess you’re literally the *only* person who could have any idea how much.”

“That is true. I saw it in your mind.”

“I guess it’s largely thanks to that and *Darla’s Front Door* that I turned out the way I did.”

“I saw some of that in your mind as well. It was...a children’s television show with funny animals?”

“Right. All about how people should be nice to each other no matter what they looked or sounded like. Even if they looked like puppets or people in animal suits. It’s actually from back during my Dad’s childhood, one of the first shows the original colonists made after things got set up. Which is why it’s lasted so long, I guess, and everyone shows it to their kids instead of just forgetting about it. It’s a cultural touchstone, as Professor Fellin would say.”

“Curious. It was about...‘being nice to each other,’ you say?”

“Yeah. I think they made it because there were people from so many different races and nations in the colony effort, and they were a little worried about all the new children getting along with people who looked different or talked differently.” He chuckled. “They probably didn’t really need to worry. Since they grew up in a brand new culture, without prejudices carried over from a pre-existing society, I don’t think racism would even have occurred to Dad and his friends.”

“The message seems at odds with the rest of your culture.”

“Doesn’t it just? I guess most of Dad’s generation took it as read that the whole getting-along thing only applied to other humans on the same planet, and the people dressed up like animals were just a metaphor. Which isn’t necessarily the way a lot of we youngest folks who grew up on it see it.”

“And that is what interested you in RIDEs?”

“Well, it’s one thing. Have to admit, it’s quite a coincidence.”

Asante’s projected head nodded. “As you say.”

Kendlen pulled to a halt in a clearing and climbed off. “So you’ve got a...what they call it...‘Walker’ mode?”

“Ah...yes. I believe I have found it...” The hovercycle collapsed in on itself, its metallic plating becoming semi-liquid as it changed shape. Shortly there was a metallic matte-gray leopard, then the hardlight came on and the pelt formed once more. Astante stretched and yawned. “Yes, this is more the thing.”

Asante was larger than he had appeared in the VR environment—about a third larger than Samantha had been. The giant cat looked up at one of the Totalian treestalks. “Hrm. No branches to nap on, and the Earth-types lack a certain robustness to take my weight.”

Kendlen chuckled. “I don’t expect many trees could. You’re a little heavier than the average cat.”

“Well, we shall make do.” He sniffed at one of the tree trunks, then pushed through some undergrowth at the other end of the clearing.

Kendlin grinned and followed. “Sounds good to me.”

Beck Hensley peered at the tablet thoughtfully. “Huh.”

Merie Sims raised an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“Just got the results of the personality survey. This is...interesting. I have a compatibility match to the 93rd percentile. According to the help section, that’s well within acceptable limits for a good Fuse match. It’s a cougar, or puma—a kind of a tawny panther from old Earth. My next closest match is only an 83, which is borderline.”

“That’s interesting, all right...but not exactly a surprise, is it? I mean, that’s the point, to find close matches.”

“Well...the thing is, it’s a ‘she.’ Her name is, uh...I don’t know how to pronounce this. ‘Injy’? ‘Ing-uh’? Spelled I-N-G-E.”

“Let me see that...huh. I think your second guess is the right one.” Merie took the tablet and glanced at it. “You’re right, you do have a good match there.” She grinned at him. “Funny, I never thought of you as all that feminine. Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Beck took the tablet back and gazed at it for a long moment. “You know, you just might have to *start* thinking of me that way. I read all the stuff Joel left on RIDEs, and if you partner up cross-gender, it changes your body to match.”

Merie stared at him. “You’re not seriously thinking of going for it, are you? Changing something so fundamental about yourself? Seventh Aphorism: *Gender is part of all things, and manifests on all levels.*”

“I know the Aphorisms, Sergeant.” Beck rolled his eyes. “You’ll notice it doesn’t say *which* gender. I promise you, I’ll have every bit as much gender manifesting afterward as I do now. Maybe even more.”

“You haven’t studied your Aphorisms,” Merie said gently. “Fourth Aphorism: All things exhibit duality. Extremes bond.”

Beck’s grin took on more than a hint of smugness. “I can’t think of anything more duality...uh...ish than experiencing *both* genders instead of just one. And extremes bonding is just what this is all about. I’m *extremely* male, she’s *extremely* female, and Fusing is going to be a bond between us.”

Merie sighed, giving up on the philosophy. “Beck, you just want to be the first Totalian to do this, don’t you?”

“That’s...part of it, I guess.” Beck shrugged. “There’s also a hefty dose of curiosity. C’mon, haven’t *you* ever wondered what it would be like to be a guy?”

Merie shook her head. “Why would I? I’m happy the way I am.”

Beck smirked. “*Sure* you are. But...also, well, if I’m going to Fuse a RIDE, I want the best match I can get. The help file said anything above 90 is pretty rare, and to get one in a batch this small is something special.” He shrugged. “You know how much we’ve all given up already for the sake of our country, and what have we gotten out of it so far? Stuck in an abandoned terraforming plant halfway around the world with prices on all our heads. By comparison, saying goodbye to Mr. Happy seems like such a small thing in return for something *good*, like the best new partner I can get.”

Merie looked away. “New’ partner, huh?”

“What? Now hey, it’s not like that.” Beck put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m not talking about replacing you. Any more than you’d be replacing me if you got a RIDE. This is just a *different* kind of partner, that’s all. It won’t change anything about *our* friendship.”

She looked at him with a level, measuring gaze. “Give me that tablet. I want to

take one of those tests. Maybe I'll even find a *male* match. If you're so set on this, I'm not going to let you do it alone, 'Becky'. This process works both ways, right? Well, the Aphorism of Balance is at work here. If you're going to switch, so will I."

"That's not an official Aphorism," Beck pointed out.

"No, it's my personal Aphorism," Merie said. "Give me that tablet, Lieutenant."

Kendlen and Asante returned to find Brunhilde in a fine Valkyrie fury. She was standing in front of Beck Hensley, fists clenched, yelling into his face.

"—are *idiot!* Complete *zadrota!* You do not even know what you are talking about!" She lapsed into a torrent of rapid-fire Russian that lasted for a good thirty seconds before stopping to take a breath. Kendlen found it a little odd that her accent actually seemed to lighten when she was mad.

Beck didn't avert his gaze, but looked back at her with a raised eyebrow, and jerked his thumb at Kendlen. "What's the problem? You were willing to match *him* up with a female RIDE."

"Was joke! Had shown he was not interesting in it anyway!"

"So why can't I be?" Beck shrugged. "People have assumed my name was 'supposed' to be 'Becky' all my life. I might as well correct nature's mistake."

"You can be my girlfriend!" Maxl put in. He was leaning against a giant furry grey wolf on the edge of the field, watching with his own lupine ears cocked forward. "Hey, 'Becky,' wanna go out with me?"

Brunhilde glowered at him then back at Beck again. "This is big *joke* to you! None of you are taking seriously! You have no idea what you would be getting into. You do not even believe it is real. This will make you *girl* for *three years!* You will have boobs, no dick, and angry time of month! You really want that?"

"Why not? If it's just for three years, I can put up with it for that long. How do I know if I'll like it or not if I haven't tried it?"

"And what about RIDE? Is not fair to force newborn to have to deal with you. After novelty wears off, you will be angry and out of sorts. You will take out on your RIDE, who never asked for it and does not even know how real human girl is supposed to be. Nyet. If you really *want* to be girl, Chatka can do this for you without hurting *malyshka* RIDE feelings."

The big bear moved forward. "It would be a pleasure."

"But I still want a RIDE of my own," Beck insisted. "Look, I promise I'll do my best not to, uh, hurt her feelings. But if I'm going to let a RIDE mess with my body and mind at all, I might as well go all the way. Someone's got to be the first, uh, 'crossrider' on Totalia, and it might as well be me."

"It is true he does have a closer personality match among the female RIDEs than the males..." Chatka pointed out.

Brunhilde threw up her hands. "Argh!"

Kendlen felt he should say something. Just an hour ago the man had cold feet about RIDEs, *now* he wanted to crossride? "Uh...Beck, you know, this isn't a joke. You'll really have to deal with being a woman for three years...while hiding out in the wilderness, fighting for our freedom. Maybe you don't think they're serious, but they are."

Beck rolled his eyes. "Aw, not you too. Look, you want me to write up a statement and sign it, with witnesses? Whatever happens, I'll deal with it. It can't be any weirder

than hooking up with a RIDE in the first place. And if people like Merie here can deal with being a woman while hiding out in the wilderness, I think I can too.”

“For what it’s worth, I believe he is serious,” Merie Sims said. “He *has* thought it through—about as well as he ever thinks anything through, at least.”

Beck rolled his eyes. “Gee, thanks.”

Merie ducked her head in a semi-formal bow. “You are welcome.”

“Look,” Brunhilde said, regaining some composure. “Even crossriders at home often seek transition therapy. Especially when happens accidentally! Brain is made womanly, yes, but...”

“Then I don’t understand the problem,” Beck said.

“Is more to being woman than having right mental plumbing,” Brunhilde said. “But if you *truly* wish to be the first Totalian to cross, my Chatka will do it. Will *not* subject newborn RIDE it.”

Oh, I think I get it now, Kendlen thought. “Beck, can we talk a minute?”

Beck turned to him. “Uh, sure boss?”

“Follow me—us.” Kendlen gave Asante a pat on the shoulders. They walked over to a semi-private place among the decaying concrete walls. Asante sat on his haunches and licked the back of his forepaws. “I know what you think you’re doing. I think Brunhilde hit it right on the money.”

Beck frowned. “Kendlen, I respect you. You’re the boss. But you’re ten years my junior. I’m capable of making this decision.”

“You have no idea what you’re getting into. You haven’t spent any time at all around a RIDE...much less Fused with one. I have on both counts. You don’t know what they’re like at all. You don’t have the experience you need to make a decision this important. And personally, I don’t think you really believe their tech can do this anyway. Not deep down.”

“Oh, come on. The stuff those scouts gave us before they left says people over there get crossed over all the time by *accident*, and they seem to make out okay. I’m doing this on purpose. Why shouldn’t I? The way I see it, this is also a way of showing the Zharusians how committed we are to this alliance.”

:You will not dissuade him,: Asante sent. *:His biosigns are firmly set for this.:*

Kendlen crossed his arms. “You seem to have it all figured out. Well, there’s one person you’re forgetting.”

Beck blinked. “What, you?”

Kendlen shook his head.

“Then who?”

“You tell me. See if you *can* tell me.” *:If he’s clueful enough to get it, I’ll back him. If not...well, Chatka can have him if he still wants it. Then we’ll keep his matchmate reserved for a while ‘til we see how he adjusts.:*

:Wise,: Asante said. *:I would not want any of my bootsisters hurt.:*

Beck looked at the big leopard, then back at Kendlen, as the two conversed privately. Understanding dawned. “Ohh... I forgot, er, what’s-her-name. The one that the survey said I was a good match for.”

Kendlen raised an eyebrow. “What’s-her-name?”

“Uh, Inge, the cougaress RIDE that came up as the match. Sorry. I’m a little flustered by all this.”

“All right. What *about* her, Beck?” *:Sheesh, I sound like my college logic teacher.*

He was always big on the Socratic method.:

“Well, like Big Bertha over there said. She’s basically a newborn, right? I mean, I suppose I could take Chatka up on that offer to cross me first. That might make things smoother for Inge.”

Asante spoke. “It might. But it might also deprive her of an important bonding experience. Crossriding is part of what we are made to do, after all.”

:I hadn’t considered that, and I wonder if Brunhilde did, herself.: Kendlen sent. It was quickly becoming second nature to think what he wanted to say to Asante. The cybernetics the nanotech had built in his head were working just as Madison had described. *:It’s too bad we can’t just ask her what she prefers...or if she’d even like Beck at all. When the fleet gets here, I’m going to have words with whoever thought sending us a bunch of unhatched eggs was a good idea. Seems like it’s causing more headaches than it’s solving.:*

:So far, my bootbrother and Maxl Beregán are getting along, as well as ourselves.: Asante pointed out. *:Perhaps try for three out of three?:*

Beck was silent, considering what Asante had said. “And your intentions toward her are...?” Kendlen prodded.

“Be the best partner I possibly can,” Beck said. “And...well, I *do* want to be first at this, Kendlen. I want to be more than just a historical footnote for having rescued the First Tranche. I know it’s going to be weird in ways I can’t imagine—even after reading that ‘What to Expect When You’re Crossriding’ book in the info packet. That’s part of the point! But I can do this.”

Kendlen reflected for a long moment, then nodded. “If you can’t, you’re not the only one who’s going to get hurt. Think of what’ll happen when it goes public to the rest of Totalia. You’re going to end up the default spokesm...spokesperson for their nanotech, good or bad. You sure you want to take that risk?”

Beck swallowed. “I...think I can handle it.”

“Also, Maxl is going to ask you out. You sure you want to take *that* risk?”

Beck laughed. “I think he was joking, Kendlen. He’s like that.” He paused. “I *think*.”

“Okay.” Kendlen sighed. He nervously combed his hair back with his fingers. “Okay. I’ll talk to Brunhilde and tell her I’m convinced you know enough about what you’re doing to let you go ahead. Let’s call in the medicos and someone from the First Tranche to observe. If this is what you want, we’re going to do it right. Record everything. For posterity.”

As they returned to the others, Merie Sims was approaching Brunhilde with a tablet. “Can you point out to me which one of these is the timber wolf, Knute? I see that I have an 89th-percentile personality match with him.”

Brunhilde facepalmed and muttered something very impolite in Russian.

Chapter 4

True Totalian Cosmy Flagship Eye of Horus, Low Orbit

Fleet Admiral Jermy Orinson's eyes snapped open on the first beep of the alarm, instantly alert. By the time he sat up, he was already beginning to relax; the alarm was an alert, but not a hull breach alarm or similarly disastrous warning. He hit the direct comm line to the bridge while he pulled on his uniform.

"What is it this time?" he snapped at the officer that answered.

"Another explosion sir, low orbit like the rest."

"Anything down there to explode?"

"Negative sir, it's empty space up there. Nothing to shoot at, nothing to blow up. No sign of what it was."

The alarm went silent, but the damage was done; sleep was out of the question for the rest of this cycle. "I'm on my way up."

"The coffee will be waiting."

Jermy stepped through the hatch and glanced around the bridge. Everyone was relaxed, busy with their tasks. "At ease," he called out before anyone could move. He headed over to the tactical station.

"Sir," the officer acknowledged him, moving over. "As reported, same as the rest of them. Dozens of explosions, bearing similar characteristics to our ship-to-ship missile warheads—but to no effect. There is nothing in the area for them *to* affect."

An ensign brought over the Admiral's coffee, and stayed back. Jermy sipped the drink and waited a moment. "No sign of anything before it went off?"

"Same as the rest, no sign anything before it went off. Nothing from the planet, nothing from the outside. Just suddenly, *Boom!*"

"Great. Does anyone have anything new?" Jermy looked around.

At the science station, a lieutenant raised her hand. "I think I know where the aliens are."

The Admiral stared her down until she spoke again. "I'm still verifying, but the weather sats recorded a disturbance a few days ago."

He joined her at her station, and watched her bring up the readings. "The air currents are disturbed over the ocean, here. Not much but it doesn't match the meteorological models. It's too straight a line to be natural."

The screen showed an infrared view of the planet. The angle wasn't good, but an obvious straight line crossed the screen.

"Do you know where they went?" he asked hopefully. Clarke was getting impatient to have any sort of news about what the aliens were up to.

"The coverage is too spotty. And once they cooled down enough they could have gone anywhere. But I think we can assume they are planetside."

Jermy nodded, it was some news, and it got the problem out of his domain. "Good work. We shrunk the search space down at least."

"Thank you sir."

The admiral turned around and briefly considered his next move. "Put a call

down to the planet, to Clarke's office. Patch it through to my office."

Jermy left the bridge to the small side room. It was barely big enough for two, but it gave him a space for private conversations. He skimmed over the rest of the night's reports while his call request worked its way through the bureaucracy.

The screen beeped, drawing his attention. "Good morning, Speaker," he greeted Clarke, noting the other man looked surprisingly composed for the time of the call.

"Good morning indeed. Do you have news?"

"I do indeed. We've been looking for the Zharusian ship up here, when apparently it's been down on the planet all along."

Raph's eyes narrowed. "They landed after all, then?"

"That's our best guess. We spotted a trail in the met-records. It disappeared before we could figure out where they are, but we're confident it's down there. We're still trying to figure out where."

Speaker Clarke sighed, his shoulders visibly bowing. "I'll advise General Tilson to have his recon flights keep an eye out. It's a big ship; there can't be that many places it can hide."

"More than you might think. We assumed it wasn't atmospheric and they surprised us. What other surprises do they have?"

"You assumed, at least." Clarke glared at him a moment. "So, since you don't have the alien ship to worry about, what else are you doing up there?"

The admiral sighed and organized his thoughts. "We had another explosion in low orbit. Same as the fourteen before it."

"Sandeep's doing?" Clarke asked.

"Possibly? Their purpose still eludes us. The spies haven't sent any more reports, and their previous ones haven't hinted at anything like this."

"Anything else?"

Jermy shrugged. "Not really. We're still coping with a manpower shortage. Since that isn't ending before more aliens show up, I've had the Shipyard start making some unmanned projects, that we can leave as surprises anywhere they might gather. There is one problem... We lost contact with the automated Totalium factories in the Kuiper Belt."

"Lost contact? Why didn't you tell me before?"

"We just confirmed it ourselves. The shipyard didn't receive the loads that should have been incoming. I sent the *Hermes Trismegistus* out to look at the main factory, and it's gone."

"Sandeep and the Aliens again?"

"It's the only explanation. No debris, so they probably took them over."

Clarke sighed. "Oh that's just great. We have enough reserves down here to last awhile at least. Are you good up there?"

"There's still enough coming in from the rest of the factories that we'll be all right for a while. The Shipyard has enough stocked up to last a year, and our project has more than enough for its needs."

"So we have a missing alien ship and a missing Totalium factory. Anything else go missing?"

Jermy glanced away. "Actually, that's four factories. Three automated ones and the main controller. Eight people ran the master. None are responding."

"Well you're just full of good news, aren't you? Anything else?"

“No sir. Other than that, everything’s going according to plan.”

Clarke studied the Admiral across the vid-link before closing it without another word. Jermy made sure the connection was closed, before slumping back in his seat, letting out a long held breath.

“Well, that went better than expected,” he said to the blank screen. He stood up and headed out to see which problem he could tackle next.

May 22, 158 AL (Totalia equivalent)
Nectar River Resistance Base

“We have very strict limits on how our Integrates can operate, worked out with the Totaliment members aboard the *Kybalion* and then ratified by the full session here,” Ghostate said. No, *Gigi*, Kendlen corrected himself. They’d explained about how they adopted different names based on their different forms. It didn’t seem any weirder than anything else about them, so he shrugged and went with it. The male owl who’d turned into a female cheetah stood on the opposite side of the planning table where the Resistance made their coordination plans with the Zharusians. “No breaking into civilian networks. No noodling around in mid-level systems without operational necessity.”

Lt. Beregan smirked. “So why don’t you just shut ‘em all down? All the computers the Zealots are using? The way Captain Roberts just took over our systems, it seems like that should be easy.”

“As we’ve said, we want to interfere as little as we can in your internal affairs.”

“It’s a matter of trust,” Kendlen said. “We’re trusting them to keep their word, Lieutenant.”

“And we will,” Gigi said. “Within those limits there’s still a lot we *can* do. The First Tranche approved a DINcom tap in the Cosmy Admiralty and Planetary Command buildings. That will be our first mission.”

“So why the restrictions at all?” Maxl asked. “I’m sure there are ways hacking civilian systems would help us, too. For one thing, we have to resupply with food every so often and we have to hit civvie warehouses for that.”

“Food won’t be such an issue now, Maxl,” Kendlen said. “We’re using the bigger fabbers they brought to make food fabbers productive enough to feed thousands. It won’t be the tastiest, but it’ll make that supply line that much more secure.”

“Unless they stop working. And fresh food is a good morale booster. Always was on the Big K.”

“There’s also the fact that both we and the Totaliment agree that it would be better in the long run if we don’t do very much at all.” The cheetah shook her head. “It’s not going to look great to your people that you need *any* outside help to clean house as it is, let alone interference from alien shapeshifting invaders from planet Z. You can bet your Zealots will seize upon any sightings of us as ‘proof’ that you’ve been co-opted by xenomorphs.”

Kendlen opened his mouth, then paused when he received a message via Asante.
:*First Tranche is calling everyone in, Kendlen. The Kybalion retrieved a message torpedo from Zharus a few hours ago,:* the RIDE said. *:It has the first report from Dr. Sigurdssen and Teenette. They’re uploading the contents, but slowly.:*

“Well, well.” Kendlen raised an eyebrow, then looked to Ghostate. “Looks like we

just got a care package from your extended family.”

“So I heard.” Gigi tapped the side of her head. “But it’ll be another hour before they have everything downloaded. Don’t want to burn out too many com units. We can finish up here and join them in the meeting chamber.”

“Great. So, let’s go over your plans for getting those taps into place...”

Later that afternoon, Kendlen sat in Asante’s virtual jungle clearing with a dozen display panels open all around him. He was rapidly coming to realize this was one of the best ways to review a lot of information at one time—which was a good thing, because a lot of information was exactly what there was.

He’d only had time to go over the text reports and some of the photos, but he was already amazed by some of the things in them. Foremost, he was relieved to know Barbaretta was all right...but he was somewhere between puzzled and incredulous that she had apparently been uploaded into a RIDE. He might have partnered a RIDE, but Barbaretta now *was* one. And partnered with Teenette, of all people. *That* had to be weird.

“It does seem odd,” Asante agreed. “But I have reviewed all the material. They seem very happy together so far.”

“Uploaded into a RIDE...what would that even be like?”

Asante purred and licked the back of a paw. “I am *sure* I would not know.”

Kendlen snorted. “Yeah. What do you think, maybe we can trade places someday?”

“Apparently, anything is possible.”

And even Darrek had found a new friend...another person of synthetic intelligence named Arca. She was an EIDE. Kendlen wasn’t entirely clear on how that differed from RIDEs, save that she didn’t have animal features. He imagined he would find out as he went through the additional material.

Kendlen pulled up some of the video files and took his first look at another world. Well, not really his first, given that the files Samantha had copied onto his computer had a lot of footage of all the colonies. But this was the first video showing someone he knew *on* that other world. Darrek and Teenette were exploring Aloha, the tourist paradise with the huge space elevator right next door. They went into shops and took footage of the wares available. They went to the beaches and saw people with a lot fewer clothes on than was the average on Totalian beaches. They went to parties and tried various beverages of interesting colors—all in the name of serious cultural research, of course. It seemed parties were available at all hours and all days in that city.

And that was just the first of many videos. Hours and hours of them. “And you’ve already watched all of these?”

“I do have a moderate advantage when it comes to speeding up my perceptions.”

“So what do you think of it all?”

Asante flicked his ears back and forth. “It is...interesting to learn more of the world on which I was made. I feel mild regret that I did not have the chance to learn more of it before I left.”

Kendlen nodded. “Yeah, that’s right...you didn’t get a choice about coming here, did you. Do you want to go back there someday?”

Asante turned one amber eye in his direction. “Perhaps, to visit. But it is not so important to me. *This* is the world on which I was born. Did you get to choose where

you were born?

Kendlen chuckled. “I get it. Yeah, I think I’d probably like to see Earth myself someday—the planet where my genes were made. But Totalia will always be home.”

“Exactly.” Asante purred. “Why don’t you watch the next video? It’s quite good. They visit Nextus.”

“I still can’t believe you really went and did it.” Becky’s voice sounded weird in her inner ears. It was as if she’d inhaled a balloon full of helium that stuck. And that was on top of the way her hearing was different thanks to the new swiveling kitty ears. The funny thing was that of all the strange new things about her newly female body, that was actually the hardest part to get used to—not the weird new lumps where there hadn’t been any and the absence where there’d used to be something important, but the fact that the voice inside her own head when she spoke was a stranger’s now. She wondered if Merie—Merle, now—felt the same way.

“What’s so hard to believe?” Merle asked in his new rich baritone. “I told you, it’s important to keep Balance.”

“Yeah, well, how are you going to balance all the hundreds or thousands of people who do it after this war is over and anyone can get a RIDE?”

“I won’t have to.” Merle shrugged with the same equanimity that had irked him when Merie did it. “Once that happens, the numbers will balance out by themselves. But when it’s only one person, there should be an opposite. Yin to Yang.”

“And what happens if there isn’t one?” Becky demanded, ears laid back. “The world blows up or something?”

“Bad things happen. Very bad.” Merle grinned at her. “Fortunately, we don’t have to worry about finding out.”

“You’re just lucky no one else wanted to crossride, or you might have had to find some other yangs to yin.”

Merle rolled his eyes. “That doesn’t even make *sense*.”

Inge, purring up a storm, headbumped her partner’s torso affectionately. Becky returned it by stroking the fur between her ears. “It may not make sense, but it will be a great adventure regardless, right?”

“I suppose.” Merle glowered at her. “It’s so hard to sit comfortably with this...this farking great *sausage* in the way. How do you even do it? I can’t even cross my legs properly.”

Becky grinned. “I don’t have to worry about that anymore. Really, you should have thought about *that* before you changed.”

Merle snorted. “Just you wait a few weeks and see how you feel then. I am *really* looking forward to that.”

The rest of the Resistance had taken this development more in stride than expected. Exposure to the Zharusians had taken the edge off—what was one more shock? After the double-cross Becky and Merle had spent a few hours with the base doctors to determine just how thoroughly changed they were.

Becky was still a little miffed that Merie had decided to share the spotlight—and that the others had let her. If they thought *he* didn’t have the right attitude, how could they have let someone cross who just wanted to do it because of a religious notion of “balance”? “*Double-cross*” is *right*. But whatever she’d said to them had apparently worked, because they’d allowed it.

About the only *good* thing about all this was it had scared Maxl off once and for all from asking to date her. “I’m sorry, but I just can’t compete with the affections of someone who’s willing to go *that* far to stay in the running.” Neither Becky nor Merle had bothered to correct his misapprehension. (Which was a little puzzling when she thought about it. Becky knew why *she* hadn’t said anything, but why hadn’t Merle?)

Becky chuckled, and ran her hand down Inge’s tawny pelt again. All the annoyances and triumphs alike of the whole thing faded next to her. Becky hadn’t expected to feel this way, for all that their personalities were compatible and everything, but when they’d Fused, they’d really just “clicked.” *:Thanks for putting up with me, partner.:*

:You’re welcome,: Inge sent complacently. *:After all, it evens out. Maybe you only wanted me for the boobs...but since now every guy you run across will only want you for the boobs, you’ll soon know how that feels.:*

:Ha ha.: It was amazing, what it felt like being inside a living metal and hardlight powersuit. The Cyclone was like...well, it was like when you were little and your Mom made you a suit of “armor” out of cardboard boxes and shoe boxes. That was how it was by comparison to this...second skin that could fly and run and roll and fight...and *think*.

Now that she’d gone and done it, Becky realized what an idiot she—he—had been, and understood exactly what Brunhilde had been afraid of. He *hadn’t* been taking it seriously. He’d only thought he had. Even what he’d said to Kendlen about taking care of Inge had been just lip service.

But when that purring presence with the glowing amber eyes wrapped itself around her and sank into her mind, learning her and revealing herself inside and out, Becky *knew* this was another person—a singularly vulnerable person, practically a newborn, with no real-world experience or understanding. But, Becky suddenly knew, Inge would die to protect her...and she felt exactly the same way about Inge.

Did Merle and Knute feel the same way about each other? She hadn’t quite worked up the courage to ask. But as she saw Merle’s hand absently reach down to scratch behind one of the immense timber wolf’s ears, she suspected that it might not be that hard to guess.

*May 27, 158 AL (Totalia equivalent)
Near Totalia City*

Even though they were currently at war, with all the attendant dangers and hazards, Kendlen had to admit that seeing the familiar spires of Totalia City on the horizon still gave his heart a lift. Maybe it wasn’t safe to go back in there yet, but sooner or later it would be. And just being this close and seeing it with his own eyes counted for a lot.

:Actually, you are seeing it with my eyes,: Asante pointed out.

“Yeah, I guess you got me there.” Kendlen chuckled. He and Asante were Fused up, as were all the other RIDE-equipped members of their little troupe, including Becky and Merle, hiding amid the trees of a pine orchard bordering on one of the access roads that led to the satellite farming communities. The road made a sweeping curve at this point, with a rock outcropping on the inside of the curve blocking one end of it from the other. It was the perfect spot for an ambush.

It was really kind of bad security to have a forest this close to the road, but the

trees were themselves a cash crop, and precious given that there were no native-Earth forests anywhere else on the planet. The Zealots were willing to accept the risk. Really, both sides had a kind of unspoken agreement to try to keep the war as limited as possible in order not to damage the resources the eventual victor would need. Kendlen wasn't sure he wanted to speculate on how the introduction of forces from outside the star system (and outside his culture's limited experience) was going to affect that balance.

Take the operation they were about to pull off now. Empty transport trucks would be coming from town to collect the harvest. They were going to knock down the trucks and block the road—but on the way out, not the way back. The food wouldn't be harmed—just delayed a bit. Even the trucks could be salvaged and rebuilt with auto-lathe factories almost as readily as the Zharusians could with their fabbers. Once they had the road well and truly blocked, they'd fade before the police or army showed up.

It was really only a minor operation, and something they could easily have pulled off even without the RIDEs. They'd done it before, with their makeshift pulse guns and some equally makeshift explosives. But this time it would serve the dual purpose of trying them out in a relatively low-risk situation, and also distracting the Zealots while the Integrates and their fellow infiltrators snuck into the city to plant the communication relays they'd brought along.

"Inge's picking up road vibrations that are about right for the convoy we're expecting," Becky reported over the comms. "ETA, about two minutes. Ready up, everyone. Just like we drilled it in virtual."

Kendlen nodded. "Affirmative." Despite his prior leadership role, in this operation he was just another soldier. Folks like Becky and Maxl had the most combat experience, so they were the ones in charge.

Becky opened a private comm channel to speak to Kendlen directly. "I still say you shouldn't even be out here, sir. You're too important to the Resistance—"

"Maybe that was true before, but we've got a Totaliment to lead us now. And with only 17 RIDEs adopted, you need every one you can get in the field." The remaining three RIDEs were still available to anyone who wanted them, but so far no one else had been interested. Kendlen imagined they'd get placed sooner or later, as cells were dispatched on operations and other cells with new people were pulled back to base to meet the aliens. "To be honest, I never was all that comfortable being in charge anyway. And I'm really looking forward to the chance to just shoot stuff for a change." After all the endless complications of the last week, *finally* something *simple*.

Becky chuckled. "All right, fair enough." She switched back to public. "Thirty seconds. Looks like there's a light tank in the lead, two trucks, another tank in the middle, three trucks, and one more tank in the rear. Let the first tank and the first two trucks pass, then open fire on the middle tank. The first tank should be out of sight behind that curve by then and out of the fight 'til they can get turned around. No fatalities if you can help it, but...take out those tanks."

A chorus of acknowledgements followed from human and RIDE alike, along with a couple of dry "yes, *ma'ams*" with them. Weapons were attached to gauntlets. A half dozen cloaked themselves and went to their ambush positions, while the others moved in to offer covering fire. Kendlen raised Asante's pulse rifle—a lot better than the ones he and Barbaretta had cobbled together back in Totalia City—and felt the whine vibrate through Asante's arms as the weapon powered up. The seconds ticked down...

And there they went. The first light tank—effectively a two-ton truck with armor plating and a pulse gun turret slapped on—proceeded up the road, followed by two cargo trucks. As the third tank began to pass by, Becky ordered, “Now!” Several pulse beams lanced out, slicing through the tank’s wheels, as gauss rounds hammered on its armor. Kendlen lined up a pulse blast that severed the barrel of the turret mount before it could even go into operation. Asante purred. :*Good shot, my friend.*:

The crew of the tank slammed open their hatches and left it in a hurry, running for cover in the forest with their hands over their heads. The RIDE gunners moved on to the trucks to either side. “Maxl! Merle! Get that rear tank!” The tank was blocked from direct fire on them by the curve of the road and the other trucks in the way, but it was trying to pull back and come up beside them. In another few moments it would be clear to fire.

“On it!” Maxl unclipped a cylinder from Bertrand’s hip, gave the end a twist, then a quick overarm toss. It hit the side of the turret with a clank and stuck in place. Three seconds later, it blew, knocking the turret off. Another toss sent a different cylinder into the hole left behind. A moment later, white clouds of tear gas billowed from all the tank’s openings, followed by its crew diving coughing and sputtering for cover.

“Jeseeph, Kren, the front tank!” A lynx and German shepherd hastened to give it a similar treatment.

By now, most of the truck drivers had followed their military compatriots into the forest for cover. Kendlen ran along the row of abandoned vehicles, checking to make sure each was truly empty. “We’re clear!” he reported.

“Good! You know what to do.”

Kendlen nodded. With help from the other RIDEs, they began to tip the trucks and tanks over, positioning them to block both lanes of the road in a layer several vehicles deep. “They’ll need to get cranes in to clear this out!” Maxl crowed. “Or an aerodyne, maybe. Damn! We couldn’t manage *this* with a few popguns and pipe bombs.”

Kendlen grinned. It felt good to be able to just lift and tip a deuce truck with almost no effort. He could honestly believe they were going to be able to pull this off.

Becky and Inge glanced up at the sky. “Word from the bird—they’re sending a relief column. Tanks, troops, and it looks like a couple fighters. Time to fade. That includes you, bird. Get your tailfeathers out of the sky and meet us back at the transport. Double-time, people!”

They stayed by the road, counting the troops as they passed until they were sure everyone was accounted for, then brought up the rear as they made their way through the trees to the clearing where they’d parked the aerodyne transport that Madison and the others had stolen so long ago. Since the Integrates had easily cracked the Zealots’ friend-or-foe transponder codes, they’d been able to pass themselves off as a Zealot cargo flight on the way in. Kendlen wasn’t sure the same trick would work a second time, or even well enough to let them get away this time, but it was worth a shot.

Becky strode up the center of the passenger compartment as RIDEs latched into place in the RIDE benches the *Clementine* crew had fabbed and installed for them. The last one in was the golden eagle RIDE who had been pulling lookout duty in the air. “Strap in, people! We’re in the air in fifteen.”

Kendlen grinned, reaching up to high-five Becky and Inge as they passed. “Good job out there.”

Becky nodded. “Yeah. I hope the other guys were able to pull it off as well.”

“*Scheisse!*” Scout Lieutenant Hamner Reinhagen returned fire from the Cyclone’s forearm cannons, the Zealots’ own white-hot bolts of energy flying overhead. Hamner had inherited the Cyclone since he didn’t want to take a RIDE away from a deserving Totalian. And he was more comfortable in the dumb machine anyway, despite its shortcomings.

“So, they have pulsers,” a large horse Fuser next to him said. “Big ones.”

These pulse cannons were mounted on tanks. They were bulky things compared to the railguns, with a lower rate of fire. But they burned through almost anything that wasn’t hardlight-shielded. The pulse-bolts were more like ball lightning—wild, unfocused. The weapons put out a lot of heat, too. It made them easy to target, but the automatic rifles the infantry had made returning fire a risky business if they focused fire.

“Fall back,” Hamner ordered. *Every edge we get, they seem to have a counter.* The Scout sighed. “This mission is a wash!”

“Maybe not completely.” The horse poked his gun out from cover and fired, minimizing his exposure thanks to the targeting sensor on the front. “Word is the Resistance’s op went great. And if there’s this many of them here, it means the pressure is off...” He trailed off, not wanting to take even the remote chance of being overheard, but Hamner knew what he meant. This was another poke-the-wasp’s-nest-with-a-stick mission, meant to draw the Zealots’ attention away from the other part of town, where a small team of Integrates and Lieutenant Rowcliff’s men would be infiltrating into the city if all went well.

“All right, team, hold the line for another minute, then we’ll fall back and let ‘em think they’ve won.”

“They kind of *have* won,” someone else muttered over the comm. They hadn’t taken any lethal casualties, but the *Clementine*’s med bay was going to be busy when they got back.

“So it shouldn’t be hard to get them to think it,” Hamner said. “We’ll see if we can get some heavier weapons fabbed for next time we come back.”

The horse fired a few more times. “That’d be nice.” He yelped as a pulse blast took a huge gouge out of the boulder they were crouched behind, just a few centimeters over from his head. “I think it’s time for the better part of valor.”

“Running the hell away?”

“Yeah. That.”

Hamner primed a grenade, and used the Cyclone’s arm actuators to toss it backward over the boulder without particularly looking where it was going. “Okay, people, let’s move! Grab the wounded and GTFO. No one left behind!”

On the other side of the city, the explosions were only a distant rumble. But they were a good sign, Bernie thought, as he led the team of infiltrators up a drainage culvert toward a stormwater runoff drain grating. It sounded like they were really drawing some fire. Good.

Bernie glanced back through one of his body’s rear-facing optics at the small group behind him. Directly behind him were the four human soldiers, Rowcliff and his men. They were among the few members of the crew who’d stayed awake during the

entire trip, studying for their role. They had soaked up every bit of Totalian history and culture Madison had sent back, including making a careful study of the native accents used in their audiovisual media. It wasn't really enough, but it was a start. They would be adopting Totalian identities and staying within the city even after the others had left.

Beyond them were the Integrate members of the team. Maxwell was a brown rat whose RIDE half had been with Nextus military intelligence during the Sturmhaven war. Dominique was a Eurasian Lynx from Uplift by way of Chakona Enclave, and Sharona was a shaggy Shetland pony who often wore a Camelot hardlight tabard. They hadn't met before the trip, but they'd spent subjective years training and drilling together in fast-time on the way over and by now carried on like old friends.

The Integrates weren't planning to stay long, as it was considered too risky for non-humans to linger within the city. It would simply be too easy to make a slip, and who knew what kind of sensory equipment the Zealots might have deployed by now that could penetrate their disguises? But their special abilities would come in handy on shorter sorties like this one, to make contact with the local Resistance, plant surveillance and communication gear, and help the humans get established via plausible whole-cloth identities inserted into the citizens database.

Then there was Bernie's job. It..wasn't going to be the most glamorous, but his completely inorganic body meant he could go places the humans couldn't. He didn't need to eat or breathe, and his custom body was almost as flexible as an Integrate shapeshifter's. The Marshals' Lithium Star division had outdone themselves creating it for him after he uploaded.

Having made a study of the schematics and blueprints Madison had sent back, aided by information picked up from discussions with natives back at Resistance HQ, Bernie planned to infiltrate the city's infrastructure in the most literal of senses. Apart from the underground tunnels the Resistance had used as a temporary headquarters, Totalia City was rife with cable conduits, ventilation ducts, and, of course, sewers that went practically everywhere. Which meant, so could Bernie.

Unfortunately, it *didn't* mean he could play Ninja Turtle. He was probably going to be more like *Get Smart's* Agent 13, poking his head out of unlikely spots to help the other infiltrators or the Resistance. *Oh well. It's a living.*

Bernie tested the grating over the tunnel. A rusty padlock held it in place at the bottom, and rusted hinges at the top. A low-powered pulse shot took care of the lock, and a little nano-lubricant ate away enough of the rust from the hinges to make the noise of opening it a non-issue. Bernie held up the grating then passed it to Rowcliff. Each of them would hold it up for the one behind him until the last Intie in the rear lowered it gently back into place.

"Times like this I'm glad I can shut down my nose," Maxwell said. The little rat Integrate's nose twitched nonetheless, out of habit perhaps.

"Some of us can't," Rowcliff said.

"Shh," Bernie said. "Secure comm only. Sound carries up pipes." He shifted shape to move on all fours, while most of those behind him had to walk slightly stooped over in the pipe's 1.5-meter height. Fortunately, they only had a hundred meters or so to go before they could break out into the old tunnels. They would be coming out not far from the site of the old Resistance base, though they didn't plan to reconnoiter it. There wouldn't be anything left there by now anyway, except possibly Zealot surveillance cameras to see if anyone did drop by. Bernie thought he might check it out later on his

own, nonetheless.

This grate wasn't locked, but it was welded into place. But his pulse gun could be reconfigured as a cutting torch, and it only took a few seconds to open this one up, too.

"You guys picking up any cameras in range?" Bernie sent via comm.

"Nothing within a hundred meters," Dominique reported.

"Okay, we'll risk it. But keep an eye out. Given that the Resistance used to be all over this place, it wouldn't make sense for them *not* to try to keep an eye on it."

They slipped out into the concrete tunnels, lit dimly by self-contained long-life bulbs built into the ceiling. This section of tunnel was deserted, which was all right by Bernie. They'd be meeting the Resistance elsewhere.

Sharona raised a hoofhand. "Hold up, boss." She blew and popped a large pink bubble, slurping it back into her mouth with a big equine tongue. "Camera, next corner...okay, diddled it. Carry on."

"Thanks." Bernie still wasn't sure whether the bubble gum was real or hardlight, and had never quite worked up the nerve to ask. Wouldn't it get stuck in her fur? But then again, maybe Integrate lifter fields would lift it right out. Either way, it was an integral part of the laid-back Cascadia slacker persona she carefully projected. Bernie wondered whether they had bubble gum on Totalia.

They followed the tunnels for a couple of clicks, feeding cameras looped footage of empty halls as they passed. They moved fairly slowly to make sure they didn't miss one, but still made good progress over time. At last, they climbed a flight of stairs up to a sealed metal bulkhead door. The Integrates seized control of every camera outside and declared no one was in the area. Bernie squirted nano-lubricant liberally all over it and gave it a good five minutes to work before he slowly cranked the wheel in the middle and swung the door outward, letting in the bright afternoon sunlight.

They came out in a small park. The door behind them was in a small concrete-block building that served as the base of an impressive albeit somewhat abstract statue of a pyramid. "TUNNEL ACCESS/STORM SHELTER" was stenciled above the door.

"Disguises in place, everyone," Bernie reminded them. "Sharona, no bubble gum until we know for sure it's a thing they do here, okay?"

Sharona rolled her eyes. "Aw, geez, boss..." But she took the gum out and very carefully stuck it behind one ear (well, that answered that, then), before assuming the disguise of a young woman in jeans and sweatshirt, with mirrorshades and chestnut hair pulled back in a bun. Dominique had a silk dress with a pattern that seemed somewhere between leopard print and camouflage, her dark hair plaited in a French braid. Maxwell had a grey serge suit. All their clothing looked slightly weird to Bernie, but that was because it was cut to the Totalian fashion, which tended toward baggy trousers and sleeves, and shirts and jackets that came down to mid-thigh. In particular, Bernie privately thought Maxwell looked like he was cosplaying David Byrne in *Stop Making Sense*.

Lieutenant Rowcliff and his men came next. They'd changed out of their uniforms half a click back, transferred their equipment to native knapsacks and duffels, and cached the foreign stuff behind a section of wall stone the Integrates had cut and hollowed out for them.

Maxwell nodded to him. "Your turn, Bernie."

"Right. Let me see." Bernie considered a moment, then shifted his proportions and appearance to female, human, and pulled up a local-style dress that seemed to be

part gown and part kimono. At least the female Totalian fashions weren't quite as ridiculous as the male ones. "How do I look?" Brooke asked.

Sharona flashed her a quick thumbs-up. "Like a natural, boss."

"Great. OK, you've all memorized the maps and know your routes. We'll meet up at Karlyl's Restaurant in 90 minutes. Got it?"

"We're clear." Dominique held out her arm to Maxwell, who gallantly took it, and they strolled nonchalantly out from behind the building. Brooke silently counted up to two minutes, then nodded again, and one of Rowcliff's men—Stebbins—walked out in the opposite direction. After a few more minutes, two more of them left, and then Rowcliff himself.

Sharona grinned at Brooke. "Looks like it's just you and me, boss-ette."

Brooke smiled back. "So it is. You've studied this place a lot more than I have, so is there anything important I need to know before we step out?"

Sharona shrugged. "Just act natural."

"Fair enough." Brooke followed her out into the city.

Chapter 5

For all that she was an old hand at acting jaded, Brooke still found her nonchalance sorely tested as they walked through Totalia City. She finally just gave up and used the hardlight to camouflage her rubbernecking. (She wondered if the Integrates were doing the same.) This was a city that had been built a century ago on designs a century older, and evolved completely independently of any outside influence since then. It was like nothing else she'd seen on Earth, Zharus, Wednesday, or in pictures and vids of the other colonies, which all tended to share at least a touch of sameness in one respect or another.

"Yeah, it's a peach, innit?" Sharona said via private comm.

Brooke blinked. "What, were you—?" But no, she had a DINsec, she'd have known if she was being hacked.

Sharona chuckled. "No great mystery what you're thinking, boss lady. Thinkin' some of the same myself. Neither part of me was ever off Zharus before. Not even to Wednesday. 'Til a couple years back, never thought I'd ever *get* to go anywhere. All this...it's totally new, and I can't wait to explore it. Only sad I can't stay as long as you."

Brooke shrugged. "You never know. After we've been here a while, maybe we'll decide it's safe. Anyway, it's just 'til the war's over."

Sharona gave a particularly equine snort. "Yeah. Funny. You think these people even know there's a war on?" She nodded toward the other civilians on the street, all peacefully going about their business. "Other places, there'd be austerity measures, buy-government-bonds signs, maybe even tanks in the streets. But here..."

Brooke nodded. "Know what you mean. It's like they don't want all the bad stuff from a war, so they're trying not to actually have one as much as possible. All the ones who're fighting it know if they get all the civvies mad at *them*, it's game over. So the Zealots don't want to piss the people off by tightening the belt, and the Resistance don't want to make life hard for them to force an ending." She shook her head. "It's like a prisoner's dilemma. If either side went all-out, they'd probably win the battle, but they'd lose the war. It's a stalemate."

"Yep. It's why they need us." Sharona opened her mouth, started to reach back toward her ear, and stopped herself. "You know, I'm *pretty* sure they have bubble gum here, boss-gal..."

Brooke smirked. "Buy me a pack and we'll talk."

Karlyl's Restaurant was a friendly little bistro in one of the more historic downtown districts. Kendlen had said it wasn't far from his old penthouse. He hadn't eaten there especially often, so he didn't think the Zealots would have any particular reason to keep an eye on it. It served mostly burgers, pork cutlet sandwiches, and other home-cooking-style fare remembered from Earth or made up anew on Totalia.

"We're with the, uh, Fellin party?" Brooke said. The greeter nodded, and ushered them into a back room where two tables were pushed together to seat a dozen people. Rowcliff and two of his men were already there, along with two natives. Brooke recognized the conservatively-dressed older one right away from the pictures Kendlen had given her: Professor Mikken Fellin, a History of Pop Culture professor at Totalia

University, and leader of one of the local Resistance cells. Kendlen aside, he was also the only member of the Resistance currently on the planet who had met Madison, Samantha, and the other Zharus Scouts in person.

Brooke nodded to him. "Hello, Professor. Is it safe to meet openly like this?"

"My research has led me to conclude it's safer than trying to sneak around. The less you act as though you have something to hide, the less suspicion you attract." He smiled faintly. "Also, the owner of this place is a friend of mine, and we sweep it for surveillance devices regularly."

"Good enough. I'm Brooke, this is Sharona...I take it Rowcliff's introduced his people to you. Ah, there's Sgt. Stebbins." She waved as the waiter ushered the fourth human in. "We're just missing Maxwell and Dominique..." She pinged their comms. "...and they're just up the street. Be here in five minutes. Great."

"This is my second, Recha Throckmorton. Also one of my graduate students." Mikken nodded to the young woman seated next to him, her pale blonde hair in a pageboy cut. "And you're from...outside."

Brooke nodded. "If we were somewhere really private, we could drop our disguises. Still..." She glanced around to make sure no one was looking, and let the hardlight disguise over her metallic arm flicker out for a moment, then back on. "Proof enough?"

Mikken's eyes widened, and Recha outright stared. "But that's...you..."

Mikken recovered his aplomb. "I did tell you what kind of people we'd be meeting, Recha."

"Yes, but...actually *seeing* it..."

Sharona waved a hand. "You understand, we're not here to try to take over or anything. We'd just like to see you guys back in charge."

"We want to help, that's all." Brooke shrugged. "I know even you guys are going to be suspicious of us, and that's okay. I'd be, in your shoes. We'll let our actions speak for us. Anyway, we're putting ourselves in your hands here—if you guys should find you can't trust us, all you have to do is call the Zealots and turn us in."

Mikken shook his head. "I'm sure *that* won't be necessary. Between you and them, you are definitely the lesser evil."

"Anyway, we brought you this." Brooke slid a local-format media chip across the table to Mikken. "Recording of the *real* Totaliment in session. Watch it when you have the chance." Mikken nodded and swiftly pocketed it.

Rowcliff spoke up. "We also have comm gear that can put you directly in touch with them with no chance of interception. If you have a safe-enough place for us to set it up."

"Oh, you started without us?" Dominique asked as she and Maxwell entered the room. "I suppose we were a little late."

Maxwell nodded. "Missed it by *that* much."

Mikken shot him an odd glance, then shook his head. "Please, be seated. If this is everyone, we should go ahead and order. You, ah, do *eat*, right?"

Brooke grinned. "The rest of 'em do, I don't. Well, I can if I really have to, to keep my cover, but no point among friends."

"Too bad. The food here is really quite good." Mikken waved the waitress over with menus, and shop talk ceased while everyone placed their orders.

After the food had arrived and people had a chance to address it, Brooke asked,

“So how are things inside the city? It doesn’t look like the war is hitting anyone especially hard.”

Mikken sighed. “It’s not. That’s one of the reasons it’s hard for the Resistance to get traction. People seem to have gone back to not caring about the greater galaxy again.”

“But what about all those letters they sent in, all that publicity, back when the Scouts were here?” Brooke asked. “I gather they were running in favor of contact.”

“*Slightly* in favor.” Mikken shrugged. “Without the Scouts themselves around to keep the pressure on, people tend to forget. They lose their enthusiasm, put their heads down, and worry more about day-to-day life. And the Resistance has not exactly been good at getting the message out since the Zealots effectively drove them out of the city.”

Sharona grinned. “Well now, *that* we can change. Comm equipment cuts both ways, eh?”

Brooke nodded. “We’re going to pull a repeat of the same stunt Madison did to get her video out at your rally, but we’re going to make it a little more permanent this time.”

“And not just for the propaganda, either.” Dominique smiled serenely. “We have brought diplomats along. I am sure they will want to speak to the usurpers and see if some kind of peaceful transfer of power can be arranged.”

“We are very eager for a peaceful solution. But it’s been...difficult for the legitimate First Tranche to gain traction for negotiations,” Mikken said. “As they have no doubt informed you.”

Brooke grinned. “We’ll see how that changes when we call them out on every vid screen in the city.”

“I don’t know about this...” Recha said. “It seems unnecessarily...disruptive.”

“Some disruption is exactly what we need at this point, Recha,” Mikken said. “Our little civil war has been very divorced from the average Totalian. People have forgotten what’s at stake. We cannot keep fighting among ourselves now that the rest of the galaxy knows about us. The isolationists have already lost. We must face reality and meet the rest of humanity on our terms.”

:Hmm. Remind me to have Rowcliff keep an eye on this Recha chick,: Brooke commed to the Integrates. *:Seems like she might be the sort to change her mind about things if it looks like they’ll cause too much “trouble.”:*

“What you’re basically talking about is a propaganda war,” Recha said, folding her arms.

“Well, you are already in a civil war. At least a propaganda war tends to have fewer fatalities.”

“It’s our job to help keep a clear line of communication between the legitimate government and the people who actually voted for it. We have methods they can’t block,” Brooke said. “Those are our orders direct from the Totaliment-in-Exile themselves. And we’ll do that whether the Zealots want it or not.”

“Believe me, miss, we’d all rather be back on Zharus, relaxing on an Alohan beach with one of those drinks that comes with the little pink umbrella in it,” Maxwell said. “But we came out here because your government—your *real* government—officially asked us to help. And we’re going to do what *they* tell us to. No more, no less.”

Recha sighed. “I guess you’re right...”

“Of course I’m right.” Maxwell gave the lapels of his suit a tug. “And once we get

the comms set up, you can talk to them about it yourself.”

Brooke cleared her throat. “We probably should go ahead and get around to that, while Rowcliff’s men get settled.”

“Of course.” Mikken nodded. “We have temporary quarters set up for them, until they can find a more permanent situation. What about the rest of you...?”

Brooke rose. “We’ll be in touch.”

“Oh...by the way,” Sharona said. “You *do* have bubble gum here, right?”

Recha blinked. “Bubble...what?”

Sharona sighed. “Aw, horse apples.”

A few hours later, the sun had gone down, and the Totalia City lights shone brightly forth, with little regard for making it difficult for enemy bombers to find targets. *Since they know the Resistance doesn’t have any, and if they did, they wouldn’t use them on civilian targets*, Brooke thought. *What a crazy way to hold a war. She supposed it would probably change once the Fleet arrived. Well, enjoy the scenery while you can, deerie.*

She wondered what her friends back Zharus-side were doing. Aleka, Vanna, Zoey, Fenwick, and the rest of Aleka’s bunch...Tamarind, Jeanette, and the other Young Guns. Would any of them be riding the Fleet out? Or would they be staying to keep order in a world that suddenly had a large number of its heroes occupied elsewhere? It would be just like that Appa to cause trouble when he thought the forces of law and order were at their weakest...

Her thoughts were interrupted by a transmission over the secure comm line. “Sharona here. In position.”

“Dominique, in position.”

“Maxwell, in position.”

Brooke replied. “Brooke, in position. Any surprises where you are?” The replies came back in the negative. “Then go for it, just like we practiced in virtual. Comm if anything happens.”

The Integrates were infiltrating three of the city’s main communication hubs to plant their gear, and Brooke was at a fourth. In a way, she’d taken the most challenging assignment. The Integrates’ hubs were located out in the open, or at the least inside buildings, where it would simply be a matter of fiddling with an access panel and leaving.

Brooke’s assignment was one of the internal hubs deep within the city’s infrastructure. Apart from a high-security military checkpoint, the only way in was to crawl a hundred meters down a one-meter-wide cable conduit whose available space narrowed to half a meter in places. “Good thing I brought a can of Crisco, ‘cuz it’s shortening,” she muttered as she went down the stairs to the tunnel entrance. The conduit ran right along the ceiling here, with an inspection hatch right above her.

Brooke dropped her human disguise, reverting back to plain ol’ Bernie. Then his metallic body began to elongate and stretch out, becoming taller and narrower. He looked down at his suddenly-spindly form and chuckled. He simply couldn’t resist; he had to say it. “I am Groot!”

Then he kicked in the lifters to rise up and into the conduit. Rather than try to slither like a snake, he simply used the lifters to push himself forward, or up, or down, or backward as necessary, while he maneuvered himself around and through potential

obstacles. *Heh. I shoulda been a plumber. Or at least a roto-rooter.*

Almost before he knew it, he had made it to the end of the conduit. He quickly scanned for any signs of tamper resistance or alarms, but didn't find any. *Of course, who would expect someone to come in from this way?* He extended his upper half into the box, wrapping snake-like around the cluster of circuit boards that made up its inner workings. He made sure to stay away from the access panel to the box itself, which surely would be alarmed. Then he insinuated boneless fingers within the circuit boards and injected a few cubic centimeters of a silvery fluid. The nanites pooled atop one of the boards before pulling themselves into it and disappearing.

The problem with the physical comm relays Madison and the Scouts had used was that they were easily detected and removed. But a relay built on microscopic scale by assembler nanites *within* the components of the original circuit board should be practically undetectable by Totalian science. The only way they could get rid of it would be to rip the whole box out and reinstall it—and that was assuming they could isolate the actual source. The external relays, with the actual DINcoms, had already been placed in hidden spots outside the city where the comms could be easily swapped out when they burned out. They should be good to broadcast propaganda and make comm calls 25/7, at least for a while.

Mission accomplished. Now to get the hell out of Dodge. Putting the lifters in reverse, he pulled himself back out of the box and slithered backward through the conduit, dropping back out of it and reverting to normal. He reached up and closed the access hatch, while he counted the seconds in his head. After two minutes had passed, he sent a quick test pulse to the relay, and was rewarded with an acknowledgment from the comm tap.

“Bernie here. My tap is installed, self-test is green.”

“This is Dominique. Mine is also go.”

“Sharona, boss. Got it done.”

“This is Maxwell. Everything looks good over here.”

“Great. You three exfiltrate the way we came in, just as we planned. Get back to the transport and return to HQ. I'm going to check in on the Professor, see how Rowcliff's doing getting that comm gear up.”

“Sure thing, boss. Pleasure working with ya.”

“Same here, Sharona, but no gum until you're back in the tunnels, got it?”

“I know, I know, sheesh!”

Bernie resumed the disguise, and Brooke made her way along the tunnels to Professor Fellin's Resistance safehouse. Setting the hardlight to invisibility mode, she made her way up to the safehouse door, gave the coded knock they'd arranged, and slipped inside when the door was opened, only resuming visibility when it was safely shut.

The safehouse was effectively a small room subdivided out of a larger warehouse in the industrial district. It had actually been walled off and forgotten during the construction necessary to join one warehouse to another, but the basement exit to the tunnels still existed. The four human agents were at one end of the room fiddling with a field video communication unit, while Mikken Fellin and Recha Throckmorton looked on curiously. “Hey, all. Relays are up.”

Rowcliff looked up. “Great! I think we've just tapped into them. I'm pulling in civilian broadcasts now. I think this is a news channel.” He moved aside so a newscaster

was visible on the screen. The slide beside him showed exaggerated animal faces—a fox head with vicious fangs, a deer with ominous red eyes—and the caption “Alien Invaders!” in a jagged scare font.

Brooke frowned. “Hey, turn it up, I want to hear this.” Actually, she thought she more sort of *didn’t*...which made it all the more important that she do.

“...Totaliment’s courageous agents, at great personal risk, managed to smuggle this footage out to us, showing the kind of creatures the rebel forces have aligned themselves with. We caution parents that these scenes may be too disturbing for impressionable younger viewers.”

Oh...merde. Brooke sent a quick comm ping to the Integrates, who should still be within range. “Hey, guys, check the comm relay. Public channel 3 Alpha. Looks like our bunch has made the news.”

The newscaster blinked out, replaced by doctored scenes from the *Kybalion*, showing Captain Van Dalen and her crew conversing with Captain Sandeep and other *Kybalion* crewmembers, or assisting in repairs. There were a couple of closeups clearly showing the animated animalistic faces of the Integrates and Fusers.

“I hate this show already,” Maxwell quipped over comm.

The scene changed again, this time to another face they all knew well from their briefings. Raph Clarke looked sorrowfully into the camera and gave a little speech about how he’d hoped even the rebels would know better than to ally themselves with these strange aliens from the unknown, whose very motives were suspect and who might very well want to enslave their world and ransack it for its Totalium. He called upon the rebels to turn themselves in and face justice, offering clemency to any who would renounce their rebel actions, and rewards for anyone who aided in the capture of an off-worlder.

“You’re recording all this, right?”

Rowcliff nodded. “Every second.”

“When it’s over, send it off via the relay to HQ. They’re going to need to see this.”

“Hey Miss Boss, maybe we should break into the channel and tell that Clarke where to go, huh?”

“Best all around if we leave that to cooler heads, Sharona. That’s the whole reason we’re here.”

“Yeah, I guess. We’re almost back to the ship, so we’ll be signing off now. See you later!”

Brooke turned to Mikken and Recha. “So, what do you think?”

Recha shuddered. “I don’t know *what* to think. They look so...*alien*.”

Brooke sighed. “So what? I can look alien, too.” She changed her hardlight disguise to her deer fursona. “See?”

Recha squeaked and jumped back, hands over her mouth.

Mikken’s lips tightened. “Was that really necessary?”

“Maybe not, but...we are what we are. We’re *people*, no matter what we look like. People like that Raph Clarke who take a look at someone and say they aren’t...they just get on my nerves. Sorry.” She flickered back to her human disguise.

Mikken nodded. “I’ll say this much for him. He’s a very talented public speaker, especially when nobody is allowed to present the opposing view.”

Brooke smirked. “That, at least, shouldn’t be a problem for much longer.”

As the weeks went by, Clementine kept herself busy. She was good at that. Sometimes she wondered if any of her crew ever realized just how good—or how busy she kept herself. But she had to do it. Every time she saw something not being done that should be done, it was so much simpler just to do it herself than to waste minutes or even—Patil help us—*hours* trying to get someone else to understand the problem and take action on it. She had the processing power, and she had the fabber, and there was always plenty of time that it wasn't being used for something else, so why not?

Sometimes it was as simple a matter as setting up charging stations for all the RIDEs who had awoken and joined the Resistance. Everyone was so happy about seeing all the charging stations pop up in vacant space in the old terraforming building that nobody ever thought to ask who had actually authorized or commissioned them. With constructor help, more creature comforts appeared—reliable hot water, better food, rooms that no longer leaked. The entire building was slowly being rebuilt under their noses.

It could also be as complex a task as setting up early-warning defenses for the base—which nobody had seemed to bother to do before they had arrived; a shocking oversight. They seemed to be relying on “security through obscurity,” and she had access to *centuries* of history showing why that just didn't work. A world where they put Totalium on everything posed a number of interesting new challenges to defense—but that was okay, because Clementine loved a good challenge. And since there wasn't much of anything *else* to do while she was stuck dirtside (well, except for the few dozen other self-appointed tasks she'd given herself, but most of those were trivialities by comparison), something like that she could sink her teeth into was just what the technician ordered.

The most obvious solution was optics, of course. If you couldn't ping it with radar, you could only rely on being able to see it coming. But the biggest problem with optics was that they worked best in the daytime, when there was plenty of visible light. Sure, there was always *some* light even at night, especially if larger, closer the moon was up, but the kind of sensitivity you needed to detect a moving object under those conditions invariably led to plenty of false positives. And while *she* was smart enough to eliminate each false positive in a matter of picoseconds, the Resistance probably wouldn't have anyone who could do that when she left, as she would invariably have to sooner or later.

There was also the option of laser-ranging—shooting lasers out to see what bounced back—but the problem with that was it would probably end up lasering someone's eye if they came close enough. Not exactly the most friendly way to say hi.

The solution Clementine eventually hit on involved a network of cheap lifter-equipped aerostats which did laser ranging in a two-dimensional plane around them. She built a network of these drones starting several clicks out from the base, in a pattern that resembled three nested geodesic domes. Any projectile that broke through one of the planes of the outer dome would trip an alarm, then when it broke the next dome she could calculate trajectory. The third dome would let her determine whether the object was moving in a straight line or an arc.

Then, if it did turn out to be hostile, she would have plenty of time to zap it with one of the pulse turret emplacements she was quietly setting up around the base. And the system was simple enough that even a non-sapient expert system could work it almost as well as she. (Of course, they'd have to use friend-or-foe transponders or make

manual exceptions for friendly aircraft, but she could go over that with whoever needed to hear it before they left.)

But this kind of thinking was only part of what kept Clementine busy. She was also constantly watching and interacting with her crew, the Resistance, the diplomats, and the Totaliment. Probably more than they realized, given that every communication device she installed had a passive mode backdoor that let her monitor everything through it. (It was intended to let an expert system watch for command keywords or gestures, but she had no qualms about subverting it to her natural nosiness—especially since she felt responsible for keeping them all safe.)

It was fun to watch the friendships blossoming between the human soldiers and their RIDEs. The personality-match algorithms had come through, and almost every pairing seemed likely to be permanent. There were a couple pairings who bickered a lot, but even they seemed to be more attached to each other than not.

She was especially interested in the cases of Becky/Inge and Merle/Knute, Totalia's first crossriders. She was considering writing a paper on them for one of the RIDE medical journals back home—she'd ask for a little help from Mom, Dad, Dr. Patil, and Dr. Clemens in refining it. How did a crossride pairing outside Zharus's cultural context differ, and how was it the same? Did the humans seem to have more trouble, less trouble, or about the same difficulty adapting? It would make an interesting case study. So far, they both—all four, rather—seemed to be doing pretty well. The counseling they were getting from Eva, Ghost, and the couple of other crossriders among the crew they'd brought from Zharus seemed to be helping.

She also kept an interested eye on the political situation via the communications the rebels were injecting into the Totalia City media networks. The Zealots had gone crazy trying to root out the source of the broadcasts, but no matter what they did to stop it, the Loyalists were able to route around it—especially with Bernie on the inside to reinfect any communication nexus they ripped out and replaced outright.

The recording aired at least twice a day. A stern-faced Trilby Whitfield stared right at the camera and intoned, "Citizens of Totalia. This is the voice of your government—your *true* government. We call upon the usurpers to step down from power and return the reins to the government *you* elected—or at the very least, call new elections so you can decide once and for all who you want leading you." Then he would go on to talk about the Scouts they'd held, the visitors who'd come from Zharus, excerpts from the report they'd gotten back from Darrek and Teenette, and the overall situation. He emphasized that a fleet was on its way, and they needed to greet them in friendship. And froth as Clarke's "True Totaliment" might, it was just as Clementine's Mom would say: they couldn't stop the signal.

Meanwhile, Booker and Grey and their assistants had been engaging in direct communications with Clarke and company, seeking to bring private diplomatic pressure on them to complement the public pressure. So far the talks weren't terribly productive, as Clarke's group categorically refused to engage in discussions with a foreign power as long as it had a footing on sovereign Totalian soil, but Booker was being calm and patient and there were a few signs it might be having some effect.

Clementine had stationed one of her holotar floaters in the First Tranche's conference room as a courtesy. The First Speaker, Trilby Whitfield, was only middle-aged by Zharus standards, but here was a man of advanced age. Yet his mind was sharp as ever. He'd decided to present the Special Ambassadors' report in full, unedited form

—including Dr. Sigurdssen’s rather exhaustive appendices on cultural and historical minutia. Nothing was held back.

“I think that Dr. Sigurdssen and Miss Clark’s report is having a positive impact,” Trilby said. “The political rally was fascinating—so different from our own politics. Indeed, it’s beyond interesting to observe the political workings of a world where there are dozens of different political entities, and not just one city.”

“You’ve seen it ten times by now, Trilby,” Seventh Speaker Jassen Balderson said. He checked his watch. “Five minutes until we make our ceasefire and debate pitch.”

“Think they’ll go for it?” Keran Lawrence, the Sixth Speaker, asked.

“They’ll go for it,” Eleventh Speaker Jaine Ramos said, voice edged with bitterness. “It’ll give them the chance to continue their weapons development and military build-up in peace.”

“That’s the trade-off we make in return for getting to look like the ‘reasonable’ ones who made the offer first.” Trilby shrugged. “We are, in effect, gambling that whatever ‘development’ they can make in a few months will not be enough to counter the couple of *centuries* our new allies have on them. And after seeing the wonders they have demonstrated so far—including those we are about to broadcast—I firmly believe that to be the case.”

“I hope you’re right.” Jassen Balderson checked his watch again. “One way or another, we’re all going to find out before very long.”

Clementine was thrilled by these developments. More than once, she forked a process exclusively to watch and enjoy the political exchanges, virtual tub of popcorn at the ready. She knew that it was all very serious and lives were in the balance, but nonetheless her sense of drama appreciated a great confrontation.

She had enjoyed Darrek and Teenette’s report as much as anyone else, if not more. It was always fun to see your own culture through outsiders’ eyes. Also, she took maternal (or grand-maternal) pride in Arca, one of the many young Eis who had sprung out of what Clementine’s parents had learned from making her. Clementine had met the girl a few times back at the Institute, when she was still a sprout. She’d seemed nice, if a bit confused. Clementine had always thought she’d go far if she could just straighten out who and what she wanted to be. Now, it seemed, she had done so, and was going to go very far indeed.

There was always so much going on around here. Clementine liked that. It was almost as good as being out in space. Since she probably wasn’t going to be leaving for a while, she would make the best of things, and find more things that needed doing. It was the best way to keep from going stir-crazy.

June 30, 158 AL (Totalia equivalent)
Nectar River Resistance Base

Booker Albescu straightened his tie as he walked down the ramp and through the underwater tunnel to the *Clementine*. It had been deemed more efficient to install a transparent aluminum corridor that mated to one of the ship’s side cargo hatches than have to keep raising and lowering it to load and unload cargo. It had also been a great demonstration of Zharus’s technology, as the whole process had taken only a couple of hours from start to finish—including digging the part of the tunnel that led up to the surface of the ground, and lining it with quick-set plas-crete.

The tunnel was seeing a lot of use. Booker and Grey stood to one side as a Totalian pushing a lifter pallet laden with supply crates passed them going the other way. The fabber was very popular these days. Not just for supplies, either. Apparently Trilby and a couple other members of the Totaliment had developed a taste for Zharusian kraken while Captain Roberts had been here, and Wilma had assured them it would not at all be a drain on resources to have that or other alien cuisine every now and again.

Booker hoped the Resistance wouldn't become too dependent on the fabber. But that was something for his assistants to worry about. They were handling most relations between the Zharusians and the Resistance while he focused on the relations between the Resistance and the Zealots. Or, rather, the Loyalists and the True Totalians, as they styled themselves.

Which was what brought him and Grey to the *Clementine*, as it happened. Captain van Dalen had requested a briefing on current events. Given that was part of his job, he was happy to oblige. "Clementine?" he said as he entered the cargo bay. "Where do they want to see me?"

"Just come on up to the bridge, Ambassador," Clementine said. "We're not being very formal today."

"All right." They walked forward through the ship. After spending months aboard it with a number of other passengers and cargo, it felt oddly spacious now that most of them had been unloaded. Wilma, Eva, Gigi, and Clementine herself were waiting, seats swiveled back to face him as he came in. "Hello, everyone."

Wilma waved him toward one of the vacant chairs at the reconfigurable utility consoles toward the rear of the bridge. "Please, have a seat. Pardon the informality, but this is where we're all most comfortable."

Booker nodded. "Of course." He sat down, and Grey lay down next to his chair. He started things off with an informal question himself. "How are things going with you?"

Wilma shrugged. "Same old same old. We'd like to get back into space, but we knew when we signed up that this support mission would take a while. Price of visiting a new star system."

"That being said, we're very happy with how things are going here," Eva put in. "All twenty of the new RIDEs we brought along are partnered now, and they all seem to be getting along well—even the crossriders, for a wonder."

"And we're learning a lot more about the local culture, now that the comm taps are live. Getting a feel for the local music, working up a potential set list for some shows." Gigi grinned. "A little live music should be good for morale—theirs and ours. We'll just need to find a good local drummer. Maybe you could ask around, see if anybody here plays."

"I'll look into it." Booker cleared his throat. "Anyway, you wanted a briefing on the state of the negotiations?"

Wilma nodded. "Go ahead."

"When we first made contact, Clarke's Totaliment was not interested in speaking to either us or Trilby's Totaliment. They didn't feel they wanted to grant us that degree of legitimacy. Of course, that changed after Trilby began his broadcasts, and it became clear that a lot of citizens considered Trilby to be a lot more legitimate than Clarke."

"For political reasons?" Wilma asked.

Booker waved a hand. “Possibly. Trilby’s charisma helps a great deal, I imagine. He comes off like everybody’s grandfather, while Clarke...well, comparing him to a pedantic college professor is probably putting it charitably.”

“Or to put it uncharitably, he’s just an old windbag,” Grey piped up.

Booker shot him a look. “Grey...”

“Hey, I’m not a diplomat myself, so I don’t have to be diplomatic. Especially since we’re being all *informal* and stuff.”

“Anyway, we’re not at the point where we can pry any major concessions out of them, but over the last few weeks we did finally get them to agree to a cease-fire while they hold a weekly series of video debates on the matter of outside contact. Mostly Trilby vs. Clarke, one or two with the Second Speakers against each other, and one or two with their chosen representatives from the rest of the First Tranche. After that, there will be a non-binding public vote whether they want to open relations.”

“Non-binding, huh?” Gigi said.

“More like a poll, really. It’ll at least show them which way the wind is blowing.”

Eva twitched a cervine ear forward. “And if it blows against us, then what?”

“It won’t.” Booker smiled. “It’s really kind of a formality when you get right down to it. Most of the Totalians alive these days are the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the original colonists. They never signed onto the original colonization plan or had any stake in keeping hidden from the rest of the galaxy, and a lot of them are curious about their origins and what else is out there. Folks like Clarke and Whitfield are first-generation natives, and they’re more of a toss-up—but as you can see, even they tend to be sharply divided on the matter. After the debates, we’re predicting a margin of at least fifteen percent in our favor, give or take a percent or two.”

Wilma raised an eyebrow. “But if it’s non-binding, will it make any difference?”

“It will at least show our supporters once and for all that they’re far from alone. That could galvanize them in favor of calling for an end to the pretenders’ reign. Maybe even organizing and taking action. It’s our best chance to resolve this peacefully.”

“Of course, we’re pretty sure Clarke’s bunch have to know this, too,” Grey pointed out. “Which suggests they’re just stalling for time. But if they feel like they *need* to stall, they know they’re in a position of weakness, which is going to make it that much easier when the *Great Western* pulls in.”

Gigi frowned. “Maybe. On the other hand, animals get the most dangerous when they’re cornered.”

“Which is why we’re trying to make sure the lines of communication are good and solid now, so we can try to talk them down from any ledges later.” Booker paused.

“Another interesting thing we’ve determined is that there seem to be at least two factions within the ‘True’ Totaliment. Believe it or not, Clarke seems to be a more moderate element compared to his second speaker, Thomm Quincy.”

Wilma’s ears cocked forward. “Oh, really?”

“Quincy was one of the three defectors from the Loyalist Totaliment, which of course doesn’t make him popular with the Loyalists. But even so, he seems to think Clarke isn’t going far enough. He wants martial law, curfew, lockdown, and a total offensive, full speed ahead and damn the torpedos. If he had his way, I imagine any aliens on Totalia would be captured, shot, and dissected. Clarke seems to be trying to keep him on a tight leash, but you know the type. He’ll wiggle loose sooner or later.”

“Someone to keep an eye on, anyway,” Gigi said.

“What about negotiations on behalf of Zharus?” Clementine asked.

“Not going so well. They’ll tolerate me as a moderator for discussions between the two Totaliments, given that I’m about the most ‘outside party’ possible. But they refuse to address the idea of any sort of trade treaties as long as a hostile alien force has a foothold on their sovereign soil.”

Eva rolled her eyes. “I get the feeling that’s a direct quote.”

“You’d be right.” Booker shrugged. “We didn’t expect this to be easy. The important thing is to get it started, so we’ll be there when they’re ready to listen, or when the Loyalists get back in.”

Grey nodded. “If at first you don’t succeed, keep on sucking ‘til you do suck seed.”

“...yeah,” Booker said. “That’s one way of putting it, I guess. Anyway, that’s about all I have to report at this time.”

Clementine smiled. “Thank you for filling us in. Please keep us informed of any further developments.”

Booker nodded, getting up from the chair. “We’ll be in touch.”

Chapter 6

September 12, 158 AL (Totalia equivalent)
Nectar River Resistance Base

Inge shook her head and sneezed, peering distastefully at the display panel scrolling credits. “I don’t understand. Why do they call it ‘*Cougar Town*’ if there aren’t any cougars *in* it?” She’d been trawling through the *Clementine*’s media archives when she found the old sitcom, which turned out not to live up to her expectations.

Becky was seated in a lawn chair next to Inge in the woodland clearing in her VR that they used as a workspace. She shrugged at Inge’s question. “You’ve got me there. Maybe you should ask one of the Zharusians. It might be some kind of cultural reference they would know about.”

“Good idea. Oh.” She stared at nothing for a moment, then laid her ears back briefly. “Clementine says that when this was made, ‘cougar’ was slang for ‘a woman who seeks sexual relations with considerably younger men.’” She wrinkled her nose. “That’s speciesism, plain and simple.”

Becky chuckled. “Sort of the opposite of us, then. *I* was the much older one in our relationship.”

“I wonder if there’s an animal for that?” She stared into the distance again. “Oh. Clementine says there were lots of different terms, but one that stands out is ‘wolf.’”

Becky snorted. “So...that would make *me* a ‘wolf’ and *Merle* a ‘cougar.’”

Inge laughed, then rolled over on her back and waved her paws in the air. “We’ll have to tell them that next time we see them.”

Becky reached over to give Inge a belly rub. “Do you ever...I dunno...regret that you didn’t have any choice about Fusing with me? I understand that usually RIDEs get to pick out their own partners these days.”

Inge rolled back upright and gazed levelly at her. “But I *did* have a choice. If I hadn’t liked what I saw, I could have turned you down afterward. But I did like you.”

“Lucky thing for me.” Becky grinned.

“*You* could have turned *me* down, too.”

“Only if I was *insane* or something, as well as just an idiot. I’m just lucky you liked me anyway, even though I was an idiot.” Becky scratched behind Inge’s ears.

Inge purred. “Those must be some really good algorithms in that personality match quiz.”

“I guess they’ve had enough experience to get them right. Good thing they have.” Becky stretched. “Funny, if you’d told me a few months ago I’d trade my manhood for a big metal kitty-cat, I’d...well, I’d probably have agreed that was *exactly* the sort of thing I was likely to do, given the chance, but I’d at least have been a little surprised about it.”

Inge tilted her head. “Do *you* regret that tradeoff?”

“I dunno. Maybe a little, sometimes? But not so much because I gave something up, but because of all the little habits I picked up that I have to re-learn. No more peeing standing up, that kind of thing. Kind of irritating. And there are other things I’m still... well. Apart from that...” She shrugged. “I’m still me. At least, I *think* I’m still me. I still feel like me *to* me. But maybe I’m a different me than I used to be and just don’t notice

it.”

“That’s one for the philosophers, all right.” Inge blinked. “Oh. Merle and Knute just sent a comm ping. They’re coming out to see us.”

Becky stood. “I guess it’s back to the real world, then.” Between one blink and the next, he was back in his body, within Inge’s Fuser form, standing in the forest by the reservoir. A moment later, the anthropomorphic timber wolf of Merle/Knute emerged from the trees nearby.

Becky waved. “Hey. What’s up?”

Knute’s wolf-head retracted to reveal Merle. He had been experimenting with growing a mustache, and it seemed to be coming along nicely. Inge opened her own cougar-head helmet so the two humans could talk directly. “I was just going to ask if you’d like to come swimming. Since it is our day off, and all.”

Becky considered. “Well, I haven’t been in a while, so why not?” She paused. “Waaaait a minute. This wouldn’t be just that you want to see what I look like in a swimsuit, would it?”

Merle raised an eyebrow. “It wouldn’t be the first time we’ve been swimming together. You saw me in my suit plenty of times.”

“So it’s that Balance thing again, huh? Turnabout is fair play?”

“If you want to look at it like that.” Merle shrugged. “I just thought, it’s a nice warm day out, just the right kind of weather for the ol’ swimming hole.”

There was a shallow spot a couple of clicks along the reservoir rim, well away from the dangerous whirlpool of the spillways, that the Resistance used for a recreational swimming area. It was true, Becky reflected, that they hadn’t been there in a while.

“I guess we should go get our swim things, then.”

“Actually, we don’t need to. Knute tells me his Fusers can fab a swimsuit onto me, and Inge can probably do the same for you.”

Inge spoke up. “She’s right, I can. I’m looking for some suitable designs now. You want me to run them by you, or just surprise you?”

“Uh, I think it would probably be best if—” Becky began.

“Surprise us,” Merle said. “Both of you.”

Becky blinked. “Are you sure about that? I’ve seen photos of some of the stuff they wear back on Zharus...”

“It’s just going to be us four anyway. Everyone else is out on assignment or doing other things.”

“Uh-huh.” Becky gave him an old-fashioned look, but he maintained an expression of innocence. Of course, even as Merie, she’d had the best poker face on the base.

“Come on, I’ll meet you there.” Knute’s helmet flipped back up and they took off with their lifters.

“Guess we might as well follow them. Hey, if you’re going to make me a swimsuit, what happens to my normal clothes?”

“I remember how they were made and put them back on you when you’re done. Since you’re wearing stuff made with nano-motile fabric now, I can do that.” Inge closed her helmet again and followed Merle and Knute into the air.

“Huh, that’s convenient.” *Maybe too convenient*, he thought wryly. *What is he up to now?*

A few moments later, they touched down on the gravel beach next to the swimming hole. As Merle had said, they were the only ones there today. As they landed, Knute peeled away from Merle's body, reforming into a big brindle-grey wolf. Merle was wearing a pair of dark blue swim trunks. They weren't particularly short or tight, just a pair of loose thigh-length shorts. Of course, the fact that he wasn't wearing anything else still served to show off a fairly muscular physique. Merle hadn't been particularly pumped, but Becky gathered that the crossride process had built the muscles on. Once he had them, Merle had to exercise to keep them—which he was obviously doing, regularly.

"Your turn!" he called out cheerfully.

Becky sighed. "Okay, go ahead." She felt the tingle all over her body that indicated the nanites were doing something to her clothing. Then Inge dropped away, revealing...well, *revealing* was the right word. It wasn't quite a bikini, because the top and bottom were connected, but it was a pastel pink one-piece with large belly and back cut-outs, so the overall effect was similar. *:Inge...:*

:Hey, you've got the body for it, and I'm proud of my work. So why not show it off?:

Merle grinned at her. "Nice look! My compliments to your tailor."

"Of my clothing or my body?"

"Both, since they're the same person. C'mon in, the water's fine." Merle splashed out into the water, and Becky followed. They proceeded to enjoy themselves for a while, under the watchful eyes of their RIDE lifeguards.

Even swimming was different in this new body, Becky reflected wryly. She was a lot more...floaty than before. Merle seemed to be having the same sort of problem adjusting, because he kept sinking, and finally confined himself to the shallower part of the swimming hole to keep from inhaling water.

After an hour or so of swimming had them both wrinkling up like prunes, they removed themselves to some large flat rocks that were just starting to catch the sun, to lie down and soak up some rays while they dried off.

They lay there for a while, dozing in companionable silence, each occasionally turning their head to look at the other. Then it happened that they both looked at each other at the same time, and Becky caught Merle grinning at her again. "What's so funny?"

"You." Merle chuckled. "I have to admit, you're adapting better than I expected."

"What's so surprising about that? It's just my gender manifesting. I *told* you it would."

Merle snorted. "You wouldn't know your 'gender manifesting' if it bit you on the part you don't have anymore."

"What about you? Made peace with your sausage yet?"

Merle stuck out his tongue. "You're never going to let that drop, are you? But, for your information, I think I have. It's been an...enlightening experience. So many things I never understood about men have suddenly become clear."

"I guess we of the masculine persuasion are just simpler folk than you, because I sure don't feel any closer to understanding women than I was before, even after being one."

"Well, there *is* one part of the experience you haven't tried yet."

"What?" When Merle just grinned at her, Becky didn't take long to work it out for

herself. “Wow. You men really *are* all the same, aren’t you? Even the ones who used to be women.”

“It wouldn’t exactly be the first time for us.”

This was true. Even though Beck and Merie had been just friends, and in the same chain of command to boot, they had rolled in the hay a few times, recreationally. It was a cheap form of entertainment when you couldn’t just go out and see a movie. Besides, they tended to be a bit more informal about the whole chain-of-command thing in the Resistance.

“But it would be the first time for both of us like *this*.”

“Then who better for both our firsts than each other?” Merle shrugged. “If you think it’s a bad idea, then fine, forget I mentioned it. But if you’re as curious as I am...”

Becky considered. “Just to be clear, this is just like all the other times, right? Just sex? What the Zharusians call ‘friends with benefits’?”

“Of course that’s all, Becky. I promise, I have *no* ulterior motives.” Merle grinned. “I swear it by the Seven Aphorisms.”

Becky blinked. “Wow, you’re really serious.”

“Serious and curious. And where else am I going to find someone else who might be *just* as curious?”

Becky considered. It was true, she *had* wondered more than once what it would be like. But she’d just been too busy to think about that sort of thing lately. And given that they’d both done it before, it would provide a baseline for comparison. There was one other consideration, though. “Are...Inge and Knute okay with this?”

:Of course we are,: Inge sent. *:We don’t get jealous of that.:*

:It’s a natural human relationship,: Knute’s deeper voice added. *:Part of being organic. Denying you that would be like...you denying us Nature Range.:*

Whatever *that* was. Becky smirked as another thought struck her. “And besides, you’ll read our memories of it afterward and enjoy it yourselves, too?”

:There is that...: Inge admitted, accompanying it with a wink emoticon.

“Well, I guess all *my* objections have been addressed.”

“Good.” Merle propped himself up on one elbow. “You know that lookout spot that we don’t use anymore since Clementine set up her sensor network? I think the air mattress is still there...”

Becky sat up. “I think it’s our solemn duty to check and make sure the Resistance’s meager resources aren’t being wasted.”

Merle grinned. “I like the way you think, Lieutenant. Lead the way.”

Meetings. More and more endless meetings. The bright side of the meetings was that Kendlen was able to attend them in Fuser form with Asante. The Totaliment *wanted* him there that way, in fact, as a sort of living reminder of the results of having relations with the Zharusians—results that were both beneficial and disturbing, all rolled up into one. It also helped that Asante’s hardlight projectors had three-dimensional multimedia capabilities that put the meeting room’s display to shame.

Kendlen didn’t mind, because he was able to review other matters internally during the meeting, while having Asante there to catch him up if it turned out he needed to respond to something in the real world. Right now, he was reviewing the latest details on Lt. Becky Hensley and Technical Sergeant Merle Sims.

Totalia’s first two crossriders were adapting well, according to the latest

psychological assessments. The process made deep brain changes that prevented gender dysphoria, and the two did seem comfortable enough in their new bodies. The biggest problem they usually had to contend with was all the curious people asking questions about how different it was. *:When this is over they're going to have to face the rest of the Totalian public,:* Kendlen said to Asante. *:Not to mention their own friends and family. I don't envy them.:*

Asante licked the back of a paw. *:At least they have each other?:*

:They've never been interested in a relationship before. I don't know why they'd start now.:

:I'm sure you're right.:

Asante's answer carried such an air of smug amusement with it that Kendlen had to ask. *:All right, what are you on about now?:*

:You do understand that one of Clementine's main sensor clusters is right over the old northeast lookout?:

:So...?:

Asante threw up a still frame of two entirely nude people who were obviously Becky and Merle in the middle of a very passionate embrace on an old air mattress in the forest. *:There is also video, if you like. With sound.:*

Kendlen stared, more glad than ever that his face wasn't visible. *:Uh...no. That won't be necessary. Allow them their privacy. Uh...this isn't circulating, is it?:*

:No...Clementine only released it to me because, as their superior, you should be aware of any possible repercussions. She would not show it to anyone else.:

:Sheesh.: Kendlen shook his head. *:Nah, their affairs are their business. Pun not intended. At least until it starts interfering with their duties.:* He chuckled. *:Besides, they make a cute couple.:*

:As you say.:

Kendlen turned his attention back to the world outside as Trilby gestured to the display screen at one end of the conference room. Charts and figures were visible. The first vote count results were coming in on the outside-contact referendum in Totalia City. So far, the vote was running about two to one in favor, though the polls in the more conservative farming communities had yet to report.

"We can't truly expect Clarke and his ilk to abide by this," Seventh Speaker Jassen Baldurson said. "This is only going to end up in further bloodshed."

Trilby snorted. "Tell us something we don't know. But at least it will cement our legitimacy in the eyes of the people. And who knows, there's always the chance they'll see which way the wind is blowing and back down."

"Yes, and maybe pigs will fly," Sixth Speaker Keran Lawrence put in.

Trilby shrugged. "With those fancy new 'lifters' they brought from Zharus, anything is possible. Anyway, the cease-fire has been as beneficial for us as for them. Possibly more so, since we all know that we have reinforcements coming soon."

"The thing that worries me," Jassen said, "is that *they* have to know that just as well as we do. And yet they're still stalling. What do they know that *we* don't?"

"Since they've moved their deliberations to a chamber with no audiovisual pickups we can hack into to keep an eye on them, it's hard to guess."

"We could ask Bernie to try to bug their chambers," Kendlen noted.

"That's just a little further than it would probably be a good idea to go right now," Booker Albescu said. He and his little deer RIDE were watching the screen just as

nervously as the Totalians. “But depending on how things turn out, we’ll keep that option open.”

The Loyalist Totaliment wasn’t the only group anxiously watching the results. In a chamber in the Totaliment Building in Totalia City, Raph Clarke and the other members of his First Tranche were watching the same readouts on a video display receiver they’d brought in. Raph gloomily watched the percentages climb higher, and sent Gerent for more antacid.

Second Speaker Thomm Quincy watched the little man scurry away, not bothering to hide his grimace of distaste. He was still kicking himself for his slowness. If he’d just moved faster, *he* could have been the one to seize power, instead of that wishy-washy Raph Clarke. Why hadn’t he thought of it?

“Sir. Comm call for you on the private line.” It was his own aide, Grom Yeager, holding his personal phone.

“Thank you, Grom.” Quincy took it and left the room, walking down the corridor until he was sure he couldn’t be overheard. “Yes?”

“This is General Tilson. We’ve had a breakthrough. We believe we’ve found the headquarters of the Resistance—and the location of the alien ship. They’re at the old abandoned Nectar River terraforming base on the northwest coast. The ship seems to be parked underwater in the reservoir.”

Quincy’s eyes narrowed. “That’s perfect! General, I think it’s time we put Project Daedalus to its intended use.”

“Has the First Tranche authorized this?”

“You let me worry about the First Tranche, General. As military commander, I have the full authority to authorize Daedalus, and will take full responsibility for the outcome.” Clarke had bestowed that position to him as a sop to keep him happy—thinking, no doubt, that there wasn’t any actual power in the position since the First Tranche as a whole had to authorize any overt act of war. But there were still things, *actual* things, Quincy could do with that authority, and this was one of them.

“Uh...yessir.” The voice on the phone sounded hesitant, but obedient. Good.

Quincy returned to his seat, carefully concealing the grin of elation he felt on the inside. In a matter of minutes, all their problems would be over. The Resistance *and* their alien friends would be wiped off the map. Invade *his* home world, would they? The world his father had died to keep safe? They would soon see Totalia was amply able to defend itself.

The settlement of Totalia City itself was only the center of an occupied city-state-sized chunk of land on the southeast coast of the main continent. Southwest of the city were the farming communities, the breadbasket (and meat locker) of the colony. Northeast were the military bases, including the prison where the Scouts had been held during their stay.

But a few hundred clicks southeast, right on the southern-most tip of an archipelago, was a nondescript little space that was almost entirely underground—but heavily guarded on the surface nonetheless. Beneath the round metal cap, a small army of researchers had been working feverishly to unmothball and prep one of the rockets that had been used for putting weather satellites into orbit before the nuclear-powered ships of the Cosmy could do it more economically. But this rocket would be carrying a

considerably different payload than a harmless satellite.

It wasn't anything fancy. But then, the nice thing about nuclear weapons was that they didn't have to be fancy. When you got right down to it, all they really were was a way to bang two rocks together really fast. And as heavily as they used nuclear fission tech on Totalia, they had plenty of the right kinds of rocks to spare.

General Tilson, a heavy-set older man in a green and bronze military uniform, entered the command center of the base, nodded the duty officer aside, and sat down at the console. He lifted a heavy chain from his neck, found the key dangling at the end of it, and slid it into a hole on the console and turned it. Several lights went from green to amber. He turned it again, and they went red. A new section of controls opened, and Tilson wasted no time entering an access code.

He reached to another keypad and pulled up a map display, then zoomed in and placed the carat directly over an old concrete structure at the northwest edge of the continent. The console beeped and projected a course that would take the rocket up almost into orbit, then down again, to hit a target that was almost on the other side of the world. Tilson acknowledged and approved it, took a deep breath, and slapped the "launch" key.

Klaxons sounded throughout the base, as all personnel were given five minutes to reach safety or else get fricasseed by the blast. The metal lid of the silo cranked open. The timer gradually ticked down toward zero.

"Sir, are you sure we should be doing this?" the duty officer asked. He knew full well what was riding on the tip of the rocket and where it had to be going.

"Ours not to reason why, Captain," Tilson said.

The officer sighed. "I hope this is the right thing to do."

"As do I, Captain. As do I."

With a rumble that could be felt all through the base, the rocket's mighty thrusters fired, launching it skyward. The first stage fell away, then the second, then it was time for the missile to go ballistic. Its trajectory took it higher and higher, and it was just seconds away from going into free-fall...

...then a second sun lit up the entire hemisphere.

Wilma van Dalen entered the bridge at a dead run and practically vaulted into the Captain's chair. Gigi and Eva weren't far behind her. "Clementine, report! What *was* that?"

Clementine was in her Vulcan guise at the science station. "A nuclear detonation in low orbit, Captain. Estimating about a two to three megaton yield. From the direction of the blast and debris, I estimate it was an ICBM-type weapon launched from somewhere near Totalia City, aimed—" She turned to look at Wilma. "Aimed directly at this facility, Captain."

"Go on."

"Sensor readings from just before the event show no trace of the rocket. It must have been Totalium-clad."

"This gets better and better," Eva muttered. "Why did it detonate prematurely? Not that I'm disappointed that it did."

"I am not...no. Actually, I do have a hypothesis. Look." Clementine threw the visual of the explosion up on the main viewscreen, slowed down a thousand times. "Look." Just after the blast, a thousand tiny pinpoints of light showed up all around it.

“Spectrographic analysis suggests those are reflections of the blast’s light from chunks of pure Totalium.”

“Fragments of the bomb’s casing?” Gigi asked, turning to her console and keying in a query.

“No, these were there already, and much too far distant to have been thrown off by the blast. The ones at the very edges of visibility are several hundred clicks from detonation. These are the same as the debris we encountered on the way down, only considerably denser.” Clementine paused, switching to a different view. “Now that I know what to look for, I can detect sunlight glinting off similar such fragments elsewhere in orbit. I hypothesize that someone has been seeding Totalia’s lower orbit with these fragments to create a Kessler field blocking access to the planet. The missile struck them on its way up and hence detonated prematurely.” She paused again, and a most un-Vulcan-like tone of distress entered her voice. “Captain, the density of fragments I am extrapolating would make it extremely unlikely I could pass through to orbit safely, even with full shielding.”

Wilma sighed. “Looks like we’re stuck here for the duration.”

“Who would do that? The Totaliment?” Gigi wondered.

Eva shook her head. “If they did, they must not have been thinking too clearly. They cock-blocked their own nuke.”

“And a good thing for us that is, too.” Gigi hugged herself and shivered. “If it had gone off even at the outermost limit of our defensive shell, it would still have done plenty of damage here.”

Clementine glanced up. “Captain, the Totaliment are requesting a briefing.”

Wilma facepalmed. “I’ll just bet they are. And probably not putting it quite that politely, either. Clemmie, please keep us posted. We’d better go tell them what just happened.”

“What in all of Totality just happened?” Raph Clarke demanded, standing at the head of the table and glowering. In particular, he glowered at Thomm Quincy, who he was *sure* had some part in this.

“A nuclear explosion in low orb—” Dr. Reena Quand, the representative from the Science Committee called in to provide their findings, began.

“We *know* that!” Clarke said, pounding the table. “Where did it come from?”

“We’re still trying to work that—” the Science Committee woman said, but Clarke waved her to silence as Gerent came running up to him and leaned down to whisper in his ear. His eyes narrowed, then he straightened up.

“I’ve just received word that a rocket was launched from Hermes Base just a few minutes before the blast. On the orders of General Tilson, who certainly didn’t get his orders from *me*. In fact, it seems we have our very own Second Speaker to thank for that.” He glared at Quincy. “Explain yourself.”

“What is there to explain? I saw an opportunity to eliminate a terrorist threat, and I took it. If it had worked, it would have completely vaporized the Resistance headquarters.”

“Uh, about that—” Reena said.

“With whom we were negotiating, and had agreed to a cease fire!” Clarke roared. “Do you know how this is going to make us look? How much worse it could have made things if you’d *succeeded*?”

“I think you need to know that we’ve found—” Reena tried again.

“Cease fire? Pah. I’m sure I don’t know why you even bother. We know what’s best for the people even if they don’t. We would never agree to let outsiders onto our world. Now that we know where they are, we should simply drop the pretense and wipe. Them. Out.” He punctuated his last few words by pounding on the table.

“We are *trying* to buy time to further our technology development program! Or did you forget that?”

“We will have all the time we need no matter what you do, up until their reinforcements arrive. So why leave them around to be another thorn in our sides?”

Reena took a deep breath and yelled at the top of her lungs, “THERE IS A CLOUD OF TOTALIUM FRAGMENTS IN LOW ORBIT, COMPLETELY BLOCKING ANY SHIPS FROM TAKING OFF OR LANDING!” She paused. “Sirs.”

Raph Clarke blinked. “...what? Explain.” He turned to look at Reena, finally giving her his full attention.

“Sir, in reviewing the visual record of the explosion, we have discovered an immense cloud of Totalium fragments, like shrapnel, in low orbit around the planet. On Old Earth, this phenomenon was called a ‘Kessler cascade.’ Earth actually had a similar debris field for a time, which blocked all attempts at space travel until its orbits had decayed, a few decades before the Totalia expedition was launched. We think that’s why the missile blew up prematurely—it ran right into this field. It’s like it was hit by a point-blank shotgun blast.”

“The explosions in low orbit, sir,” Gerent said. “The ones Fleet Admiral Orinson mentioned. They must have been seeding it.”

“And you say this will block ships from taking off *or* landing?”

“Yessir. Any ship that tries to go up or come down will get the same thing that missile did. Tiny little fragments of invisible rock, orbiting at high speeds.”

“But who’s been doing this?” Fifth Speaker Kendlen Janssen asked. “The Loyalists? Quincy?”

Clarke frowned. “I find it hard to believe the Resistance would intentionally block the planet off, when they know their allies are going to want to land here. They might be misguided, but they’ve shown no sign of being *stupid*.” He frowned at Quincy. “And I rather doubt *he* would have fired that nuke had he known about this...Kessler thing.”

“Sir, we’ve lost space,” Reena said. “That includes all of the ships we have left, and everyone else off-planet. The electromagnetic pulse even fried our last weather satellite, and we can’t put up another from down here.”

“But if we’ve lost space, so, too, have the would-be invaders lost planetfall!” Quincy crowed. “Let them come! They’ll sit impotently out there, unable to land and spread their blight to—”

“Shut up!” Clarke shouted. “*You* don’t get to be happy about this! You don’t get to be happy about *any* of this! Do you realize the position you’ve put us in? *We* broke the cease-fire, and tried to wipe out the people we were negotiating with. *Including* representatives of the alien planet whose Scouts we so carefully did *not* kill out of the desire not to burn any bridges! And this is *after* our people clearly voted to show they want to deal with them!”

Quincy sneered. “You are far too soft. Grow a backbone! Regardless of what happened to Project Daedalus, this ‘Kessler cascade’ will give us yet another edge in the war.”

“How do you know they won’t devise some method of clearing that debris when they arrive? You saw Dr. Sigurdssen’s report. Yet I doubt we’ve seen even a *fraction* of what they can do.”

“If they have, then we’ll deal with it then. The reverse-engineering efforts, coupled with Totalium and our native resolve and ingenuity should be sufficient to see us through.” Quincy shrugged. “As for our position, the only opinions we really need to worry about are our citizens’. And it would be simple enough to turn this to our advantage. After all, the detonation was exactly halfway between us and them.” He closed his eyes and steepled his fingers. “Simply say the missile was theirs.”

“What? But *we* fired the rocket. It passed right over our city! The contrail was visible to the naked eye!” Reena protested.

“Bah, one of our patrol aircraft, or a weather satellite launch. Tell the people something reasonable, and they *will* believe it.” Quincy smirked. “After all, they were *raised* to fear and distrust outsiders. We all were. Give them a reason to believe that fear is well-founded, and they will thank us for protecting them.”

“I’ve got a better idea. How about we arrest *you* and try you for treason?” Raph Clarke growled. “Maybe hand you over to them and let *them* do it.”

“Oh, really? Is the pot going to call the kettle black? Do you think they’ll really believe you had nothing to do with it and weren’t just seeking a scapegoat? Remember, they want *your* head, too.”

Eighth Speaker Darleen Cherry cleared her throat. “Quincy has a point. As far as these so-called ‘Loyalists’ are concerned, we’re *all* traitors. If we *can* use this incident to our advantage, and dampen the proles’ enthusiasm for inviting in alien invaders, it would buy us some breathing room at the very least.”

“And when the invaders show up?” Clarke demanded.

“We’re not exactly any worse off. As he said, we’re all traitors already. If we *don’t* win, it will hardly matter if we hang for a sheep or a lamb.”

Thomm Quincy smirked. “*Exactly*. With your permission, I will begin preparing for the press conference.”

The hell of it was, Clarke couldn’t see any compelling reason not to adopt Quincy’s proposal. Admitting to the rocket attack and impeaching Quincy would be a tacit admission that the Loyalists were right, and would only help their popularity with the people. At least this would sow enough confusion to buy them some breathing room for a while.

You always knew it was double or nothing from the moment you pulled the trigger on Operation Lockdown, he told himself. *You have to win, or you lose it all. So be it.* Clarke sighed. “Fine. Do that.” He waved to a couple of security guards.

“Gentlemen, please take Dr. Quand into protective custody for the time being. No communications.”

“What? You can’t—”

“Sorry, my dear, but I’m afraid we have to. We can’t risk any leaks, no matter how well-intentioned.”

The guards relieved Dr. Quand of her communication devices and led her, still protesting, from the room.

“You should just kill her, you know,” Quincy said after they were gone.

Raph shuddered. “I am not *that* far gone.”

Quincy shrugged. “Sacrifices have to be made in a war. But as you will. Any

further disaster to come out of it will be on your own head.” He pushed back his chair, rose, and stretched. “Well, I will see you later. I have a press conference to prepare.” He pushed his chair back in and breezed out of the room.

Raph leaned back in his chair, groaned, and drank more antacid. It was turning out to be a long year.

Recha Throckmorton sat in her chair, staring at the blank display panel. Only seconds ago, it had been carrying the Totaliment’s press conference about the nuclear attack that had nearly wiped out their city, and the clouds of shrapnel in the skies blocking them off from any aid by their forces in space. She felt a great hollow emptiness in the pit of her stomach. What had she done? What had she been a part of?

She’d joined the Orion Club when she came to college largely out of a love of science-fiction, and it seemed the most science-fictional thing in the world to dream about getting in touch with the rest of the galaxy again. Totality knew it would never happen, not in *her* lifetime. Of course, the very next month, Barbaretta Hansom had landed, caused a great stir—and then vanished so completely it left half the Club, Recha included, believing it had all been some kind of hoax.

She’d shrugged, put her head down, and finished getting her History degree, then went back for a graduate degree. She’d stopped attending most Orion Club meetings for a while as the Barbaretta thing caused them to devolve into little more than forums for outlandish conspiracy theories. She’d *definitely* stayed away from the public rallies they’d grown into. Who had time for that nonsense when there was studying to be done? She’d almost forgotten about the affair altogether when Barbaretta Hansom had come back into her life with a vengeance—along with three other Zharus scouts and some kind of...talking animal. The broadcasts, the releases of verifiably genuine lost media from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries...

Suddenly it all seemed fresh and new. She’d watched the ancient movies they released onto the networks, listened to the music. She’d started going to club meetings again, even a rally or two. Her belief was re-energized, along with most of the other lapsed Orion Clubbers’, it seemed. It was really going to happen! Galactic contact again, not just in her lifetime but in just few months!

Then had come the...well, she *guessed* it was a coup, technically. Recent developments were causing her to re-evaluate these past events in a new light. Could you really call it a coup if they had your best interests at heart? Raph Clarke had taken over, declared martial law for a couple of weeks, and when the dust settled, a new, more conservative Totaliment had taken power. Clarke insisted that it would be best to proceed with caution, because what did we really *know* about these outsiders when you got right down to it?

At the time, Recha had partaken of the same stunned disbelief as the others of her generation. They’d made their voices heard, they’d said plainly what they wanted. Who were these old fools to decide what was best for them? In the throes of idealism, when her professor had revealed he had ties to the ousted Totaliment and their Resistance faction, she had been a ready recruit. And she had worked tirelessly to restore what she had believed to be their legitimate government.

But then...she’d started to learn more about what these Zharusians were really like. She’d heard the stories of Joel Roberts, the Scout with a talking ferret and amazing, superhuman—*inhuman* powers. And then she’d actually *met* some of them, including

that “Brooke” woman who was actually some kind of robot in disguise—who could change from a person to a...a *deer* person in the blink of an eye.

Recha had always assumed that movies like *The Monsters from Planet Thirteen* were simply fiction—pedagogical rubbish that conformed to the belief bias of the overall population in order to gross higher at the box office, she would have said in her Orion Club days. But...but what if they *weren't*? What if the people making them had known what they were talking about? The reports from Dr. Sigurdssen and Teenette Clark that had been broadcast were intended to put them at ease, but...how could she *know* they hadn't all been faked to put them off their guard?

When you got right down to it, two facts were unassailable: first, that the Totalians' ancestors had fled religious and economic persecution to found a new paradise of their own, far, far away from any other human civilization. And second, they had Totalium, an amazing wonder mineral that could be found nowhere else in the galaxy. Who knew what lies outsiders might spin to get their hands on it?

And then had come that great light in the northwestern sky. She'd been outside in the park when it happened, had seen with her own eyes the flash brighten the landscape. She'd hurried inside to watch the news, as soon as the media networks recovered from the electromagnetic pulse. And there it was...direct proof that the outsiders weren't really so friendly after all. Not only had they been secretly erecting a deadly wall around the planet to keep help from coming through, but they'd tried to fire a nuclear weapon right at *them!* It was only their own incompetence in forgetting about the trap they themselves had set that had saved Totalia City from going up in a ball of fire.

She didn't *want* to believe it, but—they were strange. Alien. People who combined with, sometimes even *merged* with bizarre animal-machines. People who couldn't even decide whether they wanted to be men or women. How could you ever really *trust* someone like that? How could you even know what they were thinking?

And she had been complicit in helping to hide a group of their saboteurs—hardened infiltrators fanatically willing to lay down their own lives in service to their cause. (Why else would they have stayed, even when the nuke was in the air?) What more harm might they do now that the attack had failed?

(A tiny little fragment of doubt nagged at her. The infiltrators had seemed like such nice, fully human people. Would they *really* have stayed around if they knew a nuke was coming? But...no, she told herself sternly. That's just what they *want* you to think. They'd sacrifice their own people to keep you from spilling what you know.)

Enough. She couldn't be a part of this any longer. She couldn't turn her back on the safety of her planet, her people, in the name of a childhood dream that had probably always been unrealistic and harmful. Recha took a deep breath, let it out as a sigh, then reached for the phone and dialed the emergency number. “Hello...yes...I'd like to report some alien activity...”

The Nectar River Resistance base was a hubbub of activity. It hadn't taken long at all for it to sink in that the attempt to launch a nuke meant that the Zealots damned well knew exactly where they were, and a more conventional attack could be on the way at any moment. They had, of course, already known they would be found out sooner or later, and had people out scouting and prepping new base locations—ones that had nothing to do with previous terraforming installations. The Resistance would be

splitting up its personnel and equipment between three such bases, further inland. With any luck, they could keep their heads down and hold out until the Zharusian fleet arrived.

With all need for stealth abandoned, the *Clementine* hovered protectively over the camp while the Integrate and RIDE soldiers who'd come along, plus the Resistance's own RIDE brigades, stood ready to repel any attackers. Most did, at least—some had been co-opted to help with the heavy lifting as they loaded up any equipment that could be moved onto the transports and other air vehicles they'd managed to acquire over the last few months.

The Totaliment themselves, as well as Kendlen and the Zharusian diplomats, were already aboard *Clementine*, that being deemed the safest possible place for them to be in the event of an attack. The ship had considerably better defenses and speed than any native vehicle, and could have them out of there in a heartbeat. Its advanced comm gear meant that it was also an excellent mobile command center.

At the moment, they were in the ship's main conference room, with every wall configured as a media display showing Totalia City news reports, footage of people in the streets, replays of the explosion, and whatever other footage was available. One screen showed police marching the four Zharusian infiltrators out of a tunnel exit, hands behind their heads. Bernie (or Brooke) was nowhere to be seen.

Trilby Whitfield was pale and badly shaken, and had spoken little since the explosion. Kendlen himself and the rest of the Resistance was in little better shape. The collective, unspoken thought going around camp... *They tried to nuke us*. The enormity of that act made what had revealed the attempt secondary by comparison to the rank-and-file. But not to Kendlen.

A Kessler Cascade, caused by a century of space junk, in the late 21st century had made low Earth orbit too dangerous for manned missions for a good seventy years. Even unmanned ones had difficulty getting through. And all those fragments could be tracked by conventional radar—something Totalium made moot. The only way to reliably track the stuff was the far more energy intensive lidar, which wasn't all that useful in space.

Who could have done such a thing? The more Kendlen thought about it, the more he thought he knew. "Belters," he said aloud.

The word attracted the attention of Trilby and a couple other Totalimentarians. "What's that?"

"Huh? Oh. Just thinking aloud. Trying to figure out why we have an orbit full of Totalium shotgun pellets."

"You don't think it was the Zealots' doing?"

Kendlen shook his head. "Even they would know better than to try to shoot a nuke through their own debris field. This had to be as big a surprise to them as it was to us."

Seventh Speaker Baldurson pondered. "The Moses Belt Refinery has the equipment. They produce an especially pure Totalium ingot from their mines."

"There are a *lot* of small belt refineries with the necessary automation. My Dad owns several of them. So do half a dozen other small mining companies. Some of them are even set up to send unmanned carriers inward for collection, rather than load manned freighters. Wouldn't take much conversion to make those into dispersion missiles."

“It wouldn’t take much, done over several months,” Jassen Baldurson said. “Ever since our rescue.”

“And Belt folk do tend to be among the more conservative sorts.” Kendlen shrugged. “It’s in their mindset. You always do things the same way, the *safe* way, because any deviation could potentially lead to explosive decompression.”

The First Speaker sighed. “So what we have is a group even *more* extreme than the Zealots, acting independently.”

“Maybe more than one group.” Kendlen shrugged. “I’d love to ask Dad if he knows anything about it, but last I heard he was out in the Belt himself, on the other side of a Kessler field from us.”

A chime came from the room’s speakers. “We are receiving a ping from the *Kybalion*,” Clementine said. “They are conserving bandwidth, so text only. They acknowledge receiving the report we sent via DINcom.”

“Put Torris and Captain Sandeep on the line,” Trilby said. “Can we risk a video conference?”

“We’ve lost about a quarter of the com units since we arrived here,” Clementine said. “Given that we do not know when or if it will be possible to resupply in light of recent events, we should conserve them as much as possible.”

Trilby sighed. “Agreed.”

“Looks like we’ll have to stick to that ancient Internet Relay Chat protocol,” Clementine said. “I’ll open a channel. Please enter #briefing.”

<CaptSandeep> We are preparing one of the message torpedoes Captain Roberts left with us.

<FltAdmFrankel> No doubt about it. We need them here now. If they haven’t already left, they need a kick in the ass. We need them here as soon as possible.

<FirstSpeaker> Go ahead. Let’s hope they’re already in transit.

<FltAdmFrankel> Could be, Trilby. But Sigurdssen’s first report said they’d be sending their final one right before they leave, and it hasn’t come in yet. Until we receive that word, I will assume they are still making preparations.

Booker Albescu spoke up. “It can’t be *too* much longer. Based on the timetable they gave us when we left, they should really be leaving any time now. Even if they haven’t left yet, it’s entirely possible Sandeep’s torp will cross theirs and arrive after they’ve already jumped.” Clementine transcribed his words and sent them over the text channel, as she was doing for all the others.

“We can only hope,” Trilby agreed grimly. “At this point, now that the Zealots have shown how far they’re willing to go, I think it’s time we ceased organized Resistance operations and went underground until such time as reinforcements can arrive. Further provocation of these extremists can only result in needless bloodshed.”

“We’d like to try to keep the lines of communication open, but if you feel that’s unwise...” Booker said.

Balderson waved a hand. “As far as I’m concerned, you can talk until you’re blue in the face, as long as there’s no chance of them finding out where we are from your communications. Knock yourself out. But I don’t know what good it will do. They’ve

already proved you can't trust a damned thing they say, and anything *you* say they'll try to twist it so we look like the bad guys."

"Ambassador, after what's happened, I'm afraid that we are beyond your help at this point," Trilby said sadly. The man appeared to have aged a decade since the nuke exploded. He was uncharacteristically distant, contemplative.

Booker nodded. He *wanted* to rant and rave. After all their efforts to resolve this peacefully, the work of weeks—all undone in a flash of light and radiation. "I understand, First Speaker. But I have to keep trying. It's my job."

Trilby reached over and patted him on the shoulder. "I know, son. I know."

At the very tip of one of the bronze pyramids atop one of Totalia City's highest skyscrapers, Bernie Thompson leaned against a largely ornamental radio antenna, hardlight cloak rendering him effectively invisible. Given that the Zealots were busy scouring the tunnels for any further signs of enemy infiltration, this seemed like the safest place for him to be right now. If nothing else, it had a hell of a view.

"Man, what the *hell?*" he muttered. It had been a really crazy couple of days. He'd been as optimistic as anyone at the way the voting had been going. He had been looking forward to going out and mingling with the crowds celebrating victory. And then had come that crazy contrail across the sky, and the unmistakable fireball of a nuke going off to the northwest. The EMP had knocked out the media broadcasting networks for a couple of hours, and when they'd come back up, it had been with the utterly unbelievable story that the *Zharusians* had fired the nuke *and* blockaded their orbit. *The sheer, mind-bending cognitive dissonance!*

At least, *Bernie* thought it was unbelievable. But a lot of the Totalia City citizens, who had formerly been so eager to believe in friendly aliens, were falling for it. All but the very staunchest supporters seemed to be wavering. There was a lot of argument over whether it really *had* been the *Zharusians* or not, but all it really amounted to was an ongoing flamewar with neither side convincing the other. All their forward progress had been lost.

Worse, the EMP had also knocked out most of their comm taps, so the Resistance couldn't immediately counter the Zealots' propaganda. Not that it might have helped much, as deeply-ingrained as fear of the unknown seemed to be in these people.

Including Recha. Bernie took scant satisfaction in knowing that he'd been right about her. Fortunately, he'd tapped her phone, so he knew the instant she called the police to turn the Resistance in. He was able to give Rowcliff enough advance warning for them to destroy their equipment, but it hadn't been quite enough for them to get out in time. Bernie promised himself he'd break them out if there was a chance, but it didn't seem likely in the near future—at least, not without exposing himself.

Bernie shook his head. "Idiot girl. If this shell could Fuse...bodyjack city. In a heartbeat."

He sighed and closed his eyes...optics...whatever. Well, that was that. Latest word from Clementine was that he was on his own for the time being. The Resistance had gone to ground and couldn't send anyone to retrieve him. He'd just have to survive until the situation changed.

On the bright side, he didn't need food, and every power socket here was RIDESafe. If nothing else, he could at least do plenty of snooping around to keep busy.

Bernie grinned a defiant grin, staring down at Totalia City spread out all around

him. "All right, you beautiful bitch...prepare to give up *all* your secrets."
Then he kicked in his lifters, and jumped.

Fleet Admiral Jermy Orinson debated popping another aspirin for his growing headache, then nixed the idea. Aspirin, along with just about everything else, had to be carefully rationed now. He took a sip of water and looked around the table, refocusing on the discussion at hand.

"The *Seed of Truth* was greatly damaged in the fight against the *Kybalion*. Its engines are shot, but it's environment envelope is still mostly intact. We were going to bring in new engines from the Shipyard, but in light of new events, it might be better as a greenhouse," Fleet Ops Officer Meghan Oleary explained.

"How so?" Jermy asked, a little worried he might have already missed the explanation. Since the planet was now sealed off from them, he'd been rearranging the fleet for long term space operations. A fleet that was already decimated from infighting and that was used to regular resupplies of people, equipment and perishables from below.

"We can tow it out to Totalia-Ra L1, where it'll get lots of sunlight, and fill it with hydroponic gardens. It'll be a few weeks before we'll get even the fastest growing crops from it, but within a month or two, it could supply most of the needs of everyone in the fleet and the Shipyard. What it can't supply can be covered by onboard gardens and rationing."

"Hmm. At least it's already got a fitting name for a greenhouse ship. Make it so. How about the Shipyard?"

The shipyard representative was relaxed in his chair. "Still working as normal. We'll miss the fresh meat from the planet, but we've mostly been self sufficient as is. An automated carrier is bringing in a dozen spy sats and weather sats for the planet as we speak. They will need a bit of work to retool for higher orbits once they get here; they were designed for lower orbits, but in light of recent events...."

"Well, they'll appreciate the weather sats at least. Wouldn't want them to get surprised by a hurricane."

"Sir," the communications officer interrupted them. "Speaker Clarke wants to speak with you."

"Tell his office five minutes," the Admiral said. He looked around the room, "Anyone have anything else to add?... No? You have your orders, until Speaker Clarke tries to change them. Dismissed."

The room emptied quickly, leaving Jermy and the comm officer. When the Admiral said he was ready, the officer sent the signal, and stepped out himself.

Raph Clarke appeared on the screen in front of the admiral after a few seconds. Jermy noted how he'd aged a decade since the failed nuclear attack and the discovery of the Kessler field. Unlike most, Jermy knew the true origin and destination of the rocket, though there was nothing he could do about the information.

"Mr Speaker," he greeted the other man.

"Admiral," Clarke returned the greeting. "How goes the fleet?"

"Unsteadily sir. We're still taking inventory and preparing for a long duration space mission. But I think we can survive indefinitely, once we get our ducks in a row."

"Indefinitely? Surely that damn field won't be up for that long?"

Jermy sighed, "It's low orbit, but not low enough. The field as it is now would

dissipate in a few years if we did nothing. The problem is, there's been two more booms since the nuke went off. Hence our plans for an indefinite stay up here. As long as someone keeps replenishing it, no one is coming up or down."

Clarke winced and shook his head. "And you have no idea who it is?"

"We think we know *what* it is, if not exactly *who*. All of the corporate Totalium factories in the asteroid belt are accounted for. They're not exactly built for stealth. Or security, for that matter, since we don't—well, *didn't*—have to worry about piracy. But in the Kuiper Belt, there were four experimental factories, three automated and one master. They went dark soon after the *Kybalion* mutinied. We assumed Sandeep grabbed them for some reason, but now it seems more likely someone else did. Their operators or someone else who know about them."

"So they're operating independently. Can't you get them to stop?"

"If we knew where they were. The factories were designed to go from rock to rock, extracting as they went. And like most of our stuff out here, they were plated with Totalium for cosmic-ray protection. If they don't answer us, we don't know where they are."

The comm channel fell silent for so long, Jermy wondered if it had glitched. Finally Clarke spoke again.

"Try to find them if you can and make them stop. What about the rest of our projects?"

"Mostly on hold; we have survival matters that are taking priority. The last Phaeton tests were very positive, we'll probably move it out to Sekhmet for more testing soon."

"Don't delay them too long. We need to make sure we control the entire system before the alien reinforcements arrive. We're hoping that their ship is as grounded as ours, which means we just need to take out the *Kybalion*. That has to be your priority."

"Yes sir," Jermy said, hiding his own misgivings. The numbers he was looking at were *very* tight. If any of their optimistic plans didn't work exactly as planned, they would be in trouble within weeks. Theoretically, Sandeep's *Kybalion* should be in a similar situation, but from the information the spies had snuck out with the video footage, the alien tech it had on board left it in a much better spot. If nothing changed, Jermy could see himself going hat in hand to Sandeep for help in the near future, treason or no. It was one thing to die for your country in battle, but quite another to let your men and women starve to death because your leaders were idiots.

Jermy pulled himself back to the present and finished his report. "I do have some good news for you. The shipyards have some new sats coming in for you; spy and weather. We need to reconfigure them to orbit above the Kessler Cascade, but it will give you some fresh eyes in the sky. We'll have them running within a few days."

"Well, at least you'll be good for something. Clarke out."

The Fleet Admiral looked at the blank screen and sighed. On the one hand, he understood the pressure the Speaker was under. On the other, he had his own pressure to handle. There were hundreds of people across a dozen ships and stations now dependent on him to keep them eating, drinking and breathing.

"*Screw rationing, I need to clear my head,*" he mumbled to himself before raiding the first aid kit for a couple of aspirin.

"...and that's the current state of the Zealot Fleet."

Captain Sandeep nodded to his intelligence officer as the woman finished the briefing. It was odd how easily you could get used to things, he reflected. Like Lieutenant Saunders having vulpine ears and a shaggy tail now. But then, she'd always been one of his cannier officers. Being part fox suited her.

"So what about it?" Admiral Frankel said. "They're clearly on the ropes. Sounds like we should press the advantage."

Sandeep considered, then shook his head. "With all due respect, Admiral, I think not. As you say, they're already on the ropes. Kicking them when they're down could only cause further casualties and hard feelings." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "It seems to me, we might have the opportunity to turn them, or at least some of them. If Lieutenant Saunders's projections are correct, they will soon be low on supplies with nowhere else to turn. And we already know that many of them are not exactly in sympathy with the 'True' Totaliment."

"We can essentially rule out Captain Forestor's and Falco's ships. By now they'll have rooted out any potential mutineers from their crews," Frankel said. "That makes four out of the seven ships they have remaining in service we could potentially turn."

"I'm surprised Clarke didn't make Falco their so-called Fleet Admiral," Sandeep said. "But then, he was always best as a Captain. Jermy is much more level-headed."

Captain Sandeep knew every one of his fellow Captains, some of them personally. He'd spent time with them and their families while on leave. Falco had been in his graduating class at the Cosmy Academy and nearly beat him for the assignment to the Flagship. It hadn't sat easy with him to be on the opposite side from so many of them.

"I think you're right, Captain," Frankel said. "They're certainly not in any position to launch more offensive sorties, or go setting more traps. We'll keep an eye on them."

Sandeep nodded. "Quite a remarkable turn of events, isn't it? In attempting to help the Zealots protect the planet from alien invaders, our mysterious benefactors have instead helped our side, not once but twice."

Frankel chuckled. "We should send them a thank-you card or something."

"Of course, to do that, we'd have to find out where to address it..."

They both turned simultaneously to look at Saunders, who nodded. "Yes sir. We've already been looking into it. No results to speak of, but we'll keep on trying."

"No rush, Lieutenant. As long as they keep Totalia sealed off, they're doing our job for us. I don't expect it will be a problem for the Zharusians, as many other miracles as we've seen them work."

Frankel nodded agreement, and opened his mouth to say something, but the intercom chime interrupted him. Sandeep tapped the button. "Yes?"

The bridge watch officer spoke in quick, excited tones. "Sir, we've just received another message torpedo! We're retrieving it now, and should have it decoded within a few minutes."

"Speak of the devil." Sandeep tapped the button again. "Thank you, Lieutenant Saltzman. We'll be there in just a few minutes."

Frankel raised an eyebrow. "The final report?"

"The timing is right. I doubt it could be anything else." Sandeep smiled. "Regardless of its precise contents, I can already tell you what it means. *Help is on the way.*"

Part Three: The Fleet

Foreword

Here at last is the final part of *Totalia: Parallels*. Remember that this story takes place simultaneously with the other two parts, though some parts of it take place after parts of the previous ones. As with the other two parts of *Parallels*, this picks up where *Totalia: Prelude* left off; you might want to re-read it to catch up.

This was one of the hardest parts for us to complete due to all the different continuity things moving around, and changes we came up with while we were in the process of writing it. Keeping track of when everything happened was more than a little trying. Also, we realized along the way that it didn't make sense for the *Great Western* to arrive at Totalia ahead of its escort ship, so we arranged for them to rendezvous outside the system and then go in together. (This conflicted with a story Jetfire already posted, but he's not inclined to go back and change it, so I suppose this will just end up as a "Canon Discontinuity" listing on the FreeRIDERS TVTropes page, whenever we get around to making one.)

The effort of getting this monster finished kind of burned us out on the Totalia saga for a while (it took me a couple of weeks even to get around to proofing and formatting it after we'd finished it), so expect us to write a few one-shots from other time periods before we return to this storyline. But we'll get back to it sooner or later—we've got a lot more stories to tell!

Remember when you read the dates in this story that the Zharusian calendar consists of not twelve but ten months of thirty thirty-hour days each, named for Earth months but missing February (because it's shortest) and August (because, really, who cares about August?). This has the side effect of making September, October, November, and December actually match up to the 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th months for which they were originally named. So just remember, on Zharus, March comes after January, and July jumps right into September.

Enjoy!

—Robotech_Master
6/17/2015

Prologue

*January 4, 158 A.L. (Zheng He equivalent)
Great Western, Zheng He System Rim*

She could hardly be called a proper ship. The *Great Western* was a thousand meters of superstructure, fuel tanks, fusion reactors, and drive systems. Her Eridanite builders—the best in human space—had been very reluctant to send her off in this state. The Western hadn't even been officially launched, and here they were parading the ship through the Colonies to satisfy the investors and backers. Once she reached the Pharos system and its Colossus-Rhodes Shipyards everything else that made a ship a ship would be integrated, making her whole. At the moment, the *Western* was little more than a long, empty triangular tube with engines and power plants. While airtight, most of that tube was still airless. When work was needed, it had to be done in suits, or with air support domes.

At Rhodes, the rest would be added in; activating the life support, adding crew quarters and living spaces, a proper Bridge, and so forth. The Rhodes Shipyards would also be installing the rest of the weapons and shielding tech they had picked up at Kepler *en route*. Then there were the Bigtops, the Pinnaces, and Gillies—the actual Star Circus landers that would make her the *Great Eastern's* little sister.

Docked to the superstructure was the Star Circus Pinnacle *King of Hearts*, acting as crew quarters and bridge for the incomplete starship. OverEngineer Seamus Odell paced back and forth near the *Great Western's* remote Engineering Console. The ship herself was fine. There was still some fine tuning to be done before the ship entered jump, but the Cyberdani had done their best work for the Circus as usual. One more stop, one more dog and pony show to put on before he could get down to real business of finishing the ship... of finishing *his* ship.

“Calm down a bit Seamus, won't ya?” Dobbin, Seamus's longtime RIDE partner, picked up his mood as usual. “You get any more upset, you're going to start talking like you're in a 'Pat and Mike' joke, and you know you hate when you do that.”

Over the nigh-on thirty years they'd been partnered Seamus's features had gone from the normal tags to more than vaguely horsey. He could only speak with the help of a vocoder. That the duo hadn't yet Integrated yet was something of a mystery to them. Seamus needed regular nanosurgery to keep his hands and feet from becoming hooves.

"Good point. Still, if this doesn't make me feel like someone's been stealin' me Lucky Charms, I don't know what does."

Dobbin snorted. "I would think you'd be happy for the chance to give our ship a fitting shakedown cruise."

"Right into a war zone? Sure an' I've had enough of *that* in our last few passes through Kepler." Seamus shook his head. By now the motion was more of an equine side-to-side shake than the ordinary human back-and-forth. "But let them say the two magic words, 'wildcat colony,' and it's like waving a red flag in front of a bull, see if it isn't."

It had only been a few hours since word had come through that the Circus was considering loaning the so-new-it-squeaked *Great Western* to Zharus to transport a relief fleet to a rediscovered colony no one had ever heard of. The final decision wouldn't be taken until after they'd arrived at Wednesday and had the chance to talk to Zharus's representatives in person, but at this point they were inclined to be strongly in favor. Seamus had been reviewing the information packet, and the more he read about this place, the more it seemed like asking for trouble.

"I remember the days you'd have been excited to open up a new stop that had never even seen a big top before."

"Those days were before I had responsibility for a whole brand spanking new ship of my own. A ship they want to hang a bulls-eye on before it's even *finished* yet. Mark my words, this is going to mean trouble."

"We'll have the chance to speak to Isabella about it when we get to Wednesday."

"Sure, but I expect her mind's already long since made up." Seamus sighed. "And it's not as if I'm the *Captain*, who might actually have some say in the decision." He stopped for a moment and took a deep breath. "Well, enough fuming about it for now, I guess. Walking around with a storm cloud over my head isn't helping me prep us for jump. I'll have plenty of time for that when we're on the way."

Dobbin snorted. “Yes, and I can’t *tell* you how much I’m looking forward to being stuck in a tin can with you in a mood for a month and a half.”

In spite of his irritation, Seamus couldn’t help grinning. “Hey, I’ll have you know that’s *our ship* you’re talking about.”

“It’s a very *nice* tin can, but it’s still going to be a month and a half inside without a can opener. It’s like being sentenced for drunk and disorderly without even getting to enjoy drinking too much whiskey and starting a brawl first.”

“Since when do *you* drink too much whiskey? Or even any whiskey at all?”

“I don’t, but we *do* share everything, don’t we?”

Seamus chuckled. “All right, point taken. I’ll try to keep a lid on it. It’s not as if I’d be able to do anything about it until we get to Wednesday anyway, and I can’t say I’ll enjoy being angry the whole trip myself.” He returned his attention to the engineering console. “On the bright side, we’re looking remarkably good for a ship this big and new, and our lads down in Engineering are doing a fine job. We should be able to enter jump right on time. T minus two hours and counting.”

“So far she’s a far sight different than the ol’ Eastern.”

The *Great Eastern* herself was based on a ship nearly three centuries old. Though there was very little that could be called original anymore, her younger sister ship moved through subspace like a barracuda through the ocean deep. On the first stop at Ibn Rushd—just after Eridani—she had arrived days before the older ship. Much faster than anticipated. Only the presence of the heavily-armed Pinnacle *King of Hearts* had kept the local pirates at bay.

Seamus brought up the specs for the Western’s future weapons loadout—the Calliope. The components for the Kepler-built pulse beam cannons had been shipped ahead, waiting with the rest of the fitting out at Rhodes Shipyards. “Without all this...I’m going to insist on some kind of escort. The *King* won’t be enough if we’re facing an entire space navy.”

“Won’t get no argument from me there. What all do you think they could send with us?”

“As I recall, they have a few mothballed ships near Xolo suitable for

that. I'll bring this up with Bella and Mikel when we see 'em."

"Have to make sure they leave good and early."

"Tell me about it." Seamus checked the status panel on his board and tapped an amber listing for a status report, then hit the intercom button to issue instructions to an engineering team. "Why don't you start working up a list of requirements for an escort ship, given what we know about the situation? If we're going to do this, we're darned well going to do it right."

Dobbin nodded. "I'll have something for you by the time we're in jump."

"Good." That settled, Seamus did his best to put it out of his head and turn his full attention back to engineering tasks. After all, this ship wasn't going to jump herself.

Chapter 1

January 30, 158 A.L.

Toptown Spaceport

The jaguar Fuser stepped out onto the concourse of the Toptown spacedock, followed by the much shorter reddish sphinx Integrate. “Damn, Uncle Joe,” Quinoa said. “I just can’t get over seeing you like this. All those years of thinking you just didn’t care for RIDEs, like the Brubecks...”

“When instead, it turns out he was fuckin’ *pinning*,” Julius put in.

“At least I wasn’t pinning for the fjords,” Joe said. “Like someone I could name.”

“I’m really glad you’re part of the family now—or, rather, again,” Quinoa said. “It seems like I’m always finding out new things about Uncle Joe, even now.”

“People are just like that,” Joe said. “Anyway, the ship slip should be over here, if I remember right...”

“When’s the last time you went anywhere in it?” Quinoa asked.

“Well, there was that cruise we took to Xolotlan three years ago,” Joe said. “You should remember that, you were there.”

“No, when’s the last time you went somewhere *out* of the system? Somewhere you had to go FTL to get to?”

“Huh.” Joe considered that. “I don’t know. Maybe when I went to pick you up from the Circus after the divorce.” He shrugged. “What can I say, I’ve just been a big ol’ homebody these days. Hard to get up the urge to go anywhere when you’re perpetually shellshocked.”

“Well, *that’s* gonna fuckin’ change, anyway,” Julius said. “You know, maybe after this we can go some other places. I’d like to see for real some of those worlds you and Mikel visited in your memories. Maybe even old Earth.” He snorted. “No reason that bunch who still smell like durian should get to have all the fun.”

“Jules, there wasn’t any durian fruit in the crate they actually arrived in,” Joe pointed out.

“It’s the principle of the thing. After they caused you to stink up the

whole fuckin' mansion with that rotten shit, they still smell like fuckin' durian to me."

"How are those eight doing, anyway?" Quinoa asked. "Settling in?"

"We ended up creating brand new identities for them out of whole cloth," Joe explained. "So, they're 'accidental crossride' tourists from Ibn Rushd. The ones who actually did crossride, anyway. We're going to give them jobs at Steader Entertainment for the moment, until they figure out what they want to do. Seems like the least we can do after a Steader sent them back to us."

"Or what's left of one. Sheesh." Julius sneezed. "I still say there couldn't have been that much of Harold left for that 'Cheetara' to do something so intelligent and thoughtful."

"Uh, yeah," Joe said. "I'm not even going to try to speculate. Harold *could* have wised up. It's been known to happen. Rarely." He shrugged. "Really, I kind of try not to guess about how much might be left of who in Integrations ever since..." He glanced at Quinoa.

Quinoa chuckled. "I'm pretty much entirely me, seems like," she said. "Trust me, if more of me had been Quorra, I wouldn't have been such an idiot about things right afterward. Quorra was nice...pretty quiet and shy, didn't put herself forward a lot. But when she did say something, it was usually pretty on-point. That's my biggest regret, I didn't have more time to get to know her, and then she pretty much disappeared in the Integration. It takes some of us that way. Our understanding of the process is still so... imperfect."

"Thanks to you-know-fuckin'-who," Julius sneered.

"Yeah, yeah," Quinoa said. "And I'll admit, I helped. I was wrapped around his finger for months, until the Towers incident started everything rolling to the present."

"Enough placing blame," Joe said. "The important thing is, it's behind us and we can move forward. It's *all* behind us." He grinned with Julius's Fuser head, showing his RIDE's sharp feline teeth. "And now we've got fun times ahead."

"I still can't believe I'm actually going to get to leave the fuckin' system an' fuckin' *go* somewhere," Julius said. "Except for that little ring tour of yours, I was basically stuck in Nextus—and, mainly, your penthouse—for all

my short little life. Feels like whole new fuckin' vistas have opened up before me."

"We have a shade under four weeks to Wednesday from here at the speed the ol' girl can manage," Joe said. "I had the dragons at Camelot give the *Steadfast* an overhaul at Colossus-Rhodes. It's been a long time since the family used the FTL."

"Guess we'll be watchin' a fuckin' shitload of stuff," Julius said. "I still have a lot of that stuff you got unlocked after I bit the dust to catch up on."

"There's not going to be a lot else to do," Quinoa said. "Unless Julius and I want to shut down to hibernation and Joe goes into cryo for it. Which some people actually do for trips like that."

"I think they're crazy," Joe said. "When else am I going to have all that free time to watch stuff without anyone expecting me to do something *useful*?"

The Zharus branch of the huge Steader family had an entire level of the Aloha Elevator just for their collection of starships, both in-system and FTL-capable. Not all of them were of Eridani make. The ship that still formally belonged to both Joe and Mikel Steader was the oldest, the largest, and still the fastest. The 250-meter *Steadfast*, named after one of the first colony ships from Earth, had a stark white hull and a vaguely whale-like shape. The brothers had obtained it on the same trip as when they had tracked down Clint Brubeck, then gone to Earth to dig up the Twencen Trove. Her technology had been kept current.

"She's still a beauty, isn't she?" Joe said. "Classic Eridanite design. Reminds me of the Minbari ships from *Babylon 5*."

"Pretty fuckin' cool," Julius said. "Though I'm kinda surprised you don't have a fuckin' *Millennium Falcon* or something."

"I've thought of one for intra-system jaunts, but never felt the urge to actually build one," Joe said. "Besides, there's already a couple dozen of them as touristy interplanetary transit shuttles."

The Steader family had appropriate crew for their starships on retainer. They were met at the gangway by the nine spacer cyborgs, plus a few inspectors from ZITA—the Zharus Interstellar Trade Authority. Behind Julius and the Steaders a pair of songbird LRIDEs flew, recording.

Captain Faulkner saluted her be-Fused employer as they approached.

“Long time no see, Joe,” she said. “And this is Julius?”

“Yeah, that’s me,” Julius said. “Pleasetameetcha.”

“Florence, it’s been a while,” Joe said. He eyed the ZITA representatives. “I guess we’ve got the all clear?”

“Since you’re on your way to Wednesday, Mr. Steader, our job is simple. You’re cleared for departure,” the first inspector said. “But I will say I still haven’t seen a lot of Integrates traveling openly yet. No doubt many have slipped by us in the past.”

“I’m aware of at least two,” Joe said. *‘Cheetara’ and a certain scout who reportedly shares my taste in movies. Maybe I can meet him when we get back.*

“These restrictions are really fuckin’ stupid anyway,” Julius said. “Integrates are definitely legal people—leastways, half of each of ‘em are—and we RIDEs are at least sorta-kinda legal people. What fuckin’ right do you have to say we can’t go on a cruise ‘cuz of what we’re made of? Hell, you know damned well we just got four RIDEs *back* from Earth—it was in the report we sent you last month. How many others you think they’ve gotten ahold of by now? The fuckin’ horse has left the fuckin’ barn, and you’re just serving up the same tired old horseshit.”

“I’d tend to agree, for rather obvious reasons,” Quinoa said. “Now that these technological prohibitions affect people, you could make the case that it’s racial discrimination.”

The inspector held up his hands. “Believe me, I quite sympathize. But those decisions are well above my pay grade. That being said, I have no doubt there *will* be changes, and soon. Have a safe journey.”

The three ZITA inspectors gave everyone a respectful nod, then walked towards the elevator.

“Jerks,” Julius muttered.

“Well, with that bit of bureaucratic hell over, shall we?” Captain Faulkner said.

“All aboard!” Joe said cheerfully. “Captain Faulkner, make all necessary preparations to cast off. We’re just missing one last passenger, Socah Gates. She should be along within a couple of hours. Once she’s aboard, we’re good to go.”

“It’ll be nice to take the old girl superluminal again,” Captain Faulkner

said. “With these upgrades we’re almost as fast as a scout ship.”

“I look forward to seeing that first-hand,” Joe said. “All our luggage was already sent up, so we should be able to cast off pretty soon. Anyway, I’ll see you on board.” He stepped into the boarding tube, ducking Julius’s head slightly to pass through it. Quinoa followed a moment later.

“Well, off we go. Time to slip the surly bonds of Zharus, or whatever,” Julius said happily.

“Technically, we kind of slipped those bonds already, when we flew the Pan-Am up here,” Quinoa pointed out.

“Don’t confuse me with the facts,” Julius retorted.

“Come on, I’ll show you around the living quarters, then we can set up a movie in the lounge,” Joe said. “What do you think, *Sharknado*? That’s always good for a few laughs...”

“I think it’s a bit early in the trip to be thinking about torturing us, Uncle Joe,” Quinoa said. “Maybe we should work up to it? Maybe start with *Howl of AlphaWolf*?”

“You wound me,” Joe said. “That flick isn’t that bad, is it?”

“Just a little melodramatic,” Quinoa said.

“I have to admit, Joe, that the fuckin’ ‘so sayeth me’ line just makes the whole flick,” Julius said.

“And it made AlphaWolf’s whole schtick,” Quinoa said.

“Anyway, this big room here is the lounge,” Joe said, waving his arm to encompass the big room with a huge display screen at one end and plenty of sofas and cushy seats. “Kitchen and dining room’s over there, with the fabber and access to the pantry. Sleeping quarters are on the other side...”

March 1, 158 A.L.

Brubeck Mining Corporate Headquarters, Uplift

Zane Brubeck peered into the clutter of display panels before him as though, if he only looked hard enough, all the secrets of the universe would be revealed. Sadly, he actually thought he saw *less* there than usual, and was pretty sure he felt the beginnings of a sarium-powered headache coming on.

If he was honest with himself, he was probably fooling himself that taking a personal interest in things was actually useful at this point. They'd already assembled as much of the fleet as they could until Joe came back with the Star Circus's ship, and that was months away. There wasn't really much more organizing to do right now—at least, not Zharus-side, but he was still too useful as a figurehead here to go out to Cerberus and micromanage there. It was just a waiting game.

If he was even *more* honest with himself, he had to admit that he was probably still throwing himself into this work just so he didn't have to deal with the more mundane mining business stuff Agatha would throw at him if he admitted he wasn't as busy as he might be. His conscience and his boredom were at war, and at the moment the odds were pretty even.

"Sheesh, Aggie, what's it gonna take to get you into this office and me out of it?" Zane muttered. "You're the natural-born bureaucrat..."

Then one of the panels buzzed for his attention. Zane raised an eyebrow and tapped it. It was an instant message from Aggie—he had an unexpected visitor. It was that palomino mare Integrate architect, Melisande. "Well, that's interesting. Sure, send her in."

"Hello, Mr. Brubeck," Melisande said a moment later. She stood, businesslike, before his desk.

"Hey, Sandy," Zane said, banishing the display panels. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm here about what *I* can do for *you*, actually," Melisande said. "I've already wrapped up all my business affairs, so I'm available to take part in your project at any time. And...well, I had some things I wanted to show you."

Zane raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Like what?"

"Well, I was just doodling around...I know it's silly to do work 'on spec,' but I figured that if you didn't want these, I could just sell them to some other Q-mining outfit." She summoned up a hardlight display panel of her own. On the display was a Q-mining rig, but subtly different than the ones in normal use throughout the Dry Ocean.

"Oh, now what have we here?" Zane said, leaning forward.

"It occurred to me, I'd never tried redesigning a Q-mining rig before," Melisande said. "Most other types of Dry habs, yes, but not a mining rig. I

was curious what I could come up with, so...”

“So how’s this an improvement over what we have now?” Zane asked.

“Well, the rigs currently in operation are based on old designs, which are in turn based on older designs,” Melisande explained. “The way we’ve always done it, and such. It’s simpler—and cheaper—to reuse an existing design, retrofitting as necessary.”

“But not necessarily the *best* decision, eh?” Zane said.

Melisande shrugged. “I imagine the most important thing at the time most of these rigs were built was getting them working *fast*. They didn’t necessarily have the time for a fundamental redesign.” She smiled. “But then, as you well know, we Integrates are all about the *fast* time.”

Zane chuckled. “True enough. Show me what you’ve got.”

“If I apply the same principles to this as to the other habs I’ve designed, well, for starters I can bring your energy use down by about 30%, as well as implement a more efficient n-cavorite waste-heat venting system for the drill. They didn’t have n-cav when they made the original designs.”

“I can see that,” Zane said.

“And it will also be a more pleasant environment in which to live and work,” Melisande said. “Not *luxurious* exactly, but pleasant. Decreasing the size of the generators and drill support mechanisms provide 20% more living room from the same overall rig size.”

“And the overall cost to build?” Zane asked.

“Commensurate with the platforms you use now. Actually, probably about 10% lower given modern construction techniques,” Melisande said. “That’s not all I have to show you, though.” She flipped the image to a different habitat—a spherical shape, with an obvious airlock and clusters of attitude jets. “This is a refinement of one of the space habs I constructed when I was working out near the Rim. Of course, I don’t know exactly what you’ll need it for, so I kept it pretty generic. It’s based on a modular system, and different mission-specific modules can be swapped in as needed.”

“Interesting,” Zane said. “How long can it go without resupply?”

“With CO₂ scrubbers and algae tanks, the air supply is pretty self-sustaining,” Melisande said. “Though you might have to swap in new scrubbing filters and algae every five months or so. Same for water recycling. The biggest limiting factor is food. Which is why these habs tend

to be built in communities, with larger hubs for community-centric resources like greenhouses or farms.”

“And I see they can be fabbed easily, just like any prefab building module,” Zane said. “Pretty clever. So...what do you want for the use of these designs?”

Melisande shrugged. “Whatever you think is fair. If I think your offer is too low I might bargain it up, but money’s not much of a concern for me at this point.”

Zane raised an eyebrow again. “Then what is a concern for you?”

“To be honest...boredom.” Melisande flicked her ears. “As I told you before, I enjoy doing new things. Since I’ve cleared the decks to be available for your project, I don’t *have* anything to do. And...well, I’d *like* something to do.”

Zane considered that for a moment. “Hmm. You know, I don’t think there’s any reason we couldn’t have you work a little more closely with us. As you say, you’ll need to know what we’re doing in order to adapt your designs to our needs. Maybe I could have you work with my sister, Maddie—she’s the one who knows the most about where we’re going, since she’s been there already.”

Melisande cocked her ears forward. “The scout?”

“That’s her,” Zane said. “I’ll have her fill you in on the details. Of course, you understand that anything we tell you, you have to hold in total secrecy. Don’t even tell your assistant—at least until the both of you are safely off-world.”

Melisande nodded. “I’ve worked on plenty of confidential projects.”

Zane chuckled. “None quite like *this* one. I hope you’re up for a challenge.”

“Always,” Melisande said firmly.

Zane grinned. “And who knows. If you keep on impressing me the way you have so far, maybe after all this is over I’ll see what you can do for the *big rig*.”

“Oh, now that *would* be an interesting project,” Melisande mused.

“Not half as interesting as the one we’re about to hand you.” Zane beamed over Madison’s comm code. “Tell Maddie I said hi.”

As Melisande left the office, Zane leaned back in his seat and propped

his feet up. He had to admit, he enjoyed seeing people enthusiastic about their work. And Sandy seemed like a trustworthy sort of person, in addition to being competent. It would be interesting to see what she came up with when she knew more about what they were planning.

Then another display panel popped up in the middle of Zane's desk. "If you've got time to put your feet up, you've got time to help me with this paperwork," Agatha declared smugly, shoving another half dozen panels at him. "If you could get those back to me in about thirty seconds, that would be great."

Zane groaned. "All right, sis, hold your horses." With a sigh, he dropped into fast time. A CEO's work was never done.

March 2, 158 A.L.

Cheers Bar

Melisande stepped into the unfamiliar bar and looked around. She'd never been here before, but Madison had suggested it as a good place to meet. Melisande was given to understand it was something of a local Integrate gathering place, and she believed it—both the bartenders were Integrates, along with about half the patrons.

She looked around for Madison, searching for the leopardess she'd seen on the news. There were a few female leopard Integrates, but they didn't have the right spot patterns. Was she early?

"Excuse me, miss." Melisande glanced behind her to see a blonde-haired human woman in khakis. "Were you looking for someone?"

"Uh...just looking to meet a friend..." Melisande said. "I guess she's not here yet."

"There's an open table over there," the woman suggested. "She should see you when she comes in."

"Thanks," Melisande said, going to take a seat where the woman suggested. The seat was made with Integrates in mind, with plenty of space for her tail to go.

Then, as she was getting settled, the woman came and sat down across from her, and grinned. "Actually, scratch that, I *did* see you when you came in." And then her outline blurred and expanded out into the familiar

leopard shape Melisande had been expecting. “Sorry about that, but I just couldn’t resist trying it out. You’re the first new person I’ve met since I learned that trick. Hi, you must be Melisande?”

“Oh! I didn’t know you were a shapeshifter!” Melisande said. “I am—but call me Sandy.”

“All right, Sandy, call me Maddie,” Madison said. “And I actually *wasn’t* a shapeshifter until a month or so ago. It’s easier to learn than you might expect.”

“Wouldn’t be any point for me,” Melisande said. “I wouldn’t know what to shift to. I don’t have any memories of my lives before Integration.”

Madison’s eyes widened. “Oh! I’m sorry to hear that.”

Melisande shrugged. “It’s all right, I’m used to it. It just means I don’t have any old baggage to carry around, and everything’s new to me.”

“And you’re an architect?” Madison said.

“It’s interesting work, and something I’m good at.” Melisande sent over the same biographical information she’d given Zane. “I’m not sure what my function will be on this mysterious project of yours, but the designs I showed Zane interested him that he said I should speak with you and that you’d Tell All.” She glanced around. “Is it safe to talk about it in such a public place?”

“Diane has a lot of privacy safeguards...but I’ll put up a hardlight privacy field just the same.” Madison waved a hand and a translucent hardlight dome appeared, rendering the rest of the bar a confusion of blurry shapes.

Melisande nodded. “Very good. So what am I here for?”

“To be honest, a large part of it is we want you to demonstrate modern Zharusian architecture to...well, I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“Little green men?” Melisande suggested.

Madison chuckled. “Not exactly. Here’s another information packet right back at ya.”

Melisande dropped into fast-time to open and review the packet. She viewed with some surprise the Scout’s report on the new world of Totalia, and the extensive material and documentation she’d put together. “This is amazing! A whole new world, with a completely different architectural style...why do they put pyramids on the top of their buildings? Religious

influence? Oh, I see...”

Madison chuckled. “There’s a lot that’s different about that world. For rather obvious reasons.”

“So I gather,” Melisande said. She read the report on the travails of Madison, Samantha, and the other scouts in escaping, the information about the coup that had kicked off as they left, then looked up as she ran across the details of the escape. “You Integrated on the way back? Then it’s only been a few months for you.”

“It’s all still pretty new, yeah,” Madison said, smiling. “I learned shapeshifting so I could go back without freaking people out...then it turns out the first scout they sent back to look in on things was an Integrate himself, and blew his cover in the process of rescuing some people. So much for *that* idea, heh.”

“I’m certain it’ll be useful,” Melisande assured her. “Life often doesn’t work out the way we plan. I’m sure whoever I used to be, I never planned on becoming who I am now.” She chuckled. “But it can be fun to learn new things.”

“True enough,” Madison replied. “Mantha and I are really digging shapeshifting now, whatever we might want to use it for.”

Melisande took more time to review the documents. “How remarkable. To think a wildcat colony could have made it all this time without being found.”

“If that blows your mind, consider this...we have no way of knowing there weren’t others that decided to go just a little farther out, or in some different direction altogether,” Madison said. “But one crisis at a time. Assuming we’re able to get the right people back in charge, we’ll be needing to train them up in modern tech ASAP. We’re drawing in professionals from all fields of work.”

“And you chose me for architecture. I’m flattered.” Melisande smiled. “I suspect I might be able to learn as much from them as they do from me. I’ve never done much with pre-fabber construction.”

“That different, huh?” Madison said.

“It’s all in the construction materials, you see,” Melisande explained. “Modern superstrong materials and large-scale fabbers give me a lot of freedom—sometimes, one might think an *excess* of it. But the Totalians

have limits that will be a challenge to work with. And then there are all the pyramid motifs and flourishes, too. It looks like fun.” She frowned. “Of course, there is the question of how willing they’ll be to learn from an anthropomorphic horse. I see their pop culture has plenty of ‘scary alien’ movies.”

“That’s something else they’re going to have to learn to get over,” Madison said. “Some of our experts are Integrates; others aren’t. Either way, you’re all tops in your fields, and they’ll just have to deal with it.”

A blurry brown presence appeared outside the privacy field. “Knock knock!” a cheerful voice said, voice slightly distorted by the field. “Was just wondering if I could get you anything? Given that you’re taking up a table and hadn’t ordered yet...”

Madison brought the privacy field down, revealing a deer Integrate. “Oh, sorry ‘bout that, Diane. Bring me one of those nifty Shangri-La double IPAs you just got in.”

“That sounds good,” Melisande said. “I’ll have one, as well.”

Diane nodded. “I’ll be right back with those.” She swept away.

“I think we’re probably done discussing secret things anyway,” Madison said. “At least until you’ve had more of a chance to review the information I passed over.”

Melisande nodded. “Then I guess it’s small talk from here on out?”

Madison smiled. “If you don’t mind. To be honest, I’m kind of curious...if you don’t mind talking about it, what’s it like to start all over from scratch like that? I realize it’s kind of a silly question, since you wouldn’t have any way of comparing it to something else, but...”

“It’s normal for me.” Melisande shrugged. “It wasn’t *entirely* from scratch. I still had basic language, reading, math skills. It’s just that I didn’t have any personal memories. As a result, I’m basically a citizen of Camelot, without that much experience in the rest of the world—or at least, the parts of it humans live in. This is all kind of new to me.”

“There weren’t any clues, like a wallet or purse or something? Or what the Candlejacks remembered?”

“I was dumped at Camelot pretty much as I was,” Melisande said. “We never even knew who the particular ‘Jacks were. There were some fuzzy memories that *might* have been them...but the images were too nonspecific

for identification. I was just a big equine baby in a basket, you might say.” She chuckled. “Believe me, I’ve gone over every aspect of the experience, tried to hunt down any possible clues, time and again. I’ve looked at the lists of all the people who disappeared at about that time, but you can’t even go by that since the Snatchers made up plausible accidents for their victims as a matter of course.”

“Someone really didn’t want you finding out who you used to be,” Madison said.

“Honestly, you can’t even really say that,” Melisande said. “They wouldn’t have had any way of knowing I wouldn’t remember, after all.” She shrugged. “In the end, I’m kind of reduced to hoping that someday I’ll run into someone who says, ‘You know, you remind me an awful lot of my Great Aunt Matilda.’ But then, I don’t even know if my *personality* even resembles either of my halves.”

“Ugh,” Madison said. “Of course, now that Fritz’s operation has been dismantled and all his crew arrested, maybe you might be able to find something out from the records of their interrogations. I gather they actually read out the memories of the Snatchers they were able to get their hands on.”

“That might be something to look into, I guess,” Melisande said. “To be honest, by now I’m halfway afraid of what I might find. What if I was married, and my husband’s moved on by now? Would my family really want me coming back into their life after all this time, re-opening old wounds? Maybe it’s for the best.”

“Sounds to me like ‘sour grapes,’” Madison said. “Speaking as someone who’s lost both her Mom *and* her Dad, I’d be beyond delighted if either one of them walked back into my life. I’m sure your family would be, too. If you had one.”

“Maybe I’ll see what I can find out after the...ah, job is over,” Melisande said. “Oh, thank you,” she added as Diane put the two dark amber beers on the table on front of them.

“You’re quite welcome,” Diane said, nodding and retreating to the bar again.

Melisande sipped her beer. The mug had a specially-designed flange to work with a range of muzzle shapes. The beer hit the spot perfectly. “Ah,

that's good."

"It is," Madison agreed. "All the time I was out in deep space, it was one of the things I most looked forward to getting back to."

"And that makes it my turn to ask what it's like," Melisande said, smiling. "What's it like being a scout? Venturing so far away from home, all alone..."

"Well, you already know that I wasn't *all* alone on this trip," Madison said. "Thanks to a certain spotted stowaway..." She chuckled. "But it was... kind of nice, in a way. Lots of time to catch up on books and movies and things."

"Or catnap," Samantha added.

"Though sometimes I do kind of wonder what it would have been like to go it all alone," Madison mused. "*Would* I have been able to cope with the solitude?"

"Doubt it," Samantha said smugly through her mouth. "You know, I don't think you ever *did* thank me for saving your sanity."

"I suppose not," Madison admitted.

After a moment, Samantha added, "Still waiiiiiiting..."

Melisande laughed. "You two are clearly meant for each other."

"Which is probably a good thing," Madison said. "Given that we can't exactly back out now."

"But we're getting by," Samantha said. "Not a bad life I guess, even if I do miss the old bod sometimes."

"Sometimes I wish I knew what it was like to have *been* a human and a RIDE," Melisande mused. "Even apart from the whole issue of not remembering who I used to be. It feels like I've been cheated out of an experience. *Two* experiences."

"Maybe you'll get it back someday," Madison said. "You never know."

"True enough, I guess," Melisande agreed.

"So, you live in Camelot?" Madison said. "Have you been around Uplift much?"

"I've spent a few days here and there looking around," Melisande said. "Doing touristy things, mostly."

"By yourself?" Madison said. "You know, you really get the most out of a place when you go around with a local. I've got some spare time. After we

finish our beers, want me to show you some of the places tourists don't know about?"

"That sounds interesting," Melisande said. "I have to admit, I find Uplift a fascinating place in general. But then, this kind of habitat is my specialty. It's always interesting to see your field taken to extremes."

"Great! How'd you like to see where they keep the dome generators? I've got a few connections, I can get us in." Madison grinned. "And 'Mantha knows some great places in the tunnel, too..."

"Sounds like a good time," Melisande said. She smiled. This was turning into quite a fun trip after all.

Chapter 2

March 21, 158 A.L.

Wednesday

The *Steadfast* emerged into normal space twelve light-hours from Woden, Wednesday's hot, massive, luminous blue star. Woden was more prone to stellar outbursts than Pharos, sheeting the system in high-energy ultraviolet radiation. But even before humans arrived there was a planet with life here—the probes of centuries ago had not lied.

Circling its sun in a thousand-day orbit, Wednesday was a hot, dense ball of metal and rock with twenty percent higher surface gravity than Old Earth. It might have made a perfect mining station, but not for full colonization. Nevertheless, a century ago that had *somehow* happened.

Founded in the early FTL era, upon exiting subspace the colonists had discovered to their horror they were missing one ship of a million colonists, and that was only the beginning of their troubles. Catastrophe after catastrophe quickly followed, turning a colonial fleet of five million into one million within weeks. Cryosupport and navigation systems failed under Woden's relentless beating and insufficient shielding. No Spacers had been sent ahead as was standard procedure to create the planet's supporting infrastructure. The biosphere of the planet itself was toxic to Earth-based life, full of heavy metals.

But the survivors were nothing if not determined and ingenious. In the middle of one of the near-constant solar storms, the Bjornssens created the first hardlight projectors out of the cortinide nodes from the wrecked colony ships, creating a safe haven from radiation and room to breathe until help could arrive from Zharus.

Decades later, the fruit of hardlight technology was on display right from orbit. The cities of Uplift and Cascadia on Zharus had covered a few hundred square kilometers of desert and rainforest with domes. Wednesday had both of those city-states beaten by tens of thousands of square kilometers.

"They're expanding," Joe observed. "I'm impressed."

“Fuckin’ A,” Julius agreed, tail lashing. “A for ‘amazeballs’.”

“Wow. That’s a lot of cubage,” Quinoa said. “Sooner or later, this planet’s going to just have one big hardlight field all the way around, isn’t it?”

“I always thought it was shameful what Earth did here,” Socah said. “For that matter, I think Earth did, too, afterward. At least they never tried something that blatant again. I’m glad they’re thriving now.”

“Turning the ship for alignment. *Great Eastern* visible on the portside,” Captain Faulkner reported. “And about a few hundred clicks further out, the *Great Western*. Docking complete in three minutes.”

The surface of Wednesday turned out of view as the *Steadfast* made final adjustments, then settled on the docking clamps on the hull of the massive Star Circus core ship. The *Steadfast* was shorter than one of the Circus’s Pinnaces, so easily slotted into the vacant docking pad.

“Nervous?” Joe asked his niece, feeling more than a little, himself.

“Can I even *touch* Dad?” Quinoa worried. “Q and C don’t really get along. I’ve made sure there isn’t a speck of the stuff on my pelt or in the air here. I’ve been *very* thorough. But on the other hand, I’m partly *made* of the stuff.”

“You’re not the only one who has worries,” Socah said. “But we’ll get through it. I remember Mikel was rather more level-headed than Joe when they were young.”

“Boy is *he* gonna be surprised,” Joe said, chuckling. “He’ll think he knows what’s coming, but he just has no idea. I always did love it when I could get him good. Oh, that reminds me.” He took an orange knit cap with ear flaps out of his pocket and pulled it on, hiding his jaguar ears, and tucked his tail down one of his pants legs. “Wouldn’t do to give the game away too soon.”

Quinoa giggled. “A Jayne hat, Uncle Joe? Really?”

“Hey,” Joe said. “A man walks down the street in this hat, people know he’s not afraid of anything.”

The *Steadfast* approached the Great Eastern docking pad, then a series of clangs and thumps vibrated through the ship as the docking tackle made contact and the *Steadfast* settled into place. “We have contact,” Faulkner reported. “Linkup complete; matching air pressures now. Looks

like there's already a welcoming party just outside the ship lock."

"Great! Let's go meet the neighbors," Joe said. "We'll do it just like we planned, okay?"

"Got it!" Julius said. "Go get the door."

Quinoa's wings shivered. She grasped her uncle's hand. "Mom and Dad in the same place..."

"Dogs and cats living together. Mass hysteria," Joe said. "Let's go. They tell me it only hurts for a little bit..." Joe passed his hand over the control plate to open the docking corridor.

The door whisked open, and...there they stood, close together but not touching. The years and bleeding-edge anti-agathic treatments had been kind to Isabella Brunel. She appeared to be about 40 years old, with some character lines around the corners of her eyes. She wasn't wearing her Ringmistress getup, which she'd always disparagingly referred to as "that monkey suit". Instead, her outfit was a comfortable red blouse and slacks with boots. Her long black hair was nearly down to her waist.

Mikel Steader might have stepped off the bridge of the *Enterprise-D*. The prominent Steader nose combined with a Starfleet-esque Cyberdani outfit only made the resemblance to a completely bald Captain Picard that much more obvious. Joe couldn't resist and did his best John DeLancie. "Jean-Luc, *mon capitain*, so nice to see you again!"

Mikel didn't miss a beat. "Q! What the devil have you been up to, you cosmic reprobate? And...why are you wearing that ridiculous hat?"

"All shall be revealed," Joe said, before breaking character. "Seriously, come on in, make yourselves at home. There's someone here who hasn't seen you in forever." He stepped aside for Quinoa to come forward.

Father, mother, and daughter regarded one another, the tension palpable. Isabella strode forward first to embrace her daughter. "Oh my God, Quinnie, you really *have* inherited the Steader Crazy."

Quinoa mantled her wings around her mother. "Oh, I have so many stories to tell. You're not going to like a lot of them, but..." she looked at her father, who had half a scowl on his pale face. "Dad..."

"I'm not precisely angry with you for being an Integrate," Mikel said. "Just look at what I've done to myself the past forty years. I'd be a damned fool hypocrite if I criticized you."

“We’ve had Integrates in the Circus for over twenty years,” Isabella said. “I have to say, the colors *do* look stunning on you, Quinnie.”

Quinoa grinned. “I don’t suppose you’re hiring right now?”

“You’ll have to ask the new Grand Ringmistress,” Isabella said. “I’m officially retiring once we arrive at Zharus.”

“I still find it hard to believe you’re retiring,” Joe said. “I always thought show business was in your blood.”

“Oh, I’ll probably put together some kind of small show on Zharus if I get bored,” Isabella said. “A traveling circus in the *old* tradition, that just goes from place to place on *one* world. But I’ve had enough of spending most of my time between the stars.”

“And I’m going to be back on Zharus for good, myself,” Mikel said.

“A little weird you’re settling on the one planet in the universe that you’re actually *allergic to*, but I’m not complaining,” Joe said.

“I have some new hardlight implants, maybe as good as my daughter apparently has ‘naturally’ now, that’ll keep the big bad Q out of my systems,” Mikel said.

“Oh, really?” Joe said, grinning. “Picard never had any such luck in the show.”

“I can say with confidence that Q will *never* get under my skin again,” Mikel said. He turned to his daughter and spread his arms. “Quinnie?”

Quinoa sniffled. “Good...I’m glad.” Then she embraced both of her parents at once, with wings and arms. Then she smiled like a fox. “I’m glad that I’m not a child anymore, because once you hear about the stuff I’ve been up to...”

“Enough standing in the doorway. Come in, see what I’ve done with the old ship,” Joe said, standing aside and making a sweeping come-in gesture with his arms.

“The *Steadfast* looks in top shape,” Mikel said, looking around. The laser transceivers on his head flickered. “Systems are in good health. 42x Drive? Zharus is getting better at shipbuilding, I see.”

“Oh, we have some surprises in store for you Cyberdani,” Quinoa said, letting them go. She walked between them like she had as a little girl, hand-in-hand. “Maybe even more so after this business with...well, what we need the *Great Western* for is finished. But we can talk about that later.”

Joe led the way down the corridor and into the living room. “Anyway, I’m glad to see the two of you together again,” he said as they walked. “Glad and a little surprised.”

“It’s not likely to last, long-term,” Isabella admitted. “But then, it always was a matter of how willing we were to overlook each others’ faults. We’ve both mellowed a little with age, I suppose.”

“It’s like one of those twencen rock bands we read about in the archives,” Mikel said. “They might have broken up in acrimony, but every so often they’d put aside their differences for long enough to do a reunion tour. You could say this is our reunion tour *and* our farewell tour.” He glanced at Joe. “You seem a lot more...cheerful than you’ve been the last few times we spoke. I’m glad to see it.”

Joe waved a hand airily. “Oh, you know. Even I can’t mope around forever. There’s only a finite amount of booze on the planet. A man can only wear out so many livers.”

He brought them into the lounge where they’d watched movies through the trip. The couch was there, with a big jaguar taking up most of it. Joe flopped down on the couch, leaning back against it.

“Finally!” Julius said, tail lashing. “I’ve been keeping this fuckin’ thing on pause.” The image on the media wall unfroze, then the opening movement of “Also Sprach Zarathustra” were struck as *2001* began playing.

Joe pulled off his Jayne hat to reveal his jaguar ears. He resettled himself in Julius’s curled body to free his own tail. “Ahhh...*much* better. Popcorn, anyone?”

Mikel facepalmed.

“Fuckin’ *classic* Picard meme, bro,” Julius said.

“Julius, I take it?” Isabella said dryly.

“The one and only!” Julius said. “Pleasetameetcha.”

“You’re a very handsome cat,” Isabella said. “Joe told us all about you and your sacrifice. But, we thought the damage was irreparable?”

“Turns out he was only *mostly* dead,” Joe said. “Some good friends put Humpty-Dumpty together again, not too long ago.”

“And *that* would be why you’re finally yourself again,” Mikel said.

Julius got to his feet and slinked over to Mikel, then headbumped the Eridanite cyborg. “I know *so damned much* about you. Hope you don’t

mind I call you bro.”

“Any brother of Joe’s is a brother of mine,” Mikel said, hugging the jaguar’s big head.

“Isn’t that kind of redundant, Dad?” Quinoa said.

“You know what I mean.” He chuckled. “I’m still amazed at you guys. Even the Cyberdani have never quite managed to crack true synthetic intelligence yet. They think Celerite just has some natural limitations in that respect; something about quantum randomness that Qubitite has and Celerite doesn’t.”

“We’re a fuckin’ miracle, no doubt,” Julius purred.

“So, join us for a movie?” Joe suggested. “Doesn’t have to be this one, I can show any flick you want. Not sure if I have anything you haven’t seen yet, though.”

“I suppose, now that we’ve gotten all the surprises out of the way,” Mikel said. He was just getting settled on the sofa when a harsh new voice sounded from behind.

“Mikel Cornelius Steader! I swear, I’ve never seen anything like this in all my days. You were *supposed* to be the ‘sensible’ one, and here I find that not only have you done God-only-knows-what to your body, you’ve actually run off and joined the Circus! I swear, I have *no idea* what I’m going to do with you boys.” Mikel jumped right up off the sofa again, spinning around to stare as a woman in an old-style Earth military uniform stride into the room, wearing a regulation buzz cut and an expression of exasperation in her steely eyes.

“Cap...Cap—” Mikel stammered. He pointed at her with a shaking finger. “Captain Ther—ah, I mean *Captain Gates!*”

“Short circuit in your servos, Mikey?” Julius deadpanned. “I see your jaw flapping but nothing’s fucking coming out.”

The finger of accusation turned to point at Joe. “You...little...”

“You’re reminding me of *our* Dad when you do that, Mikey,” Joe said.

Isabella raised an eyebrow. “This would be your old minder from the Earth expedition? I wouldn’t say this about most Earth military officers, but I do believe I’m pleased to meet you. Especially if you have any embarrassing stories to tell.”

“Long since ex-military, by this point, and I *certainly* do,” Socah said,

grinning. “Of course, when it comes to doing God-only-knows-what to your body, I suppose you don’t have anything on me,” she admitted, the hardlight flickering out to reveal her G.I. Jane in its original plasticky finish. Then she brought up her preferred outfit, the flapper dress and bobbed hair. “But it does have its advantages.”

Isabella whistled. “Nice look! Very stylish. That’s a Jane 8, isn’t it? We have some other ex-soldiers in the crew.”

“Okay, everything just stops *right now*,” Mikel said. “Got any more surprises for us, Joe? Because I’m done playing.” He sat down on the floor with an audible thud and crossed his arms.

“Okay, Mikey, I give,” Joe said. “No more scheming.”

“He always used to do that when Joe went too far with his schemes when they were kids,” Julius informed Socah. “Sit down and grump until Joey gave in.”

“And it’s all the same eighty years on,” Mikel said.

Quinoa giggled. “It’s nice we can still surprise you.”

“Well, I have some surprises, myself. Some good, some bad, some in between,” Mikel said, getting up again. “But we don’t have to spring them on you right now. The *Western* is refueling and won’t be ready to leave for a Zharus week, so we have some quality time to catch up.” He glanced at Socah. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“My family moved to Zharus. And we took the opportunity to look up some old friends. It’s a long story; I’ll tell it later. I don’t want to interrupt your family time.”

“I get the feeling they’re a little more than just ‘friends’ now,” Isabella mused.

Joe blushed. “Uh, well, yeah.”

“You waited a long time for her, didn’t you?” Mikel said.

“Well, not intentionally.” Joe put his arm around Socah’s waist. “But you know, it’s hard to do much of anything from the bottom of a bottle. Happily, all that’s behind us now. But like she said, family time.” He waved to the comfortable chairs scattered around. “Have seats. Talk, catch up. Can I get you anything? Food, drink? Got a deluxe fabber and a well-stocked bar.”

Joe made a point of serving everyone their requests, as the gracious

gentlemanly host. He settled for a ginger beer while Mikel took his regular gin and tonic, Socah her gimlet, Isabella a pinot noir, and Quinoa a sarium stout. Julius Fused up with Joe so he could have a taste, himself.

Once the mood relaxed enough, Isabella broke the ice. “The first thing I want to hear from you about, Quinoa, is how this 20,000 kilometer orbit dive happened. You wouldn’t believe the rumors we’d heard on Proxima about Integrates, somebody named Franz or Fritz?”

“The fog of misinformation from Zharus beyond Wednesday is very thick,” Mikel said. “Integrates see to that. We’ve met a few traveling the spaceways.”

Quinoa cued up the media wall. “Two years of summary coming up, then.”

“Makes a fuckin’ good movie if you ask me,” Julius said.

“It’s more Michael Bay than Stanley Kubrick, but yeah,” Quinoa agreed.

“I would’ve said Masamune Shiro,” Joe added. “It’s a helluva lot more *Ghost in the Shell* than *Transformers*.”

“Roll film already, Quinnie,” Mikel implored, gesturing with his glass. “You’re the projectionist here.”

Quinoa laughed. “Well, for me it all started the day Uncle Joe decided I could partner a RIDE...”

March 29, 158 AL

Bjornssen Technical Institute, Wednesday

The most important building on Wednesday was a squat, nondescript concrete blockhouse, constructed to serve double duty as a shelter against cosmic radiation in case the hardlight shields failed. Standing before it was a four-meter bronze statue of an older man with arms outstretched, like Moses beholding the Promised Land.

It was symbolic, of course. The man was Dr. Lars Bjornssen, who had sacrificed his own life to ensure the safety of the surviving Wednesday colonists during a particularly harsh solar storm. He had hand-calibrated the resonators for the first hardlight dome while everyone else huddled in the shelters that wouldn’t protect them for long enough without it. The

docudramas liked to depict him trapped outside the dome, hands held up against it in that pose, as he said goodbye to his beloved wife Enid through the transparent shield. Joe sometimes wondered if it was a distant subconscious racial memory of that scene from *The Wrath of Khan*.

The reality was more prosaic, of course; he'd been able to get back inside before raising the dome, but he'd taken such a dose of radiation that nothing they could do would save him, and they had no more working cryotubes. He had opted for euthanasia as soon as he knew the rest of the colonists were safe, and spent his final minutes alone with his wife.

There was a significantly newer statue of Enid by Lars's side. She'd insisted she needed no monuments other than the hardlight dome over their heads, and her wish had been honored during her lifetime—but the sentimentality of Wednesday's citizenry toward its citizen-heroes had overcome it after she'd died ten years ago. A cunning sculptor had integrated her statue with her husband's, so she stood by his side with one arm around his waist.

The blockhouse was still used—in fact, it was the administrative center of the Bjornssen Memorial Technical Institute. Although it had been one of the first buildings on Wednesday, Enid's wish had been that it stay in use rather than be set aside as a monument like other historic buildings elsewhere. Her motto had been “Wednesday has no room for the useless,” and that had certainly been true for most of her life. Even now, when space was much more available, and verdant grass, flowers, and trees grew in the plaza in front of the building, they kept it in use to honor her memory, and probably would at least until all the people who'd known her personally were also gone.

The very first hardlight emitter still generated its light-fountain. Like the one in Bifrost Park on Zharus, it was still functional as a climate dome generator. (“No room for the useless” again.) In fact, if the other generators failed, it could still protect an area the size of the original colony, which is why the Institute was the designated emergency shelter zone for the entire surrounding area.

It had been a long time since Joe had last trod these grounds. The original building was unchanged, but the surrounding campus had effectively doubled in size over the years. Part of it was an industrial annex

in which the most advanced fabberies on the planet operated. Manufacturing on Wednesday had always been nationalized in the interest of survival, though there was increasing agitation to launch more private industry now that the colony had found a solid footing. Joe wondered what the DINcom would do to the trade balance, given that Wednesday currently imported from Zharus most of the luxury goods and technical equipment that it couldn't or wouldn't make itself. A working FTL communication link even within the system would send ripples through the commodities market.

The rest of the complex, and where he was headed today, was for education, research, and development. The Institute was Wednesday's preeminent university as well as its government research division. As with the nationalized manufacturing, Wednesday had heretofore simply been too small to separate the functions out. The planet had twenty million citizens, and only allowed immigrants that had been cleared at Zharus first.

A fountain in the center of the plaza splashed merrily. A plaque stated: *Donated by CascadiaPūr Water Systems, LLC.*

"I *still* have realtime comm to the *Eastern*," Mikel said. "Getting a two-second echo from radio pings, but this doohickey of yours...it's like I'm right there. God almighty. I wish I'd had this between Centauri and Proxima. I might have been able to delay that damned referendum another year."

"Glad you approve," Joe said brightly from minimus-Fuse, an anthropomorphic jaguar strolling alongside Socah and his niece. "Socah's granddaughter is an amazing young woman."

"I'm very proud of her," Socah said.

"Unfortunately, they still haven't licked the problems of longevity, and of getting working units through FTL jumps," Joe said. "You'll probably lose that link in a few hours or less, depending on how much bandwidth you put through it." Joe patted the briefcase he was carrying. "Of course, I've got more, but they're meant for the Institute."

"Since Rhianna empowered me to negotiate a license on her behalf, it's possible they'll be able to fab their own by the time we're done here," Socah said. "We'll have to see."

Julius wasn't the only RIDE around, nor was Quinoa the only

Integrate. They weren't as common as on Zharus, but they weren't unknown either. The people, since they lived and grew up in higher gravity, were generally more muscular and shorter to support their weight than the average Zharusian.

The spartan decor and landscaping had begun to give way to more "frivolous" art, and there was finally enough water to go around that installations like the plaza fountain were even permissible. The full terraforming of Wednesday would take many centuries, even with a dozen colony-built Neumon Formers doing the work.

Head Researcher Dr. Shareen Gross had the practiced skeptical look of a woman who had seen a lot of crazy bullshit proposals in her life. The fact that said potential bullshit was about to be demonstrated by one of the richest people in human space, his distinguished Cyberdani brother, and accompanied by *the* most famous bullshit artist in human space, apparently didn't give credence to Joe and Socah's presentation. For the sales pitch Julius had switched from furry to business suit mode. He and Socah made quite sharp-looking pair.

"So, what you're saying here is that a woman on Zharus invented the holy grail of faster-than-light communications in her garage?" Dr. Gross said.

"That is exactly what we're saying, Dr. Gross," Socah said respectfully. "It was one of those accidental discoveries that are so frequent in science. She has spent nearly two years, working with a number of notable specialists in subspace physics, to improve on that discovery to practical levels. What we've produced for you here are examples of pre-production prototypes. The final versions will be released for market on Zharus in just a few weeks."

"You expect me to believe that?" Dr. Gross said.

"No, actually I *expect* you to take these prototypes and test them, since that's what scientists do—they test hypotheses," Socah said. "Then I *expect* I'll either hear from you, or I won't. And if I don't, I *expect* it'll be your loss."

The stout woman pursed her lips. "We'll require two days—that's forty-four hours—for initial testing," Dr. Gross said. "I'll need to call up some specialists to verify the claims in these papers and produce some test

units on our own fabbers.”

“You do what you have to do,” Socah said. “But the fab schematics don’t go beyond your lab without a license agreement.”

“Of course, Mrs. Gates,” Dr. Gross said. She blinked a few times, sending commands through her ‘specs, and returned several files to the petitioners. “There, I’ve signed your scientific testing agreements. The sooner we get started the sooner you’ll have your answer.”

“You can leave the briefcase, Joe,” Socah said. “Thank you, Dr. Gross. We look forward to hearing from the Institute sooner rather than later.”

As they walked out of the lab, Joe glanced to Socah. “You think you will hear from them?”

Socah chuckled. “Oh, I expect so. After all, you and I already know the effect is real. I’m sure that somewhere in the institute there’ll be *someone* who’s not so in love with the stick up their butt they can’t see past their own nose.”

“You’re mixin’ your fuckin’ metaphors there, y’know,” Julius pointed out.

“Yes, but she does it so *well*,” Joe said.

“The Circus will *definitely* be wanting to license,” Isabella said. “It’ll be useful when we’re spread out all across one system even if no one ever licks the cross-jump problem.”

“Oh, we were taking that as a given,” Joe said. “The Circus being the haven for new technology that it is and all.”

“We can discuss terms when we’re back on the ship,” Socah said.

“Speaking of which, we should probably show you around *our* ship,” Isabella said. “Both of them, in fact.”

“I’d like that,” Socah said. “I’ve been wondering about it since I caught your show on Proxima Gamma thirty, thirty-five years back...I guess it would have been in ‘72. There were rumors you’d taken out a whole Kepler pirate fleet some years before that.”

“Oh, we did,” Isabella said, flashing a feral grin. “It’s a personal failing, but the Circus makes sure to remind them to leave us be every time we stop there. Between the *Eastern* herself and the flotilla we carry, we’re a veritable fleet by ourselves. It’s because we’re so secure that the other Colonies entrust us with some of their most bleeding edge technology.

“We’ve been popular enough the last two rounds we decided to add a second core ship and flotilla,” Isabella said. “So the *Great Western* was born.”

“And now we’re bogarting her for the next couple of years,” Joe said.

“Every ship needs a shakedown cruise,” Isabella said. “This one will just be longer than most. The Circus tends to take the long-term view, anyway. With the *King of Hearts* along you’ll be getting a couple hundred Circusfolk in the deal.”

“Great! Maybe they can put on a show for Totalia City after we get the government thing straightened out. I’m sure they’d love that,” Joe said.

“I don’t know, a single Pinnacle seems a bit small to cover a settlement of three million people,” Mikel said. “You’d want at least a Bigtop for something like that. Maybe two or three.”

“Assuming we’re successful in Totalia, maybe the Circus should make it their first stop after Zharus?” Quinoa suggested. “Give ‘em a taste with the *King* and then bring in the rest if they’re a hit.”

“It might actually be too small for a full engagement at this point, but that’s something to consider,” Isabella said. “Would at least be worth another Pinnacle.”

“Me, I want to see what the *Eastern* looks like now,” Quinoa said, rubbing her hands together and grinning like a child. “I have Intie-recall, so I remember everything from when I was maybe two years old. I wonder if my old hiding spots on the Bridge are still there...”

“So this is the troublesome little girl that my mother warned me about,” Captain Alfonso Perez said. Like his mother, and like Mikel, he was a bald, pale Cyberdani with a crown of laser transceivers. “You’re a little large to hide under the Helm now.”

“Just a tad,” Quinoa confessed. “It’s funny, everything looks so much *smaller* than I remember.”

“You present *quite* the colorful figure,” Perez said. “We Cyberdani have worked to prevent the bleaching effect Celerite has on our bodies, but alas...”

“Your problem is, you backed the wrong fuckin’ horse,” Julius said cheerfully. “Q’s got it all over that celery stuff.”

“Is that so?” Mikel folded his arms. “We’ve had a couple decades of friendly competition between Integrates and Cyberdani in the Circus, Julius. Far as we can tell we’re neck-and-neck in this race.”

Julius smirked. “Not from where I’m sitting.”

Mikel laughed. “Well, we can banter more later. We should head over to the *Western* and the *King of Hearts* soon. Seamus is the *Western*’s OverEngineer, by the way.”

“That’s wonderful!” Joe clapped his hands. “Can’t wait to see him and Dobbin again.”

“Yes,” Captain Perez said. “He and Dobbin have been with her since her keel was laid. He’s understandably a little antsy about taking her into a situation like this, but...”

Joe grinned. “But excited to show off what she can do, too, I’ll bet.”

“That is Seamus to the proverbial T,” Perez agreed.

“Well, the day’s not getting any younger. Come on, we’ll show you the rest of the ship.” Mikel led the way toward the exit at the rear of the bridge. “There’ve been a few changes since last time you saw her...”

April 12, 158 A.L.

Starbucks, Uplift Mall Food Court

It was a pleasant spring day in Uplift. Rufia sat at one of the food court tables at the Uplift Mall, with Yvonne lying behind her. Rhianna had combed and asked for a meeting here, but hadn’t exactly said why.

Not that she was complaining, of course—especially since Rhianna was buying. She sipped from her gourmet coffee as Rhianna sat down across the table from her with a cup of hot chocolate. Kaylee was accompanying her, but not Fused this time. This suggested that it was going to be about business, then—they preferred to have those discussions face to face.

Rufia glanced speculatively across the coffee at her friend. “So, Rhi, what’s up?”

“Oh, just...things,” Rhianna said, a mischievous little grin playing across her face. “Rufia, is your tour business at the point where it could run without you for a while?”

“How long a while are we talking, Rhi?”

“Oh, say, a year or so?”

Rufia sprayed a fine mist of coffee over the table in front of her.

“What? A whole year, are you nuts?”

“Well, I know how bad you felt about getting left out of kicking Fritz’s butt last year,” Rhianna said. “I thought you and Yvonne might want to get in on the ground floor of our next little adventure.”

Rufia eyed her suspiciously. “A *year-long* adventure?”

“At least.”

“So what’s it about?”

“I can’t say just yet—at least, not in a public place,” Rhianna said with a suspiciously cat-like grin, made all the more cat-like by her lynx nose.

“Sworn to secrecy. But you’ll be away from Zharus for a year.”

“Away where? In space? Doing what?”

Rhianna made a zipping motion across her mouth. “Can’t say. But the Brubecks are involved.”

“Oh? Well, then, if *they’re* involved, sure, I’m in,” Rufia said. “There’s got to be a lot of money in it. Maybe I can save up enough to buy myself back from Yvonne.”

“I *heeeeeard* that!” the elk in question caroled from across the room. “You should be putting your business propositions to *me*, you know.”

“Besides, Zane’s getting cuter every day, and sooner or later I just *know* you’ll say yes when I ask about a threesome.” Rufia winked.

Rhianna swatted her. “Keep dreaming. Tigerboy’s all *mine*. Rowr.”

“Spoilsport.”

“Anyway, I bring it up because there’s something connected with it we’re going to be needing you to do here on Zharus in the next couple of weeks,” Rhianna said. “We’re getting a couple of...very special tourists who’re going to need to be shown around. And since you’ve already agreed to help us sort out the Crate o’ Cousinage, we figured we could probably just shuffle them in.”

“Hooboy, have you got a full plate,” Rufia said. “Isn’t your comm thingy almost ready to go to market?”

“My cup runneth over,” Rhianna agreed. “Not going to talk about it here, Rufe.”

“Speaking of you and Tigerboy,” Rufia said, smirking. “Come on,

what's the deal between you two? Serious? Playful? Just friends with benefits? Is he going to propose? Are *you* going to propose? What?"

"And that's *another* thing I'm not going to talk about here," Rhianna said, nodding at the sole remaining media floater that still followed her around. It was the absolute cheapest model the paparazzi could buy, just a helium-filled balloon with a camera, a transmitter, and a lifter for propulsion. It probably cost a single *mu*. Kaylee eyed it like a housecat stalking a flying bug.

"Awww, c'mon, be a sport," Rufia said. "You're supposed to be 'one of the girls' now, so make with the gossip! Dish, dish! Kaylee, pop that damned thing if you have to. I want something juicy out of you, girl."

"With pleasure!" Kaylee purred, leaping into the air and popping the balloon with the swipe of a claw. She crunched the camera and transmitter in her jaws for good measure. It would take another few minutes before they could rotate another one in.

Rhianna blushed and took a sip of her drink. "Serious. And...I think if for some reason I *did* want to be Ryan again, he'd turn femme for me."

"Y'all should see how they go at each other while dreamin'," Kaylee said, grinning. "Always switchin' around."

"Well, dreams are one thing," Rhianna said. "But Rufe...I want to have his babies."

Rufia leaned so far back in her chair it almost fell over before Yvonne reached over and gave it a nudge with her head to tip it back. "Oh...my... God! You're going to do that *before* me? Damn, girlfriend! When you go girly, you don't mess around! When you gonna pop the question?"

"I...really have no idea," Rhianna said. "Maybe sometime...before we... Maybe he'll actually do it first. I don't know."

Rufia laughed. "Well, whatever you do, *don't* let him get away. Or if you're going to, let me know so I can move in on the rebound."

"Not a *chance*," Rhianna said. "*Mine*. Rowr."

Chapter 3

April 1, 158 AL (Wednesday equivalent)

Wednesday Orbit

The *Great Western* hung over Wednesday like someone had left a thousand-meter candlestick floating in space. In sharp contrast to its larger sibling, which sported landers, ships, and modules all over, the *Western* was almost completely naked—little more than a drive core and a single Pinnacle-class ship serving as its temporary bridge. Nonetheless, it was still a pretty impressive sight as the *Steadfast* approached.

“How long has it been since you last saw Seamus and Dobbin?” Mikel asked.

“We got together the last time the Circus hit Zharus. That was...what... six years ago?” Joe chuckled. “Funny...he was talking about retirement, then. But he always seems to be doing that.”

Mikel nodded. “He was OverEngineer of the *Eastern* for about fifteen years. Before they needed the *Western*, he really was going to retire. Changed his plans to be OE on her for at least her first rounds. Felt the *Eastern* and the rest of her flotilla had a lot of design flaws. They still had their share of troubles after the big refit forty years ago.”

Joe nodded. “I can see the appeal of reengineering the whole thing from the ground up.”

“Kind of like you did for Zharus society, eh Uncle Joe?”

Joe grinned at Quinoa. “I decline to answer that on the grounds it might tend to incriminate me.”

“We are cleared to dock,” the *Steadfast*’s helmsman reported. “ETA, five minutes.”

Captain Faulkner nodded. “Proceed.”

With a series of pulses from lifters and maneuvering reaction thrusters, the yacht reoriented itself to dock with a port on the *Great Western*’s broad expanse of docking areas. In fact, the entire surface of the ship was docking area, with all but one slip unoccupied. The *Steadfast* latched into place at the head of one of the two empty faces, occupying the

same position as the *King of Hearts* on the face just to the left.

Joe rubbed his hands together. “Well, here we are, then. Let’s go say hi.”

Entry into the Great Western was through a ladder leading down through the Steadfast’s ventral docking hatch into the ship itself. The core of this area had a triangular cross-section, with grav plates providing surface gravity to each face of the triangle. There were ramps every so often that would allow people on one face to move 120 degrees around to one of the others. Waiting on the face below the Steadfast’s docking ladder were an Eridani in a Captain’s uniform, and a horse Fuser showing the OverEngineer rank insignia.

The horse snorted, and spoke in Seamus’s voice. “Joe Steader. I might have known *you* were behind this nonsense.”

“Guilty as charged. I’m behind a lot of nonsense, I’m afraid. It’s what I’m known for.”

“Fuckin’ A.” Julius was the last to exit the ship, dropping in on his lifters to land on all fours on the deck. “You must be Seamus and Dobbin? Julius. Heard fuckin’ loads about you.”

Dobbin cocked his head. “We heard you were dead.”

“I get that a lot.”

Mikel nodded to Seamus. “Good to see you again.”

“And you. You’re looking remarkably...shiny these days.”

“Well, you’re looking remarkably horsey, so I guess we’re even.”

Captain Xun cleared his throat. “Welcome to the *Great Western*. Captain Armand Xun.” He offered his hand. “I’ve heard a great deal about you, as well, Mr. Steader.”

Joe took it. “Pleased to meet you, Captain. And glad to see the two of you are still doing well. I knew you’d be a great team, all those years ago.”

“Yes, well...” Seamus faltered. “The ears suit you.”

“Thanks!” Julius said. “Made ‘em myself.”

Quinoa waved. “Hi, Seamus! I don’t think you remember, me, but...”

The horse wagged his ears. “Well, as I live and breathe, Quinoa Steader. Don’t you still owe me a few hundred *mu* for that bank of Sarium batteries you shorted out because you wondered what that red button labeled ‘DO NOT PRESS THIS UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES’ did?”

Quinoa blushed. “Ah. You *do* remember me.”

Joe laughed. “Face it, Quinny, you’re pretty much unforgettable.”

“Why did they even *have* that button, anyway? It just shouted, in big neon letters, ‘here, push me now!’”

“They weren’t designed to be toddler-safe. But then, what is?” Seamus snorted, then held out his arms and de-Fused, revealing a wiry redhead with traces of grey, with the equine ears and slightly elongated face of someone who’d spent a lot of time in Fuse. “It is good to see you all...even if I have three or four bones to pick over this addle-pated idea of taking *my* ship into a war zone.”

Captain Xun cleared his throat again. “A few other people *do* get a say in that decision, Seamus.”

“That doesn’t mean any of them collectively have the sense God gave a grapefruit amongst ‘em.” Seamus laid his ears back and scowled. “Oh, fine, I’m resigned to this foolishness. Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“We wanted this ship *because* it’s the best, Seamus.” Joe waved a hand encompassing the area around them. “You’ve done a hell of a job with it so far. We want this to be as safe as possible for *everyone*.”

“Yes, well...” Seamus mumbled, mollified. “Don’t we all.” He sighed. “But I don’t know if you understand just how incomplete the *Western* is right now.” He tapped a wall and it turned transparent. Behind the wall, lights turned on, illuminating a long empty prism. Every few hundred metres, reactors were set up, connected by catwalks to the shell.

“Where the fuck is the rest of the ship?” Julius asked, looking up and down the revealed space.

“Orbiting Colossus, waiting to be installed,” Seamus explained.

“It’s very... Star Warsy. The catwalks over the bottomless chasms are a nice touch,” Joe noted.

Seamus nodded. “So as you can see, there is still a lot to do.”

Dobbin nickered. “What my partner wants to say is, we could use some time to fit out the ship with as much protection as we can, in the time we have.”

“As I understand it, most of the parts for that are already at the C-R shipyards, and there’s still a few months before we’re set to leave. Jules just sent our preliminary plans to Dobbin. I’m sure he’s been able to review

them.”

“Hooboy, I have.” Dobbin projected everything on the non-transparent wall—schematics for the *Great Western* herself, the four industrial ships, and all of the smaller craft and modules scheduled to dock to the Circus ship. “What we got here, Seamus, is a puzzler. We’ll have to leave the rest of our flotilla at C-R. That’ll raise suspicion unless we come up with some cover story.”

Seamus shrugged. “Not so much of a problem. Stands to reason we’ll want to test the big ship by herself before we risk hooking up the smaller craft. We may want to snag a few of ‘em if there’s leftover space once everyone else is aboard, though. You never can have too many ships.”

“There won’t be any trouble getting the necessary stuff done in that time, will there?” Mikel asked. “The shipyard can do this kind of fast finishing work?”

Seamus nodded. “Aye, with ease. It looks empty, but that makes it easier. We get to Rhodes, they split us open at the seams and slot all the hab modules and backup battery levels and stuff in like Lego, and seal it back up. Won’t take long at all. We may not be able to get everything in, but should have enough time to hit the high points.”

“Well. Looks like we’re good, then.”

Julius licked the back of his left forepaw. “Fuckin’ A.”

“But of course you don’t want to spend all your time standing around here. Come along; we’ll show you what there is to see.” Captain Xun gestured toward the corridor leading around the ship to the next docking face. “Starting with the *King of Hearts*.”

Seamus waved a hand. “We’ve seen it already, so Dob’ and I will be back in Engineering making sure everything’s ready. We’ll see you when the tour makes it back that far.”

“Great!” Joe nodded to Captain Xun. “By all means, lead the way.” As the man and horse headed astern, the rest of the party followed the Captain laterally.

“These three corridors run from the bow to the stern of the ship.” Captain Xun waved a hand at the broad empty space around them. “I use the word ‘corridor’ loosely, of course. Right now, it’s all open space, with the docking ports for each side all opening onto a single flat plane, but

they'll put in separate corridors at the shipyard.”

“They don't build them like this anymore.” Joe looked down the center.

“Actually, given that they only just now fuckin' built this one, they kinda still *do* build 'em like this anymore, Joe.”

Joe snorted. “You know what I mean, Jules.”

“The core ship style fell out of favor once active colonization stopped about fifty years ago,” Xun explained. “It's perfect for attaching cryosleep modules by the tens of thousands. Most of the core ships left are in mothballs around Eris in the Sol system, and they're three to five times as long as the *Western*. Real monsters.”

Quinoa nodded. “It is kind of a specialized class. They don't even move that much cargo from one place to another anymore since most colonies are self-sufficient.”

Joe scratched his chin thoughtfully. “I wonder if Earth would be willing to sell one or two of them? Might be useful if we need to found a new colony on Barsoom.”

Julius snorted. “Getting a little far ahead, isn't that?”

“Hey, if you don't think a few moves ahead, you can't win the game.”

“Before you go looking to Earth, you might want to check your own backyard. The Shipyard construction frames are already big enough to handle those old monsters and then some. Seems like *someone* might be getting ideas in Pharos for the future,” Xun noted.

“True enough, but there's something to be said for buying off-the-shelf rather than spending resources banging something new together. ‘Recycle, reduce, reuse,’ as they used to say.”

Just ahead, a square outline of black and orange hazard piping denoted a cargo elevator. Xun led the way into it. “As many of us as there are, we'll go up this way.” As they all stepped into the square, Xun made a quick gesture, then tapped a command onto the hardlight panel that appeared in response. A square of hardlight rose out of the floor, carrying them with it, as a hatch slid open overhead.

They rose through the hatch into a much smaller space—a cargo receiving area with diamond-deck plates, catwalks, and lifter cranes. Uniformed crew paused in their tasks to salute as their Captain rose into

view. “Welcome aboard the Pinnacle *King of Hearts*, temporarily serving as the *Great Western*’s command module.”

“Nice!” Quinoa looked around, eyes sparkling. “It’s so great to be back on Circus ships again. Is this one fully-crewed? Including the troupe of performers?”

Xun nodded. “Considering how many of us crosstrain, why shouldn’t it be?”

Joe nodded. “That should come in handy. Maybe you could put on some shows out at Cerberus while the ship’s being completed.”

“Cerberus?”

“The fleet’s top secret staging base. As I understand it, that’s where the personnel, supplies, and ships are being assembled for loading onto the *Western* once it’s ready.”

“I see. That sounds like a great idea. Keep their skills sharp, stave off boredom, and bring a boost to morale at your isolated base. I’ll pass that suggestion on to our Ringmaster so he can work something up during the jump. He may ask for further details later on.” Xun nodded toward the bow of the ship. “The bridge is this way.”

After the wide open space of the docking plane, the standard-sized corridors of the *King of Hearts* almost felt cramped. The layout was standard, the same as the pinnaces Joe had visited before. The corridor went right up the heart of the ship, with others branching off. Finally they reached the reinforced bulkhead that unsealed to admit them onto the bridge.

The Pinnaces were FTL-capable ships by themselves. The *King of Hearts* had actually been constructed by Colossus-Rhodes Shipyards during the refit the Steaders had financed four decades before. The Bridge still retained the same layout, with the helm front and center before the viewscreen, surrounded by only a half dozen other stations necessary to navigate the ship. The Bridge itself was deep inside the ship rather than in a vulnerable place near the hull.

Quinoa brightened on seeing it, her dermal hardlight lenses actually glowing, then dimmed again, deflating. “Oh, yeah. I...well...Intie memory, you know? Dad?”

Joe looked at his brother. “What’s she talking about?”

Mikel coughed. “Back when things were getting rocky between me and Bella I made the *King* my home. Quinnie visited often, of course.”

Quinoa nodded. “Now that I can remember pretty much everything, it doesn’t seem like such a happy time. It just didn’t make sense to a four-year-old.”

Julius nosed her leg. “That bites.” Quinoa reached down and scratched him behind an ear.

Joe raised an eyebrow. “How’d it happen to get picked for this duty?”

“She has the most recent system upgrades of any Circus ship, and some of the most experienced senior crew. Just what you need for shepherding a new ship.” Xun shrugged. “It’s not really my place to speak to the personal matters of my superiors, but I doubt they were even a consideration. The competition for the berth was pretty fierce.”

Mikel nodded. “There are only so many ships in the Circus, and I’m sure I have some kind of history with at least half of them.”

“Well, I can get over it.” Quinoa smiled. “One of the *good* things about being an Integrate is that I can lock unpleasant memories away and *literally* not think about them. I’ll still know what they are, but it takes some of the immediacy away not having to relive them.”

Mikel frowned. “But not actually *erase* them, right?”

“Of course not. Fundamentally, our memories are who we are—the good and the bad. If you lose any of that, how are you even the same person anymore?”

April 15, 158 AL

Fleet Launch: T-125 Days

I’m taken by this feeling and I’m losing the fight

I’m falling, feeling, faster we go.

Surrender to this moment like the day to the night

I’m falling, falling, faster we go.

“Thanks for the ride, *Gumdrop!*”

“No problem, Sandy. Have a good trip in.”

Melisande drifted free from the airlock, smiling down at the uneven

planetoid kilometers beneath her. She could have ridden the ship down to dock, but it was heading to the wrong dome and she preferred to “walk” the last leg anyway. The dance beat from an old early-21st century song played in her inner ears as she kicked the lifters and headed downward. She’d run across the song while doing a report on the Brony movement for a history of pop culture class, and kept coming back to it since it seemed to be speaking directly to her.

*It’s your life
And it’s the only one that you’ll ever get
Do you feel alive?
And are you making the most of it?
It’s your life
And you’re the only one that you’ll ever be
Do you feel alive?
And can you handle Zero Gravity?*

She *could*, in fact, handle zero gravity, due to the customized deep space paks made in her home Enclave of Camelot. She hadn’t used them since the Halley Enclave project years back, but she was glad she’d kept them in storage since then. Waste not, want not.

She smiled as she drifted toward one of the three kilometer-wide domes on the planetoid beneath her. She had known for as far back as she could remember that this was probably the only life she would *ever* remember. And after she’d spent her first few months mourning the loss of whatever had come before, she had been able to accept that this life was “the only one that you’ll ever get,” and to try to make the most of it.

And right now, that involved jetting out to a tiny little pebble in the outer reaches of Zharus’s solar system to get a head start on organizing her project, now that she knew what the goal actually was. Her assistant, Valerie, was wrapping up the last of her Zharus-side commitments and would join her in a few weeks.

Melisande still found it hard to believe she was going to be among the first of her kind to travel to another star system—and not just any star system, but one that wasn’t accustomed to having visitors itself. And she’d

be helping them learn to use the modern building techniques the rest of the galaxy had invented...but she didn't doubt she'd be learning just as much from them. It was absolutely her dream job, and she was champing at the bit (so to speak) to get started.

So here she was at an iceball its inhabitants called "Cerberus." It was an appropriate name, since the outpost effectively had three "heads" — separate dome settlements some wag or wags had named Lassie, Pluto, and Scooby. Twencen pop culture would have its way. Her destination was Pluto, where the local spacers lived and the fleet was being organized. Lassie was for the Rangers, the branch of system law enforcement that counted outer space as its bailiwick. The Scouts had a base there, too. Scooby was where Zharus expatriates lived while they waited for shipboard berths.

Melisande expected she'd end up visiting all of them before she was finished getting her project together, but her first destination was the fleet HQ at Pluto. She brought along with her orders signed with Zane's personal encryption key authorizing her to do whatever was necessary to the commission of her duties. She didn't expect they'd be necessary, but it was good to have them just in case. It would really be a hassle to have to wait hours for a response every time she had to go over some petty bureaucrat's head. (Of course, there was the DINcom chip in the tablet in her luggage, but that was to be used for text mode comms only, and that only at direst need to avoid burning it out.)

The space nearby was cluttered with cargo pods, arranged haphazardly in parking orbits. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to them, they were just stuffed in any old non-intersecting orbit. Farther out, Melisande sensed one of the large industrial ships. She frowned, considering it. She was no expert, but she'd learned a few things about deep space cargo handling when she'd ordered in materials for building Halley. There was no way that single ship could handle even a quarter of the cargo waiting here. What was going on?

She tossed her head and put the thought aside as she traveled onward, beginning to feel the first light stirrings of Cerberus's weak gravity well. She'd be sorry when the trip in was over. It was kind of nostalgic being out here, so far away that the sun was just a far-brighter star. It reminded her

of those days overseeing her first zero-grav construction project, putting together a truly self-sufficient deep space home.

It was a pity Halley was nearly halfway around the system rim from here; she'd have liked to drop in and see how things were getting on. She'd heard they'd already spawned two daughter Enclaves, Shoemaker-Levy and Ikeya-Seki, using the same construction techniques she'd taught them. Well, perhaps in a few weeks, when her project was well on the way to being ready and she had some time to spare, she could treat herself to a ride out there with a Ranger patrol.

Cerberus's weak gravity definitely had her in its grip now. She adjusted the vector of her lifter thrust. Shortly she'd switch directions to cushion her landing, but right now she'd be better off to work with gravity rather than against it if she wanted to arrive sooner than a couple of hours.

She was getting close enough now to be noticed by the dome's traffic radar. Sure enough, a comm laser painted her a moment later, and she maneuvered her DIN to accept the beam. "—is Pluto Control. Is this Melisande I'm talking to?"

"Sure is!" she beamed back. "You have an approach vector for me?"

"As it happens, we've got a lot of them, and you're very nearly on one of them already. Adjust your course by about ten degrees to starboard and you'll come right onto...yeah, that's close enough for government work. See you when you touch down."

A few minutes later, Melisande alighted gracefully on the landing pad. It had been an easy target to hit, given that it was sized for shuttles. A single Integrate could barely even be seen. As soon as she had landed, she used her lifters to let her bound swiftly to the airlock without gaining too much altitude in Cerberus's naturally-low gravity along the way. Her mane stirred in the breeze as her hardlight atmo-shell collapsed in favor of station air, then dropped back into place as the dome's artificial gravity took hold of it.

"Hey, pretty lady!" A chimpanzee Integrate waved from the security station across from the lock. "Welcome to the ass-end of nowhere. Hope you enjoy your stay."

Melisande flipped her mane back out of her face. "With a welcome like that, how could I not?" She frowned. It seemed like there really should have been more than one person on security duty here. Especially with that

person leaning back in his seat with his bare feet on the counter. What with this and the laxity of the cargo handling, she was beginning to sense a theme. “What’s going on around here? Your orbit is...a little cluttered, isn’t it?”

“Ain’t *my* orbit, lady. But yeah. There’s just a little tiny shipping pile-up. Command said they’d get it straightened out, but that was two months ago.”

Two months ago? “I think I’d better get down to the command office and check in. It was nice to meet you, Corporal...?”

He tossed her a jaunty salute without bothering to get up. “Ratliff. Give my regards to the big boss. Or, better yet, don’t. Anyway, good luck with that.”

Melisande caught the unspoken “You’re going to need it,” but only nodded in return and turned to travel up the corridor in the direction of the dome proper. She paused to stow her deep space pak in a convenient locker, then was on her way.

Superficially, the three domes of Cerberus looked like igloos sitting on the planetoid’s surface. They even used ice in their construction. The domes were geodesic composite frameworks. The tops of the domes were only 250 metres above the surface, high enough for all the headroom they would need inside. Ice from Cerberus itself had been carved out to fill in the spaces of the framework, before insulation was sprayed inside and hardlight fields inside and out were turned on for the final steps.

Inside, the domes contained four broad avenues that converged on the center. Circular streets linked the avenues to each other to get around easily, theoretically. The outermost rings were dedicated to warehouses intended to store supplies until they could be shifted to the *Great Western* and other ships on the Totalia expedition. The next section inward contained living spaces for the dome inhabitants. Generators, environmental systems and the command center were all hosted by a prefabbed tower in the center of the dome.

Theoretically, getting to the command office should have been a simple matter of stepping out of the airlock, onto the avenue and a straight run to the middle. What Melisande found instead was very telling. Cargo from around the system clogged the avenue, completely blocking it in some

places. Were it properly organized, the warehouses of the outer ring should have had more than enough room to hold it all, if anyone bothered to put it away.

She tapped the local network for a map, and so was able to find the way to the command office through alleys and side routes without too much trouble. She wasn't terribly impressed once she got there. The desk of the staff sergeant receptionist was piled high with the reusable data tablets used for paperwork deemed too sensitive to transmit over networks, but the sergeant in question—a tagless human with cap pulled down over his face—seemed to be more interested in catching up on lost sleep than dealing with them. Even the metallic clomp of her hooves on the deck plating as she approached seemed insufficient to wake him. And she was pretty sure she smelled something alcoholic about him that was closer to cheap gin than aftershave.

Melisande frowned, then raised her hoof and stomped down hard, wishing it could have been on the sergeant's foot. But the resounding CLANG did the trick. The sergeant jerked awake, cap falling off in his haste to sit up. “Wha? Who?”

“Project Chief Melisande, from Brubeck. Here to see Colonel Nguyen.”

“Uh...just a sec. I'll see if he's available.”

“Fine.” Melisande took a seat in the small reception area. For want of something better to do, she pulled up her penetration testing software suite. She wasn't any better of a hacker than the average Integrate, but she had to know how to do it to make sure that her own buildings were at least reasonably secure. She set it against the command computer, not really expecting to get in with DINsec being what it was.

But to her surprise, she found herself with full access to the network after only about three minutes. The installed DINsec was at least five months out of date...and the suite's dandruff sniffer notified her that at least two other Integrates had bypassed the DINsec recently. They had to be intruders, because legitimate Integrate logins would have gone through another module.

Melisande dropped into fast-time to do a thorough examination of the network and the files therein. Her accountancy and audit modules

immediately located the duplicate sets of ledger books—the ones detailing that progress was proceeding according to schedule, and the hidden set listing how things were really going. She snorted, nostrils flaring. Why, there had hardly been any progress at all since the project had begun! *This can't be right...*

She downloaded the files, to analyze at her leisure, and as an afterthought set a trace that would alert her the next time those other Integrates logged in. Then she dropped back into the real world as the sergeant said, “Uh, ma’am, Colonel Nguyen is in a meeting right now. I can have him get back to you—uh, *ma’am?*”

Melisande strode purposefully toward the office door. “That’s all right, Sergeant, I’ll just let myself in.” She threw out a hand and directed a lifter pulse at it, slamming it open in front of her. *In for a centi-mu, in for a mu.*

In the office, an untagged older man with a slight Asiatic cast to his features jerked and stumbled—right in the middle of a swing with a five-iron at a teed-up golf ball. Instead of hitting the hardlight capture field of his office golf simulator, the ball flew directly toward the office door. Through a quick blip of fast-time, Melisande was able to plot its trajectory so she could casually reach out and pluck it out of the air. “I believe you’re supposed to call ‘fore’ first, aren’t you?” She tossed the ball aside.

Colonel Nguyen wobbled and dropped the golf club, but managed to recover his balance with a hand on his desk. “What is the meaning of this!” he demanded.

“Well, well, well.” Melisande projected confidence and authority as she swaggered into the office, operating in full-on “alpha mare” mode. “Colonel Nguyen. I have to admit, I didn’t believe things could possibly be as bad as the reports we’d been receiving.” Not that there had actually *been* any, as far as she knew, but anyone this bent had to be paranoid of being found out, and she could use that. “Congratulations. You’ve managed to exceed my expectations. Just what kind of Mickey Mouse operation do you think you’re running here?”

Nguyen opened and closed his mouth like a fish gasping in the air. “I... I’m sure I have no idea what you’re insinuating!” he stammered, though the way his face paled gave this contention the lie.

“Insinuating? After what I’ve seen just on my way in? It’s no

insinuation when the evidence is right before my own eyes!” Melisande hit the Colonel’s desk with her fist, making the handful of tablets on it jump. “We are mere months from launch! Weeks away from the *Great Western’s* arrival! The Fleet’s preparations should be far more advanced!”

“We’re on schedule!” Nguyen insisted. “You should be getting regular reports saying so!”

“Now, Colonel. You know and I know that those reports aren’t anywhere close to true. If it hadn’t been for the *irregular* reports, I hate to think what might have happened when Zane got out here in a few months. By which time *you* would have been long gone, I imagine.” Melisande sniffed. “This ends here and now.”

Nguyen seemed to recover a little of his aplomb. “By what authority?” he demanded.

“By *this* authority.” Melisande tossed the plastic plaque bearing her orders onto the desk. “Go ahead, run the tamper-checks and verify the seal encryption. I’ll wait.” While she continued to project the authoritative attitude that would have surprised Zane and everyone else on the Totalia project she’d ever met—except for Valerie, who’d seen her straighten out mismanaged construction projects before—she inwardly thanked her lucky stars that Zane had taken it on himself to smooth her path a little.

The day before she was to ship out, he had called her into his office to present her with the orders. “All right, listen up,” he said. “I got word about who’s in charge out there. One ‘Colonel Nguyen,’ an old-school Nextus ground-pounder. Came up through the ranks in the Sturmhaven War and all that. I have no idea what he’s doing in charge of putting a space fleet together, but Nextus moves in ways that can mystify even people like me who grew up there. And if I want Nextus’s support for the whole Totalia shebang, I have to keep them happy by letting some of their military officers play in my sandbox.” He waved a hand. “Anyway, what with you being new meat from the Home Office with orders of her own, that sort is likely to see you as a threat to his authority. And odds are pretty good he’s an experienced player of The Game, which means he could give you trouble if he felt like it—especially since you not only aren’t *from* Nextus as far as we know, but you’ve only got a few years of life-experience dealing with that sort of thing. No offense.”

“None taken. What do you suggest?”

“Well, I’m going to cut your orders in a really broad sort of way. Give you *lots* of wiggle room. There are plenty of ways a seasoned Nextuscrat could interpret orders to prepare an architectural education division that would have you tied up in knots. So I’ll just have to give you *carte blanche*. Authority to do whatever is necessary in pursuit of your orders...and not mention exactly what those orders are. You know your own business best. And that means they can’t put up as many roadblocks to stop you.”

Melisande blinked at him. “Are...are you sure about this?”

“Well, you’re not exactly someone who just came in off the street. I’ve had your background thoroughly checked out, and talked to all my people who know you, and everyone reports you completely trustworthy.” Zane grinned at her. “Still, if I get out there and find you’ve completely taken over the whole operation, then I think we’ll have Words.”

In the here-and-now, Melisande sighed inwardly, and wryly resigned herself to the necessity of future Words.

Nguyen looked up from the comm on his desk, face even paler. “This... this checks out. But...but they said—”

Melisande stepped up to the desk, and a quick lifter pulse jerked the plaque back into her hand. “*Who* said? Said what?”

“I...I think I’d better not say anything else without a lawyer.”

“Now *that* could be the first smart thought you’ve had in months.” Melisande snorted. “Pity it had to happen now.” Her DIN flashed as she accessed the computer and transmitted the credentials from her plaque into it, receiving an acknowledgment of her authority a moment later. She sent a request for project security to come to Colonel Nguyen’s office immediately.

“Step away from the desk, plea—oh, *come on*.” Another lifter field knocked the pulse pistol out of Nguyen’s hand before it even cleared the holster. “Please. Let’s see what else you can add to the list of charges for your court martial. Maybe you’d like to try for smoking in a no-smoking office? Littering? Jaywalking? Spitting on the sidewalk?”

Nguyen stood there and glared at her, and was still in that posture when a Fused German Shepherd RIDE with a security armband entered the room. He glanced uncertainly at Melisande. “Ma’am? What is the situation here?”

“Sergeant, I have arrived to relieve Colonel Nguyen for gross incompetence, dereliction of duty, and possibly treason. If you want to verify my orders, here they are.” She offered the order plaque. “Please arrest him for dereliction of duty, insubordination, and—” she nodded at the gun on the floor “—attempted assault. I’ll beam the particulars over shortly.”

The RIDE peered at the plaque. “Seems genuine.” He detached a set of handcuffs from his belt. “Come along, sir. Sorry about this, but rules are rules.”

“I’ll—you—you haven’t heard the last of this!” Nguyen sputtered.

“That’s for sure. I won’t have heard the last of it until the court martial’s over.” Melisande snorted. “Take him away.”

As soon as the office was empty and the door closed behind them, Melisande walked around to the back of the desk, adjusted the chair for a large Integrate frame, and sank into it. *And to think I only got a C in acting class back at Camelot U.* She tossed her head, ears flopping around, and blew a long sighing snort that peppered the desk in front of her with equine snot. “Oops. Damn. Haven’t done that in a while.” She must be more shaken than she’d thought.

Melisande took a deep breath and tried to calm down. “Right. This job just got a whole lot bigger than advertised. Well, the fastest way to ‘done’ is through ‘begun,’ so let’s light this candle.” She pulled up the desk’s hardlight displays, linked in through her DIN, and got to work.

April 20, 158 AL (Wednesday equivalent)

The Great Western, Wednesday orbit

The next few days were filled with frenetic activity as everyone rushed to get the *Great Western* ready to jump out to Zharus. Systems needed to be inspected and re-tested, supplies needed to be loaded, and paperwork had to be completed. After a couple of days, Isabella joined them, taking up residence in a stateroom aboard the *Steadfast*.

Joe made himself useful where he could, applying a little Steader elbow grease to the bureaucratic wheel here and there. He was a lot more familiar in Wednesday than his brother, and easily found his way through

the simplistic (by Nextus standards) Woden Space Authority to smooth their departure. Once the Is were dotted and the Ts crossed, the *Great Western* and her older sister ship were ready to depart.

Joe spent his free time looking over the specs for the new ship. There were several puzzlers, so he decided to make a bother of himself and ask Seamus on the Engineering Deck. It was the only finished space on the great ship, and like most modern technology, was automated enough to only require a small crew of a few dozen to monitor and maintain the machinery. Many of them were Eridanite engineers, still making adjustments.

Joe buttonholed Seamus at the main drive console while Julius sniffed around the rest of the bay. “So, Seamus... how fast is she in subspace? The docs are kind of vague about it.”

“The entry nodes and Drive Rings are barely broken in yet, Joe. We don’t even know for certain yet. But it’s at least 55c, *possibly* over 60.”

“On one of her faster trips, fifteen years ago the *Eastern* made it between Ibn Rushd and Neorus at 70c. I’m sure this girl can do better than *that*.”

Dobbin nickered. “That would be telling.”

“And I’ll go ahead and tell him. We have some control over how fast we transit subspace. It’s an Eridanite trick they keep to themselves.”

Joe whistled. “That would be convenient, for sure. Especially if you were careful to stay at the slower end of the range until such time as you really needed the speed.”

“We can’t go too fast or we’ll outpace the escort ship you’re supposed to provide. If it’s the ship I’m thinking of, it’ll have to leave at least two weeks before the *Western* does even if we take our time.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged.” Seamus smiled equinely in Fuser. “We’re about five minutes from jump. Perhaps you’d like to throw the lever yourself?”

“If you’re willing to trust me not to throw it the wrong way and jump us back to Zheng He by mistake.”

Seamus chuckled. “I think we’ll take that risk.”

“So...how have the two of you been? I’ve heard about all the surgeries. You’ve been together a pretty long time.”

Dobbin nodded. “Ayup. Ever since you brought us together, back in the day.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without this old nag.”

Dobbin snorted. “Probably look a lot more handsome.”

“Eh, you saw me before we first Fused. I wasn’t exactly God’s gift to the ladies even then.”

“So, why haven’t you two Integrated, anyway? Any ideas?”

Seamus shrugged. “It’s not like there’s a timetable, is it? I’ve looked into it, and there’s no small number of long partnerships that just don’t. We’re just one of them, that’s all.”

Joe scratched his head. “Forgive me if this is too personal, but have you ever considered...having it done? One of the Circus Inties could probably...”

“We’ve considered it, but...” Seamus shrugged again. “We like being able to de-Fuse. An’ no guarantee the mental changes would be something we’re comfortable with.”

“If it ever gets to the point that the nanosurgeries aren’t effective on him anymore, or we’re in some kind a’ life-threatening accident-whatsit, then we’ll see.” Dobbin snorted. “For now, why borrow trouble?”

“Seems like a sensible philosophy.”

“It’d be kinda *unhandy* if we ended up feral.” Seamus grinned. “I have enough problems with that as it is.”

Joe chuckled. “Fair enough.”

The comm at the engineer’s station went live. “This is Captain Xun. Status update, please?”

Seamus tapped the comm panel. “All systems ready. Standing by for jump on your mark, Captain.”

“Very well. Please initiate jump when ready.”

“Aye, sir. Engaging jump in ten seconds from...mark.” Seamus grinned to Joe, and nodded to the lever. For all their high tech cybernetics and starships, the Eridanites still preferred physical controls where practical. “Nine...eight...seven...”

“Fuckin’ *one* already.” Julius reached up with his forepaw and pushed the lever forward. The engines’ thrum intensified, and for a moment the engine room was awash in brilliant white light. The thrum plateaued, and

then the noise level in the engine room was back to normal.

“Er...jump entered successfully, Captain,” Seamus said. “Just...a little early.”

“Hey!” Joe smacked Julius on the head. “What have I told you about premature activation?”

Chapter 4

April 17, 158 AL

It took the better part of a day even to begin to get a handle on the logistical mess Nguyen had made of the preparations. It was nearly a catastrophe, and Melisande wasn't certain if she could get everything back on schedule. By far the most important request that had come in on an unexpected message torpedo, double-underlined in red, was the need for hefty escort for the *Great Western*. A number of well-armed smaller craft were scheduled to be docked to her, but apparently some people felt it wouldn't be enough.

Melisande called her assistant in fast-time. "Valerie, do we have a DINcom link to Xolotlan?"

"Not yet, but I think I we can feed one through home base on Zharus if it's important enough."

"It is. We need to talk to home base anyway. We're going to need a crew to run the escort ship. The one we need is in mothballs. We need to pull strings as fast as possible." The Integrate mare combed her mane back with her fingers. "If we can find her old Captain, that would be ideal. Public records say she retired to Cape Nord about six years ago."

"Cape Nord? Really?" The ocelot blinked at her.

"Don't ask me, kitty. I've never been there. Get the ball rolling, will you?"

"On it, boss-hoss."

It was another day before Melisande felt she could relax and try to regain some equilibrium—and pointedly try *not* to think about what she'd just gotten herself into. But then, as she was lunching on an oat salad at her desk, the tracer she'd left for the mystery Integrates pinged. She jumped up again, grateful for the distraction. They hadn't noticed her tracer, and it was closing in on their location. Half the dome eliminated...then half of that...then half of that...and so on.

She strode out of the office to where the sergeant was now doing more than just trying to *look* busy. He'd actually reduced the number of stacked

tablets by about a third. Not a patch on what an Integrate like Valerie could have done, but still, a creditable effort for a human slacker. “Good work, Sergeant. Carry on. I’m stepping out for some air.”

The officer swallowed. “Uh...yes’m. Thank you, ma’am.”

“Now, where’s the armory? Oh...never mind, I have it.” She proceeded up the hall and opened the security door with a code she’d taken from the computer. Since the domes were expected to be peaceful, there wasn’t much in the way of weapons—and anything too powerful or long-ranged could lead to dome punctures and loss of pressure. But there were plenty of shorter-range weapons like plasma shotguns. It would have to do. As she made her selection and checked the weapon’s charge, her tracer locked in on the exact location of the Integrates—a warehouse on the other side of the dome. Good enough.

The dome was small enough that it only took a couple of minutes to get there via the cargo lanes. She cloaked as she approached the warehouse. No need to give herself away early, after all. She tried to ignore the way her heart was pounding as she approached. She’d had the basic self-defense courses Camelot offered, but she wasn’t a soldier. If these Integrates *were*... maybe she should call for backup? But there might not be time for that. Well, even if she didn’t confront them, she could at least see who they were.

The warehouse was almost completely empty—another element of the very same *wrongness* she’d seen coming in. All that cargo in the streets and in orbit, or at least a significant portion of it, should be filling this warehouse from floor to ceiling, waiting on the arrival of the ships for which it was destined. Instead, it only had a pair of Integrates in it, hunched over a comm at the other end of the room.

The two were an interesting pair, a female brown bear and a male pronghorn antelope. The project records identified them as Fran and Newlin. Apparently they had a history together. According to the project records, they had been scouted as a pair for their logistics expertise at a Xolotlan shipping company at the beginning of the project. They’d been shipped out right away, and had been here ever since.

Melisande wasn’t sure why, but at the sight of them she suddenly felt a deep and burning nausea, as if half her sarium batteries had just gone bad all at once. But they all reported perfectly fine—so what was the problem?

She dropped into fast-time to puzzle it out. She'd never seen them before... had she? She ran a pattern search on her memories but came up empty. So why did she...?

No...surely not. It couldn't be. But...Melisande removed the interlocks on a set of memories she didn't often look at anymore—the first fragmentary memories of her life, before all her systems had fully Integrated and she'd been able to think clearly. Her birth moments, they'd been. The memories felt so *wrong* that they made her physically ill, but even so she'd been over them dozens of times to try to find any clues they might have to her past identities.

And...there they were. Blurry, but unmistakable. A bear, an antelope, leaning in and looking down at her. Lips moving, but no intelligible words and too distorted to lip-read. Although they hadn't been clear enough to identify without candidates, there was no doubt when compared to the two Integrates actually present. It was *them!* Melisande couldn't believe it. It was really *them*. She blocked off the memories again before doubling over, retching.

Fran perked up, muzzle in the air. "Hey...did you hear something?"

Newlin's ears swiveled. "Dunno...maybe we better check?"

Melisande shrank back against the wall, cradling the shotgun in her arms. The nausea was passing quickly now that she knew its cause. She took a deep breath and let it out again as quietly as possible. The smart thing to do would be to call for backup, possibly to wait and confront them later. After all, she knew who they were, and it wasn't as if they were going anywhere...

...unless they were considering running like their erstwhile boss Nguyen couldn't, now that he was under arrest. And there was that little personal matter to consider. If these *were* the Candlejacks who'd Integrated her...they'd have to know who she had *been*, wouldn't they? This could be her one chance to find the answers she'd been after for so long.

If they were responsible for the project being so far behind, it was her duty to bring them in. And if they had destroyed her life—*both* her lives—then it would also be her pleasure. *Payback*, she thought. *At last*.

She hefted the shotgun, threw up a hardlight shield...and charged.

Newlin was her first target. He'd be easier to take down, which would leave her with only one enemy to deal with. Three plasma pulses were going his way before she was even five meters into the warehouse. Of course, as an Integrate himself he was able to throw up a shield of his own in time, but the plasma blasts still drained its energy considerably. The third one rattled him. But by then Fran was moving to shield him.

Good enough. Melisande continued to fire, but also continued to accelerate, putting her shoulder down and throwing more power into her shield—as well as her lifters to add to her acceleration. She covered the distance across the warehouse floor in just over a second—just enough time for Fran to start to realize what she intended, but not enough to do anything about it before Melisande slammed straight into her, sending her staggering back into Newlin, then both her and Newlin slamming into the wall behind them. Their hardlight shields fizzled and collapsed under the pressure. Melisande slammed into the wall with them, of course, but a bear and an antelope provided plenty of padding to take the shock.

Melisande was back on her feet before either of them, and she covered them with the shotgun from just far enough away they couldn't kick it out of her hands. "Don't. You. *Move*," she said coldly. "You bastards. Who *am* I?"

Fran rolled onto her back and groaned, gazing up at Melisande and her gun and spreading her hands. "I...I've never seen you before."

"I've sure seen *you*." Melisande knew she must look a sight right now. Gun shaking just a little in her hand, whites of her eyes showing, hardlight lenses flaring... "You're the first thing in my life I *do* remember. Both of you. You did *this* to me...to us. Force-Integrated us. Wiped out all our memories. Now I want to know everything you can tell me about who we *were*."

"Oh, noooo..." Newlin moaned. "Crap. It's from *those* years, isn't it?"

Fran bit her lip. "We...we don't remember you. Honest."

"Oh, come on. Integrates have perfect recall of everything that happened in their Integrated lives, if they want to."

Newlin shook his head. "Not if they...erase it."

Melisande tried to keep the gun from shaking any more than it was already. The eyes of bear and antelope followed the muzzle as it wavered.

“You...*what?*”

“We...well, we *guess* we erased all our memories from back then,” Newlin said quickly. “From when people tell us we...from when we *must have been* Candlejacks. Otherwise they’d have read it out at the trials.”

“We don’t even remember *why* we erased them,” Fran said. “It’s just...one big blank. We...kind of wish we hadn’t, now.”

“You expect me to believe that?” Melisande demanded. But inwardly, her heart sank. There had been news stories at the time, she remembered. Members of Fritz’s inner circle, even down to some nth-level subordinates who turned out to have missing memories of the things they’d supposedly done. It did make it harder to prove the crimes when they couldn’t read out those memories, not that this had necessarily availed them when plenty of *other* people had reliable memories of what they’d done.

Ironically, from the records, neither Fran nor Newlin had ever been arrested, much less tried for their part in Fritz’s reign. Apparently nobody they’d done over was still around by the time of the trials—or at least, nobody who cared enough to make a fuss over something that far in the past. *They mutilated their own minds for nothing*, Melisande reflected. *I’ll bet that’s real easy to live with. At least my blank spots aren’t my own fault.*

“It’s the truth! Really!” Newlin insisted.

“All right, fine.” Melisande tossed her head. “But there’s still the matter of you hacking into a protected computer system. I think you *can* give me some answers there, unless you’ve just erased your own memories of the last five months, too.”

Fran winced. “No, I...look, we can explain. We were just trying to...”

“Nguyen’s been running this project into the ground,” Newlin said. Melisande tried not to stare. He actually sounded *indignant* about it. “Our first real chance to get out of this system, and he’s treating it as his retirement account. We were...I dunno...trying to find some evidence we could use against him.”

“Or some way to get the word out,” Fran said. “He had all comm channels locked down. Helps keep the Press contained over at Lassie.”

“So you’re just poor little misunderstood sheep who’ve lost your way, huh?” Melisande snorted. “I’m supposed to believe *that?*”

“Look,” Newlin said. “We know—by inference, at least—that we’ve done some things in the past we weren’t proud of. But...this was going to be our chance to make a new start. We figured we could slip away when we got to Totalia, make new lives for ourselves there. If we’re going to do that, why would we want to make it *harder* for that to happen?”

“If you’re the reason Nguyen just got arrested...well, we’re on the same side,” Fran said. “Look...we’ll give you root. You can scan our memories. We won’t hold anything back.”

“All right, fine. But if this is some kind of trick...”

“It’s not. Honest.” Newlin shook his head. “And if after that you want us to hibernate until we can be brought up for trial...well, we will.”

Melisande sighed, and took possession of the proffered root keys. She put both Integrates into hibernation for the moment, then slung the shotgun and went into their minds to scan their memories. It was just as they’d said, on both counts. They’d come to Cerberus in the hope of making a new future for themselves together...and been upset when Nguyen was doing nothing to move the project forward. They’d tried to get word out, but the comm lines were blocked—and enough of the people in authority were in on Nguyen’s scheme, or at least benefiting passively from it, that it was hard to tell who to trust. They’d obviously *all* been sending false reports. *Well, horse puckey. It looks like I’ll need a bigger broom.*

And as for the other matter...they both had gaps of several years, starting right after they’d each met Fritz and ending some time after they’d moved into Towers Enclave together. The blank period neatly overlapped the time of her own birth. There was something else weird about it, but Melisande couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

Then she had it. She woke them back up again. “Your missing memories...they include the time when you two must have first *met*. As far as you know, you met each other for the first time when they start up again in Towers.”

Newlin nodded sadly. “Yeah. They do.”

“Then why are you...why did you stay together after that?”

Fran shrugged. “We looked at all the stuff in the room that had both of us in it and figured out we must have loved each other.” She smiled softly. “So we spent some more time around each other and figured out why.”

“We keep hoping that we were smart enough to set up a time-capsule email with the missing stuff in it,” Newlin said. “But we just don’t *know*. If we’d allowed ourselves to know, it would have defeated the purpose of erasing it all.”

“If we did, it probably would have been set for years ahead,” Fran said, eyes downcast. “We wouldn’t have had any way of knowing what kind of a witch hunt there’d be.”

“So we can’t wait around for it. We’ve set our mail accounts to store and forward, so we’ll get it wherever we are if it comes.”

“And so here you are. Great.” Melisande glared at them, but somehow she couldn’t find it in herself to be more than irritated. After all, when you got right down to it, she was still the same person she’d always been. Even knowing a name wouldn’t have magically unlocked those missing memories. *And you’re the only one that you’ll ever be.* “It doesn’t mean you’re any less responsible for what happened to me. But...holding a grudge won’t get me any answers.”

“For what it’s worth, if we ever do get them back...we’ll tell you anything we can remember,” Newlin offered.

“Damned right you will,” Melisande growled. “But for now...I’m going to need some assistants to help me get this program back on track. Given you’re about the only people I know for sure I *can* trust right now, it looks like you’re elected.”

Fran got slowly back to her feet, then helped Newlin up. “We won’t let you down.”

“See that you don’t. Your first job is to give me a speedy audit of what we have and what we lack. Report to me at Nguyen’s ex-office when you’re done. I’m in the process of cleaning house, but it’s going to take a while.”

Melisande sighed as she left them in the warehouse. *Who’d have thought the people who forcibly Integrated me would be the only ones I could really trust?* Of course, given the excision of their memories, it was arguable that they *weren’t* really the same people anymore...and they might revert to being those other, less likable people if they got those memories back. Though this led her in turn to wonder whether *she’d* be a fundamentally different person if she got her own memories back, and if so, did she really want to...and that was a rabbit hole she’d been down often

enough over the years to realize it led nowhere in the end.

She tossed her head and cracked her knuckles. “Right. Well, let’s get this show on the road. First order of business...find more cargo ships from somewhere...”

May 2, 158 AL

Pluto Dome, Cerberus

They had plenty of warning the ship was coming. Given its size, the first ghostly pre-images showed up hours ahead of time. For all of that, Melisande had the urge to throw up her hands and cry, “Wait! Wait! I’m not ready!” But then, that was how she’d felt pretty much continuously over the last couple of weeks. *At least we’re more ready than we would have been.*

Finding three more industrial core ships in the space of a few weeks had made her pull her mane out a few times. They had to meet minimum haulage specs and their crews needed thorough background checking. One had had to be pulled out of mothballs from the Xolotlan Boneyard and a crew put together from scratch. Fortunately, by that time Melisande had been able to call in favors from Halley and its daughter Enclaves, and several dozen seasoned Intie spacers had shown up to help. And Valerie’s arrival via the Rangers’ fastest available ship had been another lifesaver.

At the same time, the *ZNS Rickenbacker* had also been pulled from mothballs, and against all odds Valerie had managed to dig up her former captain after all. Melisande had been too busy (and a trifle too timid) to ask for the whole story, but as she understood it the woman had “retired” to Cape Nord for some masculine pampering after a very stressful last tour. Melisande didn’t know exactly how Zane had cajoled or coerced her into returning, but she had—and had brought her Nordie he-man with her. Given what she’d heard about Cape Nord, Melisande wondered if their relationship would survive the trip—but Captain Souza was a professional, so she had little doubt the *Rickenbacker* would.

Now, the *Great Western* herself was arriving, *en route* to the Colossus-Rhodes Shipyards for as much fitting out as they could manage in a few weeks, before leaving again for “further FTL shakedown”. The timing

was going to be tight, but she'd seen Intie spacers assemble habs in one quarter the time they were "supposed" to take, and the Shipyard Spacers were supposedly just as skilled, and eager to show up other builders. Considering they'd been literally waiting years to get this job done, she had little doubt they were ready for the *Great Western's* build.

As for the rest, they were falling behind. She was still trying to figure out how to configure the cargo manifest to match the mission specs that kept changing every time someone on planet had a bright idea. Finding and building enough ships to slap onto and into the *Western* to carry the people and cargo was their responsibility—or, more accurately, *her* responsibility.

The latest bright idea, a joint proposal from NuJose and Punta Sur representatives, was a genebank. The idea was valid enough, and the Spacers had dozens of genebanks cached around the system 'just in case', so grabbing one was easy enough and would normally fit in easily anywhere on board. But the planetary council had bigger plans. They wanted something to show the Totalians more than a freezer of frozen flora and fauna. They had designed a multizone space where a variety of garden biomes could be set up to give the Totalians some living gifts right off the bat.

She skimmed the specs and realized whoever had put it together had a couple of brain cells at least; the biomes and supporting structures would exactly fit within one of the already-built Big Top landers with a little room to spare. NuJose's 'contribution' was an EI to watch over it; the module would be completely self-contained once built. Melisande's problem was figuring out where to put all the rest of the highly important supplies and people this ark project was displacing.

And then there had been that message torpedo from the *Clementine*, including, of all things, a list of personality quiz results from crewmembers of a Totalian space cruiser and asking for best-match RIDEs for all of them. Fortunately, this was another thing she didn't have to worry about personally. Valerie just grinned at her and said, "On it, boss-hoss," and that was that. Melisande wondered how she had enough brain to handle it all. Valerie had said something about "thinking in parallel" once, but hadn't ever explained it further. *I wish I had three more of her.*

The mare sighed and scrolled up the listing of more than two dozen

different ships, cargo module manifests, and personnel that would be attached to her for the journey. Her DIN winked as she sent the list to Fran over in the quartermaster's office, with a query attached as to the status of all the parts and pieces, along with the authorization to start the Ark module project.

For all their efforts, there was still a decent amount of cargo in orbit; secret stuff and important stuff that had to be kept out here, supplies to support the people waiting around Cerberus, and stuff that had been sent out before someone realized the *Western* had to go to the shipyards before stopping at Cerberus. Perhaps if they could locate the right bits up there, they could send them directly to the *Western* when she returned without having to land them first. Meanwhile, they could see about pulling in and stowing all the supplies meant for the base rather than ships in orbit.

Melisande groaned as an all-too-familiar ping came in from the Ranger Science Ship *Heart of Gold*. Golden Heartburn, *more like*. “Yes, Dr. Z-B. What is it now?”

“We *insist* for the sake of *Science!* on witnessing the arrival of the *Great Western* in person,” Zaphod said. “That vessel has the newest version of the Eridanite FTL drive—”

“And notarizing it, too!” his other head interrupted.

“Don't be ridiculous, you don't notarize ship arrivals...”

“Well, if you *witness* them...”

“No, no...that's not it. I mean, since when are *you* a notary public?”

“I took a correspondence course.”

Melisande still wasn't sure how much of the patter was Integrate meme infection and how much of it was calculated to annoy everyone they came in contact with into leaving them alone as much as possible. Either way, it was certainly working. “All right, fine. Just stay out of the way—and out of the marked danger areas, too.” It was probably uncharitable for her to want to suggest that the danger areas were likely to be the *very best spot* for witnessing the arrival. Of course, they'd probably think that anyway. “You can follow it in to Rhodes and then go help with re-tuning the *Rickenbacker's* forward nodes.”

“Re-tuning forward nodes? Do we look like mechanics?”

“Would you have *Einstein* re-tune forward nodes? Would you have

Stephen Hawking do it?”

“Einstein and Stephen Hawking don’t want to come along to Totalia with the rest of us,” Melisande deadpanned. “Any Integrate scientists in the area who *would* like to see a new star system, and get their paws on two new meta-materials, should probably consider making themselves as *useful* as they possibly can. I’m just saying...”

There was a long period of silence. Then, “That’s dirty pool, you know.”

“Effective, though.”

“...yes. Yes, it is. Very well, Melisande. We will assist in fine-tuning your blasted forward nodes.”

“Who knows, perhaps we can coax an additional few percentage points out of them with those new experimental modifications we were working on for Goldie’s future FTL retrofit. We hadn’t considered applying them to *normal* ships...”

“Yeeeeees. We *could* do that. It would be a marvelous opportunity...for *Science!*”

Melisande cleared her throat. “We need to make sure the carrier can keep pace with the *Western* in subspace—” *and doesn’t implode or something*, she added with a silent prayer to whatever powers might be listening “—so I’m counting on your FTL drive expertise. Science away, gentlemen.” *And please, please stop talking to me.*

It wasn’t all bad news. For a few minutes, now and then, Melisande allowed herself to relax and take pleasure in her accomplishments. In fast-time, those minutes stretched to hours, which was useful for playing Nature Range. “Kill me, *please*,” Melisande would moan to Valerie on particularly stressful days. And so she would, upgrading her ocelot body to a leopard or lioness in order to be able to take down a full-sized horse. But it didn’t help, because the work would still be waiting when they both got back to the real world.

But in her more cheerful moments, Melisande could at least take heart that things had improved considerably around the dome. The most corrupt officers had been shipped back to Zharus for disciplinary action, and replaced by better ones. The others had seen which way the wind was blowing and gotten their acts together. Even Corporal Ratliff was now

standing at attention and saluting properly, rather than slacking. The sergeant who had formerly manned Valerie's desk had sobered up and was now happily driving a forklift. *Miracles never cease.*

Melisande arranged to be in Pluto's flight control center when the *Great Western* finally materialized for real. It was a frankly impressive sight even on the monitors, and Melisande regretted she couldn't have been on one of the ships out watching it directly. Even if it had to be—she suppressed a shudder—the *Heart of Gold*. But there was just too much to do to be that far away from the office, even with DINcom.

It started with a shimmering in the area where the pre-echoes had appeared, and a brightening of the general area of space. The brightness took on the colors of the ship, and then the shape and definition. At first gradually, then suddenly, an immense starship was there.

A comm signal came through the same DINcom link that was relaying the imagery. "*Great Western* to Cerberus base. The Eagle has...uh... materialized."

A woman's voice. "Joe, get off the mic."

Melisande laughed. "*Great Western*, this is Pluto Dome Control. Boy are we glad to see you. We were starting to worry we'd been stood up. We're beaming over the latest cargo manifests and mission updates for your consideration, as well as berthing information for Colossus-Rhodes. The Rangers precleared your arrival in system. Your route is clear, so you can make for the shipyard at your best possible speed."

"Captain Xun here. We are receiving, Control. No time to waste at this point—we're already on our way. I'm sending our final haulage specs. We'll work up an on-loading plan and have it ready within ten hours so you can start moving everything into position for when we hit you on the rebound. At this point we don't know how long it will be before we do get back your way, but no reason to waste any time."

"Great! We'll be ready for it." Melisande closed the link and headed back to her office. There was still so much more to do!

Melisande supposed she shouldn't have been surprised to find a small entourage waiting at her office the next day, composed almost entirely of Steaders. Not needing to accompany the *Great Western* to the shipyards,

the *Steadfast* had detached and proceeded to land at Pluto Dome. Now that the local day shift had started, here they all were. The large tawny jaguar RIDE politely sniffed at her as she passed to walk to the door.

“I was told you were in charge here?” Joe Steader asked politely. “When I left, I gathered I’d be reporting to Colonel Nguyen.”

“The good Colonel is on vacation for the next five to ten,” Melisande said as she unlocked her office door. “For my sins, I’m in charge of this mess.”

“What sins might those be?” That was the borged-out Eridani with Joe—Mikel Steader, she guessed.

“Mainly, the sin of kicking his no-good ass to the curb and taking over so something would actually get *done* around here.”

“Well, this is a horse of a different color,” Joe said.

The Terran-military-uniformed woman with him smacked him, and Quinoa Steader groaned. “Uncle Joooooe...”

“Don’t make me fuckin’ bite you,” the jaguar grumbled.

“Sorry, force of habit.” Joe grinned. “Well...anyway, we figured it would be better to keep out of Seamus and Captain Xun’s hair while they hammer the *Western* into shape, so we thought we might as well try to make ourselves useful here. Get our orders straight from the horse’s mouth, as it were.”

The jaguar growled at Joe. “I *will* fuckin’ bite you. Don’t think I won’t.”

Joe ignored him and continued. “My brother’s very good with figures, Isabella—this is Isabella Brunel, by the way—used to run the biggest circus in the galaxy, Colonel Gates has some logistical and command experience, as well as being in on the planning stages of the expedition proper, and Quinoa and I are...good at talking to people, I guess.”

Melisande snorted. “Circus, huh? You might be more qualified for this job than I am.” She shook her head. “If you talk to my executive assistant, Valerie, she’ll probably have some good spots where skilled volunteers would be a help. As for you, Joe and Quinoa, I’m thinking maybe you could head over to Scooby and play PR for some of the press? Give them something to take their minds off things; they’ve been penned up long enough to start going stir crazy.”

Joe grinned. “I know how that is. I’ll be glad to give ‘em a little of the old Steader soft-shoe.”

The jaguar snorted. “Stepped-in-something-soft shoe, you mean.”

“And I’ll be glad to help.” Quinoa smiled. “I’m sure a few of them would still love to have a chat with the Integrate who was crazy enough to dive from the top of the Alohavator.”

“She gets that from *your* side, you know,” Isabella said to Mikel.

The ‘borg raised a hand. “I wouldn’t dream of disputing it.”

Melisande cocked her ears forward. “And you’re sure you want to help out, rather than going off to tour Colossus or something while the rest of us finish up?”

“I’ve done enough of that kind of thing in my life,” Joe said. “Everyone else is doing their best, so how can I do any less? This isn’t the time for horsing around.”

Quinoa groaned. “Uncle Joe...”

“Sorry, sorry. Ow! Julius!”

“I fuckin’ *warned* ya.”

Chapter 5

May 5, 158 AL

Colossus-Rhodes shipyards were set up at the L2 point of the gas giant-moon system on the far side of the moon. From Rhode's dark side, it wasn't much to look at, a few glittering satellites and habitats sparkling in the darkness.

Closer up, the scale of the shipyard was more obvious. Huge frameworks, tens of kilometres long floated in space. They mainly provided a place for stuff to be kept until it was needed. They also helped provide orientation guides in space. At the moment, a half dozen scaffolds were set up around the *Great Western*, three at each long edge of the prism, and three more gathered over the Side A. The *King of Hearts* had already disconnected from the ship and was docked on the Alpha Frame.

On board the *King*, Captain Xun, Overengineers Seamus and Dobbin and the rest of the command staff watched the work start with the anxiety of expectant parents. They were joined by the Shipyard's Chief Overseer, a heavily borged out Spacer named John Masters.

"Side A disconnection complete. Pulling it free now," the Overseer said, sounding calm and unaffected by the tenseness on the bridge. For the crew of the *Great Western*, it was the start of the next phase of the ship's construction. For the Overseer, it was simply a Tuesday.

Out in space, the Alpha Frame was connected to the A-Face of the ship. Thrusters fired, pulling the frame and face away from the rest of the *Western*, revealing the dark interior of the great ship.

Once the face was far enough away, dozens of thrusters lit up on the Beta and Gamma frames on either side. Modules that looked tiny against the big frames, but were actually as wide as the faces of the *Western* detached and flew towards the ship.

The Chief Overseer turned to the *Western's* crew. "Everything is looking good so far. Measurements match up as expected. First stage is building the decks around the midship reactors."

"No more catwalks over bottomless chasms," Dobbin noted.

John nodded, a smile showing on the hardlight face he projected inside his helmet. “Exactly. After that, we’ll start slotting in the rest of the modules. If you wish to change the order, please let me know within the hour. I understand a quarter of them are still undefined?”

“That isn’t changing, we don’t have time to change them. So we’ll just load blanks in, and when we figure out something to do with them, we’ll update them. For now, they’ll probably just be bulk storage anyway,” Captain Xun said. “We’ll cluster most of them in the forward third.”

“The Bridge we’ll put midship, with the secondary flight deck in the forward third as well. Main engineering is in the aft and can also serve as a flight deck if needed, so everything’s balanced,” Seamus said.

“Right. I understand you don’t want the bridges fully activated yet?”

“Not yet. We don’t have time to do the full shakedown. Hook everything up so we can use it as a backup if the *King* has to detach, but the *King* will remain as the effective bridge most of the time. How long will it take?” Xun asked.

The Overseer looked away a moment. “We understand you want to be going out again as soon as possible, so we’re working around the clock with all teams on deck. All of the interior modules should be in place by next week. We’ll have the Side A hull replaced in a few days, and then three weeks or so to finish all the internal hookups and systems integration testing. We’re putting priority on offensive and defensive systems, per your request.”

Seamus looked at the view outside, and tried not to look *too* impressed. “Great work as always. It’ll be good to see her filled up and complete.”

“A ship such as she is never truly complete, not until the day she is decommissioned. But she will be ready enough for her mission when we are done.”

Captain Xun shook the Overseer’s hand. “Thank you. Let Seamus know if there are any wrinkles we can help smooth out, or any schedule slippages. If you’ll excuse me, I have another meeting to attend.”

“Of course. I will remain on the *King* to coordinate.”

Xun paused, “One quick question. How experienced are you with EIs? How difficult would it be to integrate one into our systems?”

“Fairly trivial, for the Western’s controls. It’s a common adaptation for our modern designs, so we plan for them from the start. Even for the *King*, we could do the retrofit within a few days. Do you have an Intelligence in mind?”

“We may have some candidates that I’m considering. If we pick one, or some, we’ll send them your way.”

May 15, 158 AL

Captain Xun barely had time to sit down in his office, when the door chimed. A window opened on the door, showing the guest. He was an android, with a much more human appearance than the shipyard’s Overseer, but Xun knew this body held no human mind. The man was dressed in a simple civilian suit—slightly overdressed for the circus, but not too much.

Xun stood and tugged on his own shirt and glanced down. His desk was crowded with tablets and the remains of breakfast, but there was no time to straighten it up. He mentally kicked himself for his own procrastination, and shoved the dirty plate and glass into a drawer. “Enter!” he called out.

The android walked in, looking around briefly before settling his optics on the Captain. He approached the desk and offered his hand. “Greetings, Captain Xun. I am Astrogon.”

“Hello Astrogon, welcome aboard. Please, have a seat,” Xun said after shaking the hand. When both were seated, he started. “I’ve read your records, and I’ve been reading up on EIs. You do seem very capable.”

“I have been simming in Space since I was a sprout. I am also licensed as a pilot for Zharus and Colossus space. I am fully versed on FTL theory, and modern space combat techniques, as well as a few new strategies I’ve developed based on the *Western’s* specs.”

“I see. And you want to offer yourself as an EI for the *Great Western*. Why? Why do you want to run off to the circus like this?”

Astrogon clasped his hands on his lap and took a carefully timed moment. “I don’t know how familiar with EIs you are, but my brethren tend to have a greater multitasking ability than our RIDE cousins. We enjoy

helping large projects run more smoothly. That is why we're showing up in so many places around the system.

"When I came online, and was able to decide on my own dreams; the Stars were one of those dreams. FTL ships are still off limits to us, but I quickly realized the loophole. The Circus has long been on the bleeding edge of technology for all of the colonies. The *Great Western* would be an ideal place for me to reach my dreams, and for you to continue the Circus tradition."

Xun crossed his legs and leaned back, contemplating Astrogon's proposal. "It is intriguing. But are you up to the task? The *Western* is a big ship, and her first cycle is going to be extraordinary."

"I have been briefed on the Totalia mission. If you do not accept me for the *Western*, I am ready to travel with you in my current shell, or other appropriate shells if needed.

"As for my capabilities, I am a quick learner and a quicker adapter. It will be easiest if I'm involved from the beginning, so that I may get used to the capabilities as quickly as possible."

"I don't know," Xun said. "Putting a novice in charge of that much power, in an untested frame."

"I will be subordinate to you, of course. And manual controls will still function. I'll just be another set of eyes and hands, ready to follow your orders."

"I see." Xun frowned. "Before I can give you a final decision, I believe you should present your proposal to Seamus Odell and Dobbin, our OverEngineers. By rights, they should be involved in this decision as well."

"Of course. It would not be proper otherwise. Do you wish me to contact them?"

"I'll call them in shortly. But first...you said you've simmed some battle strategies for the *Western*? Let's go into Sim space and take a look, see what you've come up with." Xun closed his eyes and sent an invitation to the EI. Astrogon joined him in a simulation of the *Western*'s bridge in FTL mode.

Xun sat down in his chair in the middle of the bridge and nodded to the android. "First test, coming out into the Kepler system from FTL. You have the controls. Let's see what you can do."

July 1, 158 AL.
Fleet Launch: T-50 Days
Uplift

“Mmm.” Of the two lumps under the covers, the smaller one on the left shifted position first, purring contentedly.

“Mmm.” Now it was the right one’s turn.

“*Mmm*,” both voices said in harmony. One arm from each of them pushed the covers down, revealing a human woman with lynx ears and nose cuddled up against a furry tiger-man.

“Morning,” Rhianna murmured.

“Mmm,” Zane said, licking the back of Rhianna’s ear. “Morning. Big day today.”

“Yeah. Guess we should get up.” Rhianna yawned, ear twitching. “Eventually.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Neither of them seemed particularly inclined to want to move. They yawned some more, and snuggled into each other’s arms a while longer. But wakefulness gradually worked its way in, along with random thoughts that had gone through their minds in days before. “Zane?” Rhianna said drowsily. “You think you’ll ever learn to shapeshift, like Maddie?”

“Eh...someday, maybe.” Zane shrugged. “I can’t say it wouldn’t be fun to kiss you with human lips, but...for now, I kinda painted myself into a corner, really.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah...as I’ve been telling you all over and over again every time this comes up, the whole Integrate Rights movement was based on, ‘Hey, we can’t help looking like this, accept us as we are.’ And if I, the poster boy for the movement, suddenly go, ‘Oops, I tell a lie. We *can* help looking like this after all!’ then how’s that gonna look?” He chuckled. “Besides, we sibs were always a bit competitive. I think it’s best to let Maddie enjoy being unique in the family for a while. Don’t want her to think I’m a copycat.”

“You always have to be so reasonable...”

Zane grinned. “Hey, what can I say? I gotta be me.” He grinned. “You

think *you'll* ever go back to being a guy?"

"To be frank, I can't imagine *not* being Kaylee's partner," Rhianna admitted. She nodded toward the lynx, who slumbered in passive mode in the charger at the other end of the room. "I'm not going to say never, and Kay knows that, but..." She shrugged. "Then you'd *have* to learn 'shifting. I know, I know. 'People, not plumbing', but..."

"We can discuss that if it ever happens." Zane closed his eyes and smiled. "So...I guess we should go down and meet your folks now."

"And I should put on something a bit more covering than this chemise." Rhianna smiled cutely, then purred before getting out of bed and stretching. "Wake up, Kay. Time to change the world."

The lynx opened her eyes and affected a yawn. "Mornin'. Sleep well, for whatever value'f 'sleeping' you did?"

"We're...rested," Zane said. He yawned, himself, then rezzed some casual clothes. "And I'm dressed."

"Cheater," Rhianna teased. She took off her chemise and tossed it so it would land over Zane's head, then quickly dressed in her regular Rosie the Riveter style. There would be time later for more fancy clothes for the press conference. "Shall we?"

Zane held out a hand, and the Zane Cane drifted across the room into it. He offered the other arm to Rhianna. "Let's do."

They met Rhianna's grandparents in Bea's Breakfast Nook. The couple had already occupied their usual table, in a corner by the window. Over the last few months, they'd become something of a fixture at the place, given that the food was good and they could amply afford it. Grace and Darby Gill Stone were Rhianna's father's parents, academics from Earth with long experience in administration and the sciences.

She would be tapping that experience while she and Zane went on their year-long private "interstellar cruise".

"Good morning, honey," Grace said, standing up to greet them. "Zane."

"Ma'am," Zane said.

"Hi Grans, Gramps." Rhianna gave Grace a hug, then slid into the seats across from them with Zane. Pamela came by and offered menus, but

Rhianna hardly needed them by now. “We’ll just have our usuals.”

People like Grace and Darby were the reason why there was a market for organs on Earth. Rhianna doubted there was much in the way of original equipment on them besides their skull and brain. Earth had had perfect zero-rejection organ transplantation for almost three centuries, and only the cost of cybernetics had gone down faster in the last hundred years.

Apart from similar tastes in academe and entertainment, Grace and Darby had also shared a disdain for cybernetic enhancements not uncommon in their generation. When body parts had given out, due to ill health or accident, they had spent the extra cash to replace them with transplants instead. That they were effectively chimeras wasn’t generally obvious when they had clothes on, apart from one of Darby’s hands being a different skin color than the other one, but the cryo techs who’d overseen their awakening had gotten a surprise.

Darby nodded to her. “Looking forward to the big day?”

“I’m no Steve Jobs, but I think I’ve got it covered. This isn’t the first time I’ve released something like this.”

“So we’ve heard,” Grace said. “You know, we’re very proud of you, even if you did give us quite a shock at first.”

Darby chuckled. “Good thing our tickers are about fifty years younger than the rest of us.”

“*Some* of the rest of you,” Rhianna retorted.

“A point of fact, yes,” Grace said crisply, dabbing the corners of her mouth with a napkin. “But today of all days, we should avoid argument. Especially in public like this.”

The waitress started bringing out breakfast plates, which provided a nice way to defuse a traditionally divisive issue for the family. The arguments between Socah and Grace were the stuff of legend. The argument had resumed with the same heat once Socah had revealed she hadn’t gotten an organic body. And Rhianna had always been a little closer to Socah than to her other grandparents.

But for all their faults, there was nobody else Rhianna trusted to run the new communication hardware company in her absence.

“So, what did you decide to name the company?” Darby asked. “I recall you were making your final decision last night with your business

partners.”

“Well, we decided against any kind of fruit,” Kaylee said.

“Doesn’t seem right to name it after just me, or even just me and Shelley, since it was a team effort. We considered something taking from all four of our names, like RKRU, or RhiKayShelUn, but it just looked either inscrutable or silly.” Rhianna shook her head. “If I’d known it would be this much trouble coming up with a name for the company, I don’t know if I’d have invented the darned things.”

“So, we’re stickin’ with Freeriders,” Kaylee said. “An’ sticken ‘Comtech’ on the end. Freeriders Comtech.”

Zane nodded, cutting into his breakfast steak. “Good plan. You’ve built up a lot of brand equity in that name, so why not use it?”

“Brand equity? Really?” Kaylee wrinkled her nose and sneezed expressively. “Save us from marketroids and bean counters.”

“Hey, every field has its jargon.” Zane grinned. “Anyway, I’d think RIDEs would be very good at counting beans, or anything else.”

Rhianna laughed. “I think we’re all going to need to learn to count some beans. And I’m really glad we’ve got an expert on that kind of thing so close to hand.”

“Yeah, me too,” Zane said. “I don’t know what I’d do without Aggie around either.”

Rhianna rolled her eyes. “Yuk it up, tiger boy. I know where you sleep.”

Zane grinned. “Because you often sleep there, too?”

“Well, yeah.” Rhianna reached over to put her hand on his. “Really looking forward to the cruise.”

“I know. Me too.”

Darby sipped his coffee, and regarded them over the mug. “Seems like odd timing to go on an extended pleasure cruise right after launching your business.”

“Well, it’s not *exactly* a ‘pleasure cruise,’” Rhianna said. “The main goal is to do some DINcom testing in the field. *Far* afield. I’m still trying to figure out why it won’t survive an FTL trip.”

“But since we’re going that far out anyway, we figured why not pop in at a few ports a’ call an’ such,” Kaylee added. “Do some a’ what stripey there

would probably call ‘market research.’ Fab and hand-carry samples to peeps who might want to license ‘em. After all, we’re gonna be selling ‘em more places than just here.”

“And if we can enjoy ourselves a little along the way, why not?” Zane said. “Multiple birds, single stone.”

“Even so, we would have put it off a few more months, but...” Rhianna shrugged. “Sometimes things just happen and you have to change your plans.” She felt a little guilty that Grans and Gramps weren’t cleared for knowledge of the true nature of the mission, while Nana Socah was, but Socah *was* helping with the prep and coming along. All things considered, her other grandparents didn’t really need to know more than the “space cruise” cover story—though she imagined she’d have some apologizing to do once the facts of the matter finally came out.

Grace gave Zane one of her appraising looks, as she frequently had since they’d met. Dr. Grace Stone didn’t hold much with cybernetics in general, but the technorganic Integrates were something entirely different. Zane smiled back pleasantly, or at least as pleasantly as a two-meter-plus humanoid tiger with a maw full of pointy teeth could.

“You’ll take good care of our granddaughter, of course,” Grace said.

Zane nodded. “Believe me, there’s nothing else I’d rather do.”

Rhianna rolled her eyes. “Graaaans...”

“So, Grace and I are pondering ways we can show we’ve ‘gone native,’” Darby said. “Being *such* fresh arrivals.”

“You could always pair up with a couple of RIDEs,” Zane suggested. “Lot of Earth folk have too much metal to do that as soon as they land, but that won’t be a problem for you two.”

“Says the man whose family used to be dead-set against us,” Kaylee put in.

Zane grinned. “That just shows how awesome you-all are.”

Rhianna considered. “If you *should* want to, I’d be happy to help you find some you could get along with. There might even be some at the museum you’d like to talk to.” She shrugged. “That being said, you should only do it if you want to, not because you feel like you *ought* to.”

“Oh, we have something else in mind, young *lady*,” Darby said, winking. “You could say you gave us the idea.”

Rhianna's eyes widened. "Wha...no! You're not...you are!"

"We had arranged for a deep cellular regeneration at the clinic with Eleven. So we decided, why not do the old switcheroo at the same time, since it's so much easier than back on Earth?" Darby said. "Can't let you youngsters have *all* the fun."

"But..." Rhianna stammered. "I just can't imagine...I mean, Nana's going to...oh."

Grace smiled. "I'd be a liar if I didn't admit tweaking Socah a little *was* a consideration."

"Granted, we did ponder partnering with one of your RIDEs," Darby said. "But to be honest we're not really *there* yet. No offense meant. We're simply uncomfortable with how closely they delve into memories as part of the Fuse process."

"You can lock that out," Kaylee said. "But, I think I understand."

"We're old. There are some things we'd *like* to forget," Darby said. He tapped his temple. "Having someone digging in here could be uncomfortable for both."

"You might just find you have that in common with some of the bunch at the museum," Kaylee said. "They're old, too, as we count it...and as war vets, lot of them also have some things they'd like to forget."

"Huh." Rhianna puzzled over the idea that her grandparents would balk at a little mind-to-mind contact while thinking nothing of altering the structures of their entire bodies. *I guess everyone has their own comfort zones.* "Well, I hope you'll be happy that way."

"We have you and Ivy as examples," Darby said. "The well-adjusted young women you are."

"That's true. But this is one hell of a new trick for you old dogs to learn." Rhianna tried, and failed, to imagine old Darby as a woman and Grace as a man. Her brain just couldn't call up the imagery. Between this and her younger cousin Raynor's parents pressuring *him* to crossride...
:*Just what have I started, Kay?:*

:*A new family tradition?:* Kaylee teased.

"But learn we will," Grace said firmly. She grasped her husband's hand in much the way Zane had held Rhianna's. "Now, enough about us old fuddy-duddies. Let's finish our breakfast. Big day today."

The RIDE museum on the Brubeck campus was considerably more full than usual. All the RIDE inhabitants were on their pedestals to leave floor space for the invited guests and human members of the press. There were also enough press drones floating near the ceiling to make it look like there was a mass balloon release planned.

“It’s a little odd we’re doing this announcement thing in museums, isn’t it?” Uncia said. The presentation would be holocast in realtime all over the planet, and via the very thing being announced, to all of the major habitats and colonies across the Pharos system.

“I think it’s perfect,” Rochelle said. “What better time to make sure we remember the lessons of the past?”

“Plus the first versions of this tech are already on display here,” Rhianna said. “How are the long-range connections looking, Kay?”

“Good all the way to Xolotlan, Rhi,” the lynx mecha reported. “This is going to blow ‘em away.”

In addition to themselves, there were others who had worked on the project and helped proved beyond the shadow of a doubt it was what they thought it was. Dr. Rose deHavilland, a highly respected figure in subspace physics and FTL research, would explain how it worked to the audience in layman’s terms. Speaking for the Marshals was the Qube, Reed Mosley himself, to give testimonial of the last two years they’d spent beta testing the hardware.

After the main presentation the media would be allowed access to various transceivers to verify that it worked, and demonstrator comm gear would be sent home with them to test to their satisfaction and review. They’d made sure that Xolotlan had a big bank of DINcom transceivers prepped and ready for some extended demonstrations.

Rhianna cleared her throat. “Well...let’s get this show on the road.” She stepped up to the podium. “Ladies and gentlemen, organic, inorganic, and in-between. Thank you all for coming out today. You’ve all heard a lot of crazy rumors about what we’ve been working on the last little while. Today, you’ll get the truth.”

“Which is actually crazier than some’v the rumors,” Kaylee put in. “You tabloids are really gonna have to start working a little harder.”

“Now, a little story. Nearly two years ago many of you had gathered on the Brubeck Mining main platform for its restarting. On that same date, Kaylee and I made a chance discovery.”

“Y’all recall just how furiously everyone was updating the DINsec hardware we’d released to the public domain,” Kaylee said. “We were lookin’ over some a’ the ones in the rig, an’ we found some that were actually working better than they shoulda. So we checked to find out why, one thing led to another, and here we all are.”

“Science more frequently goes ‘hey, that’s funny’ than has Eureka moments,” Rochelle said.

“Exactly, Shelley,” Rhianna said. On the wall screen behind them a series of historical images displayed, starting with the first commercial transistors, the Altair 8800, the iPad, the D-Wave quantum computer, progressing further through various firsts. Locally, sarium batteries, spherical RI cores, and their cubical EI variants. “Now, one thing to keep in mind here is that this will be the first commercial product of this technology, much like you see behind me. It will get better. But we think you’ll still be amazed at what we have now.”

Rhianna held out her arms so Kaylee could Fuse, and Uncia did the same with Rochelle. As the hardlight image of the DINcom 1.0 transceiver materialized overhead, all four spoke together. “We give you, DINcom. The first viable Faster-Than-Light communicator.”

The auditorium went silent while the specs and evidence were forwarded to various media and scientific institutions. No doubt Integrates, EIs, and RIs were looking at the documents from every angle, several times, at extremely fast time compression. A second later, the room erupted with skeptical shouts and gaping mouths.

“You’ve all been given access to the system-wide FTL network we’ve established so you can verify our claims,” Rhianna said.

“Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence,” Uncia added. “Say hello to Xolotlan in realtime.” She gestured at the screen behind them and brought up the stunned press room of the space habitat, several light-hours out. “Good morning! I think the press in our audience knows James Jacobs of the Xolotlan Press Bureau...”

“Um, good morning,” the stunned reporter said. Then he waited...

“We’d like to ask you some questions, if you don’t mind,” Rochelle said. “What is...” She held up a couple of dice for all to see, then rolled them on the table and peered at them. The screen next to the one showing Jacobs displayed the dice so the audience could see Rochelle was reading them correctly. “...two times six?”

Jacobs frowned. “Uh...twelve?”

“Right, twelve!” Rochelle grinned. “Of course, we could have pre-arranged this using trick dice...so you-all will be able to ask your own questions. Use your own dice, if you want! Or decks of cards, whatever.”

“Don’t be shy, say hello to Uplift,” Uncia continued. “Ping away! Verify! Talk with your colleagues! This is a live link!”

“My God, it really *is*,” someone said.

Rhianna picked up the unit they had brought with them, holding it between her and Kaylee’s shared fingers. “We used the imagery earlier for a reason. This unit is the Altair 8800 of this technology. Just think of where the future may lead us.”

Kaylee laughed. “Come down to it, I’m something of an Altair 8800, myself. Or maybe an Apple II.”

“Next, some nuts and bolts,” Rhianna said. “We’ve been very methodical about this. I’d like to introduce Dr. Rose deHavilland. Doctor?”

Once the Doctor was on stage, the foursome retreated into the green room at the back of the stage. Rhianna’s heart was pounding. “I think it’s gone pretty well so far, what do you think?”

Rochelle grinned. “They’re eating out of our hands.”

“I’ve been monitoring the comlink to Xolotlan,” Uncia reported. “The reporters seem to be at least moderately convinced we’re not faking. Bandwidth is holding, too. Lost only a couple units so far.”

“I think it’ll be a few hours an’ the reg’lr radio transmission of that side of the communication coming back from Xolo before they’re *really* convinced,” Kaylee said. “But we’re gettin’ queries from potential investors already. And I’m talkin’ *billions*.”

“But I’ve still got dibs, right?” Zane grinned. He was leaning against the green room door as if he’d always been there.

Rhianna smiled back through Kaylee’s Fuser face. “On my company *and* on my heart.”

“Who could want anything more?”

Rhianna wrapped her arms around him and licked his nose with a hardlight feline tongue. “Of course, we still have something else to announce, don’t we?” she purred.

“So we do.” Zane nodded. “We’re on as soon as the good Doctor finishes, right?”

“That’s right. Should just be a few more minutes.”

“Great!” Zane stepped back, putting his arms on Rhianna and Kaylee’s shoulders and looking down at them. “I can’t wait. My only regret is that we’re all going to have so much work to do on the way we won’t have that much time to enjoy our ‘cruise.’”

“Oh, I’m sure we’ll find time to relax,” Rhianna said.

“Yeah. But not as much as everyone’s going to think.”

“That’s *their* problem.”

Kaylee broke in. “Looks like Doc deHavilland is winding down. Better get ready.”

“She really knows how to hold an audience,” Rochelle said. “A regular Carla Sagan.”

“She’s going to be a hard act to follow,” Rhianna mused.

Zane nodded. “We’ll just have to be extra-entertaining.”

Rhianna straightened up. “Well, once more into the breach...”

As Dr. deHavilland bowed to the audience and stepped back from the podium, Rhianna and Kaylee stepped up. “Hello again, everyone. We know you’re eager to get down to playing with the DINcom demonstrators we’ve set up, so we’ll keep this quick. We just have one more thing to say today. It’s not exactly related, but since we were announcing stuff anyway, we just figured why not.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Okay, Zane, come on out.”

The crowd roared as the familiar khaki-clad tiger strode out on stage, carrying his well-known cane. “Hey, everyone.” Zane waved. “Thanks for inviting me, Rhi.”

“You’re always welcome, of course,” Rhianna said. “Now, remember there’s still a little problem. We haven’t figured out how to make DINcom work over interstellar distances. No matter how many unit-halves we send to Wednesday they always fail to connect. So, we’ve chartered a ship. A sort

of working vacation. A year away from Zharus with some *very* smart people traveling with us.

“We’re certainly not the only interested party in getting this to work. The Scouts have agreed to cooperate and provide support. As you all know, too many scouts have disappeared without a trace. We’ve been very fortunate that some made it back to us.” Rhianna nodded at Madison and Marcus Trenton and his RIDE partner. “Even a simple SOS might have...”

As Rhianna spoke, Zane patted the breast pocket of his khakis, then the other pocket. He frowned and checked his hip and then back pockets. Then a yell came from the audience. It was Agatha Brubeck, standing on a podium with her RIDE partner Annie. “Hey, bro, go long!” She threw something forward, overhand.

Zane reached up a hand and snagged it in a lifter field, fingers closing around it. “Thanks, Aggie!” He turned to face Rhianna, at the same time Kaylee suddenly de-Fused and stepped back. “Hey, Rhianna...?”

Interrupted, Rhianna blinked and turned to face him. “Um...yes, Zane?”

“I realize this is kind of sudden, but...” Zane went to one knee in front of her and offered the object—a ring box, now open to reveal a sparkling diamond-qubitite ring. “Will you marry me?”

The auditorium went silent once more, aside from a doubled gasp from Rochelle and Uncia. The proposal had caught Rhianna so completely off guard her entire train of thought derailed...but only momentarily. She held back a happy sob and embraced him, forgetting where she was, her world contracting to just the two of them. “Yes! Yes, Zane! Of course I will.”

“Oh, *good*,” Zane said. He embraced her, shaking a little. “Very...very good. Wow. Thank you, Rhi. Wow. I can’t even...”

Agatha and Annie had Fused and made their way to the stage. “I think Zane’s at a loss for words for once,” Agatha said. “Congratulations.”

“Well, I didn’t expect *that*,” Uncia quipped.

“Hush,” Rochelle said.

“Getting the proposal *right now*, I mean. Not that she said yes,” Uncia said.

“Of course, we’ll have to wait on the ceremony ‘til we get back from the cruise, so this won’t *technically* be a honeymoon,” Zane said. “But it’ll give

us something to look forward to. And give the folks back here some time to plan it.”

“My family would *never* forgive me if we got a quickie Aloha wedding anyway,” Rhianna said breathlessly. “It’s going to be the full deal, with a fancy dress...” She was trying to recover some aplomb and utterly failing, with tears of joy streaking her makeup. The media floaters surrounded them like a school of fish. She sighed. “We’re going to be engaged for *light-years*.”

She and Zane stood up together. Rhianna sniffled then they faced the crowd, speechless again. “Well...something for the celebrity feeds, then,” Zane said. He waved at the media, and the public watching the feeds.

“Well, we’re gonna have to close on that note,” Kaylee said. She padded up to the front of the stage. “Give us a while to pull ourselves together after *this* lil’ surprise, won’t you? Thank you.”

Chapter 6

July 16, 158 AL

Cerberus, Pluto Dome

Over the last couple of months, afternoon meetings between Melisande and such members of her senior staff as were free had become a daily event. They helped make sure everyone was on the same page, and it did help relieve some of the stress to share the load. At the moment, Joe Steader, Julius, and Socah Gates were the sounding boards she had available.

Melisande peered at one of the hardlight displays floating above her desk. "We're *still* missing a Sampo MR6 fabber? Where the hell is it?"

Julius sneezed. "Someone stole a Sampo? What, did the Earth fuckin' freeze *again* or somethin'?"

Melisande snorted. She was used to Julius's quips now. The jaguar's early life had been filled with riffing bad movies while being Joe Steader's bodyguard during the war. She smiled. "I understood that reference. But, it's just one of a handful of items still unaccounted for."

"Maybe the *Clementine* grabbed it when they came through in January?" Socah Gates suggested. "It would fit their mission profile."

"Possible. They didn't mention anything in their last message torpedo. Maybe they didn't think it was important enough." Melisande felt another headache coming on. Trying to keep everything straight, even with Valerie's multitasking help, was the biggest problem by far. This project dwarfed any of the large construction she had ever done. "Fact is, we're still behind schedule."

"It's the *Rickenbacker*, isn't it?" Joe said. "I thought Mikel cleared things up with the Eridanite engineers. Between them and those Ranger mad scientists..."

Melisande winced. The meme-infected Integrate Rangers spent at least as much time irritating the Eridanites as they did her. There was no way the *Rickenbacker* could be made as fast as the *Western* even at the low end, but with the "black box" tech Mikel had wrangled out of the Eridanites

to speed her up, she'd reach the rendezvous outside the Ra system with a good safety margin if they left at least three weeks before the bigger ship.

"The way things are going, the *Rick* needs at least *another* two weeks of testing before Captain Souza will be confident enough that the engine mods work to her satisfaction. Which means delays." Melisande sighed.

"On the bright side, Seamus will be happy to get that extra shipyard time," Joe said. "And it'll give you more time to make sure you've got all your ducks in a row, too."

"True. Still, Zane isn't going to be happy about this."

"Meh." Julius flicked an ear. "It's been months already. Few more weeks won't be the end a' the world."

"Julius, a few weeks on Totalia is the concern here," Socah said gently. "You know what war is like."

The jaguar mecha's ears drooped. "Uh, yeah. Fuckin' sucks."

"Nevertheless, I understand why Captain Souza is so cautious. Something goes wrong in subspace with your drive, and...poof."

"Well, I'm sure they're getting it done as fast as they can. They know what's at stake as well as we do." Melisande shook her head. "And it's true, we're not exactly at peak readiness here either. I think a missing fabber is really the least of our worries right now." She tapped the display panel and pulled up another report. "I'd like to focus on the cargo pallets located in the three inner orbits, and explore our options for breaking out the specific crates we need to bring down here and then shifting the remainder to one of the outer orbits for easier on-loading to the *Western*..."

July 27, 158 AL

Colossus-Rhodes Shipyards

Unretired Captain Esmeralda Souza, a tall, willowy woman with short brown hair, walked the corridors of the ZSN *Rickenbacker* with the horse Fuser who was nominally in charge of the *Great Western's* refit, but had also found the time to help put the storied escort ship back to full spaceworthiness. The ship had only been mothballed six years, but the "*Rick*" had never been a fast ship, intended to keep pace with slightly slower cargo ships in subspace. What trade there was between colonies

tended to be high-value goods that needed protection against pirates—Keplerian and others. The *Rick* would be sent in first to clear the way, and would then escort the cargo ships in normal space into and out of jump. For cargo routes, the escorts tended to work in pairs, so another ship could leapfrog ahead in alternate systems. The one escort protected the cargo ships until jump, and then arrived a few days behind to swap out with the other while the trade ships were still shifting cargo. For this one-way trip, just the one ship would be needed.

The *Rick* was five hundred meters long, with fore and aft Drive Rings, a cluster of five gravitic engines capable of 580G of acceleration, facilities for up to two hundred fighter-class ships, and weapons blisters with full coverage of all firing arcs. It was neither the heaviest- nor the lightest-armed escort ship, but was exactly what the mission required.

The Fuser walking beside her was a couple old friends, Seamus Odell and Dobbin. The *Great Eastern* had proved repeatedly that it hardly needed escort, but sometimes the tiny Zharus Space Navy had felt the need to show the flag and greet the massive Star Circus ship on arrival.

“The Rangers sent some rather oddball Integrates to squeeze a few more lights out of the old girl,” Captain Souza said.

“Fringe Division. We’ve met them before, last go-around,” Dobbin said. “I’ve never met another two-headed Integrate. I thought about convincing them to join the Circus, but...”

“Frankly, sometimes I think I could have done without meeting the one.”

Seamus snorted. “I gather they have that effect on people.”

“But between them and the Integrates from the comet Enclaves—which is another new one on me; all these years coming in and out and I had no idea they were even there—I have to keep pinching myself at every progress report. I feel like Rip Van Winkle. I go to sleep at the end of my shift, and the next time I wake up, there’s another week’s worth of progress.”

“I hear that. We’re rather more used to Integrates and their ways—we’ve had a few of them in the Circus for decades—but it’s still amazing what they can do when they work as a team without any need to hide their abilities.” Dobbin whickered a laugh. “We’ve had a number of them apply to

join our crew after the refit is done.”

“As have we. And after seeing what they can do, I’m certainly not going to object.”

“Though, speaking of objecting, I get the feeling a certain someone’s doing enough of it for both of you.” Seamus flicked an ear back, and Souza knew who he meant without needing to turn her head.

She sighed. “He’s still back there, isn’t he?”

“Ayup.” A dozen paces behind them, a muscular man of the Cape Nord variety followed them, barely managing not to glower.

“Honestly, I don’t know what to do with Eckhard. He insisted on accompanying me as my ‘bodyguard,’ but I’m afraid the poor dear is quite out of his element. It’s so hard for him seeing his little ‘delicate flower’ wielding the full authority that should by rights belong to a *man*.”

“I ever tell you about my first experience in Cape Nord?”

“Either three or four times, I forget which. Iphigenia Rose, wasn’t it?”

“Well, I still can’t believe you retired there, Esme.”

She chuckled. “The funny thing is, I retired there *because* your story made it sound like it might be a fun place. After years of having to be strong, dealing with pirates and worrying about little lost cargo sheep, I *wanted* to be pampered for a while. And I was happy. Still, when Zane Brubeck called up and asked me to take the reins of my old ship for one more mission, it seemed like a nice change of pace.”

“So much for domestic bliss?”

Souza smiled and shook her head. “No, no, I *was* happy. And am. We renewed our marriage contract twice, and we were thinking about making it permanent. Which we still might, if it survives this. Eckhard isn’t too thrilled, but he couldn’t exactly say no when I was asked to ‘serve my polity and my planet.’”

Dobbin snorted. “Patriotism is Manly, after all.”

“Indeed. But he didn’t want to just sit around and wait for me, either. He’s a sweetie, but he’s pretty protective.”

“It’s a Man’s duty to protect his wife!” Eckhard said, sounding every bit the stereotype of the Cape Nord “Man”.

Seamus snorted. “He’s going to end up in the brig before this mission is over, isn’t he?”

Captain Souza rolled her eyes. “Don’t tempt me. I think that’s actually worth Man Card points.”

“Yeah. It would be.”

She smiled. “But in all seriousness, he’s not at all a bad man. Or a bad *Man*. I’ll be quite happy to have him along if he can just learn to respect my authority outside our stateroom as much as I respect his *inside* it. We’re still working on that.”

Seamus cleared his throat. “Ah, well, whatever floats your boat. Good luck with that, and I mean it.”

Souza chuckled. “Thank you, old friend. And good luck getting *your* boat floating, too.”

“As you say, with the crew we have here at the shipyard, that’s not going to be a problem for either of us.”

“Indeed.” Souza nodded. “Well, this could be the last we see of you before the out-system rendezvous at Totalia. The de-mothballing is complete, and we’re most of the way through final systems testing now. We could be moving out within a few days. A few short jumps out and back for calibration, then we’re up for the big one.”

Seamus nodded. “We’re not too far behind that, ourselves, but from what we’ve been hearing out of Cerberus, the final loading stages could be a *literal* circus. Integrates are great for repairs and building stuff, but when your cargo is split across several orbits in drifts hundreds of clicks apart... oy. Not so much even the Intiest Intie can do to speed that up.”

“So I hear. We have a few things to pick up there ourselves, even if the shipyard quartermaster did handle most of our supply issues.” She turned to shake hands with the horse-man. “We’ll see you there.”

“Sure. The first beer on our first shore leave is on me.” Seamus paused to glance over his shoulder at Eckhard. “Or the first frou-frou cocktail with a little umbrella in it, whatever the case may be. I wonder if they have those on Totalia.”

“If they don’t, that’s just another thing we’ll have to teach them how to make.” Souza chuckled. “Clear sailing, spacer.”

“And a safe trip to you, too.”

September 2, 158 AL

Steadfast Dining Room, Cerberus Spaceport

The voyage from Wednesday had been a tense one for Quinoa. She vividly remembered her early childhood—the great flaming rows between her mother and father over what to do about Earth, how to run the Star Circus, what to have for dinner, and worst of all, the recriminations after young Quinoa inevitably went off by herself to explore the giant *Great Eastern* and her flotilla. Unlike with the *King of Hearts*, she couldn't just block out all the unpleasant memories—she'd effectively have to give up most of her childhood.

Still, the dinnertime banter between her father and her uncle put a smile on her face. Adding Julius and Socah to the mix, it was all she could do to keep herself composed. There was so much dry wit concentrated in one place it didn't take much to catch it on fire. Though when Isabella entered the dining room, Quinoa sometimes felt a chill down her spine. She normally took a seat next to her daughter, and never next to Mikel. Quinoa was once again a buffer, and with her wings, a more effective one than a human five-year-old child.

For all that dinners were sometimes awkward, they nonetheless had gotten into the habit of eating together in the *Steadfast*, which they continued after landing on Cerberus. In contrast to the voyage, when it had been hard to get away from each other, now it was the only time they were all together.

"I've decided to represent Eridani on the Totalia mission," Mikel announced.

"As well as the Steader family, no doubt," Isabella said, with a slight chill to her tone.

"Actually, my brother will be handling that part." Mikel grinned. "I've gone so long representing Eridani, I don't even know where I put that silver spoon I was born with."

"Probably pawned it, like I did," Joe said helpfully. "Our expedition to Earth needed extra funding."

Now seemed like a good time to bring up her own decision. "I...I'm going to be staying on Zharus, everyone. I don't think it's a good idea if both Uncle and I vanish. Again, I mean." She smiled across the table. "Besides,

Uncle Joe and ‘Captain Thermopylae’ deserve some time together without me getting in the way.”

“And I’d like to spend time with my daughter,” Isabella said, putting her arm around Quinoa’s shoulders. “We’ve spent so *little* of it together over the years. We have a great deal to catch up on.”

Quinoa blushed outwardly and felt chilly inwardly. *So what’s Dad, chopped liver? It’s not like he got to see me more.* “I...I’ll be glad to have you, Mom. Are you settling in the Circus Village? You’re free to use any of the Steader homesteads.”

“I haven’t decided where I’ll end up yet. I appreciate the offer, but I think I’d rather find my own situation.”

Mikel nodded. “You usually do—without thinking how they affect anyone else’s situations.”

Isabella bristled. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

At the end of the room, Julius stood up. “You know what? I’m fuckin’ sick of this. Every time you two assholes are in the same room, you put Quinny between you and send death stares at each other across her. If that’s what her childhood was like, no wonder she ran away *from* the circus. Get the fuck over yourselves, why don’t you?” Not waiting for an answer, he padded out of the room, tail held high.

Joe regarded his brother and his ex-wife coolly. “You know what? I’m with him.” He dropped his napkin on his half-finished meal, then pushed himself back from the table, then stood up with his own tail in the air. “Feel like a movie, Socah?”

“A comedy,” Socah said primly, likewise standing. “I’m tired of the drama here at the dinner table.”

“I’m coming too,” Quinoa said, pushing her chair back, not looking at either of her parents, with the door closing behind her. Mikel and Isabella were now alone in the dining room.

“Well,” Mikel said mildly. “They sure told us.”

“We have been walking on eggshells since we met at Zheng He,” Isabella said. “For Quinoa’s sake.”

“I think the walking on eggshells is the problem.” Mikel turned his chair to face her. “Seems like we were walking on the same eggshells right up to the divorce.”

Getting married in the first place had been a mistake. They both knew that, even if neither said so out loud. Their relationship had arisen from Mikel saving the Star Circus from a decade of horrible business choices and just plain bad luck. But gratitude had only carried Isabella and Mikel so far. Even the *Great Eastern* hadn't been large enough to give them distance in the end.

"Well, what are we *supposed* to do?" Isabella said.

Mikel shrugged. "Maybe just try to get along with each other *without* the eggshells? To be honest, I don't know what we're even still angry about."

"Endurance," Isabella said. "It was downhill from there. We weren't even married yet, but I've thought about this a lot. The disagreements started there."

"And they can stop here," Mikel said. "Those arguments are moot now. If they weren't, you think we'd have both been so okay with Colonel Gates? She was *at* Endurance barely two weeks before I got there with the *King of Hearts*. Two bloody weeks! If I'd met her again just five years ago I would have done...I don't know...something awful to her."

"I thought you were the one who just favored keeping your head down and letting it pass," Isabella said, though without the rancor in her voice that might have tainted the statement before.

"Just because I thought it was the best course didn't mean I was happy about it." Mikel shook his head. "If I'd thought we could get away with standing up to Earth back then...instead of ending up just like Endurance...well. Things are different now. Now we've got RIDEs, and EIs, and Integrates...and soon we might have two new metamaterials that Earth hasn't gotten its hands on yet. And the other colonies are finally starting to figure out that paying the Danegeld doesn't mean the Dane's been gelded."

"Zharus is the only world that has a hope of mounting an effective defense, just due to population," Isabella said. "Because Earth will come calling, sooner rather than later now. The twencen 'bumpkin' cultural gambit we started with your brother is wearing awfully thin."

"It lasted as long as it needed to. To be honest, I'm surprised we got this much time out of it." Mikel smiled. "Look, I'm not about to say we should start dating again, or anything like that, but...I think we ought to

have more to agree about than argue about now. We should let those differences stay in the past, for Quinoa's sake *and* for Totalia's sake."

"Totalia..." Isabella said. "To be honest, I still want to stay with Quinoa on Zharus."

"And that's fine. She ought to have at least one of us with her, after so long." He sighed. "I'd like to stay, too. God knows I'm tempted to let Eridani send someone else. But...well, this is the culmination of what I've worked all those years for. If I don't see it through, then what were all the *other* years I didn't spend with her for?"

"I have to admit, I do respect that you backed up your arguments with years of hard work." Isabella shook her head. "If I'd tried to practice what I wanted to preach...or even just preached it out loud..."

"You wouldn't have gotten very far." Mikel nodded. "At least diplomats are less likely to get assassinated than dissidents."

The Star Circus had taken on a few Earth political dissidents over the years. As neutral territory it was often the only place they could go. But Isabella had known that any overt political stance would have endangered that neutrality, which would have in turn endangered the whole Circus. It had galled her that it was necessary to hold her tongue publicly...which had probably been another of the factors that drove her and Mikel apart.

"Maybe that's why I've been so angry with you. You were able to put your money where your mouth was, while I..."

"While you did something that was just as important," Mikel said firmly. "You think my diplomacy would have done any good without the Star Circus to demonstrate Earth wasn't the only center of culture in the galaxy?"

Isabella cocked her head. "Are we...starting to argue about why we're arguing, now? Are we really that far gone?"

"I think we should declare a *detente*," Mikel said. "We both agree on what we want the future to look like, so let's just let the past stay in the past."

Isabella considered that. "It might be hard. I've been...annoyed at you for so long, the sniping's become a habit."

"I'll forgive your occasional slip-ups if you'll forgive mine," Mikel said. "As I said, we don't need to start dating again—we don't even need to be

best friends. Or even, well, friends. We just need to do something more than *barely* tolerate each other. I *really* don't want Quinnie to regret that we're back in her life, do you?"

"When you put it that way..." Isabella smiled, and offered a hand. "Let's go give them the good news."

September 10, 158 A.L.

Fleet Launch: T-10 Days

Scout Headquarters, Uplift Aerodrome

On the outside, the *Daydream Believer* bore a few recent modifications, altering her outline with a couple additional small missile bays, two pulse cannons, and hardlight cloaking emitters. It was hardly a sneakship like the *Satellite of Love*, which had already departed for its berth on the *Western*, but it would do. Madison was hardly going to be by herself if she went into combat.

"She's a beauty, Maddie." Zane leaned on his cane, the faint breeze from the Uplift dome wind generators ruffling his fur and stirring the scout khakis he wore. "She's your *General*. Like Dad's first ship."

"Yeah." Madison grinned. Her khakis matched Zane's in all particulars except for having the rank badge of a Scout Captain, whereas his were rankless. "I still can't believe how lucky I am to have her. Only wish Dad could be around to see it."

"And you lived on board by yourselves for months at a time?" Rochelle said. "I think I'd go stir crazy in a space that small."

"It's not for everyone. But still, it's roomier than it looks. Come on." She led the way up the ramp. "I'll give you the full tour once we're underway—there'll be plenty of time. Right now, I just wanna get us off this rock before someone finds something *else* they need me for."

The *Daydream Believer's* Maintenance Chief, making his final checks in the Garage that normally held a Scout's exploration gear, met them and handed Madison a tablet. "She's all yours, Maddie, 'Mantha. Just need your final sign off."

Madison took the tablet and scrawled a signature with the stylus. "Here you go. Hold onto that autograph, it might be worth something

someday.”

“That’s what y’all say,” he said, smirking. He waved with the tablet and quickly walked back down the ramp, which immediately started to close.

“Ship’s starting to come alive,” Rhianna said. “She’s stretching like a sleepy cat, waking from a long nap.”

“We’ve done all the preflights,” Madison said. “Used to take a full hour to do the systems check and reactor startup. Not anymore.”

Zane grinned. “*Someone’s* in a hurry.”

“Come on up and strap in.” Madison headed up the corridor toward the bridge, where a couple of RIDE acceleration couches had been added behind the pilot and co-pilot stations. She gestured for her brother to take the co-pilot seat. “If you’re going to be an honorary Scout, Zane, that’s yours. Don’t touch anything.”

Zane snorted. “Gee, thanks, sis.”

“Just to keep it fair, I won’t touch anything either.” Madison waved a hand toward the instrument board and it lit up. “You all ready?”

Rhianna and Kaylee Fused and settled into the acceleration couch and latched into place. “Ready!”

Rochelle and Uncia took the other couch. “Same here.”

“Great! Then off we go!” The ship thrummed with the vibration as Madison brought the engines up, then with a faint lurch it lifted into the air. Madison pushed a hand forward, and the throttle moved forward of its own will. The *Daydream Believer’s* engines fired and it streaked for the sky.

Of course, launching to orbit wasn’t the end of it. They had to wait in orbit until the local space traffic control was satisfied their flight path out was clear. It gave them time to catch up on recent events, given that the last few stages of mission prep had had them all running in different directions at once. Now here they were, stuck in a tin can together with nothing to do but talk. Madison supposed it was a prelude to what the longer trip was going to be like.

“So.” Madison turned to Rhianna. “I gather you announced the greatest technological innovation since the integrated circuit...and you *still* managed to upstage yourselves at your own press conference. Dish!”

Rhianna blushed faintly. “I think your brother bears some of the blame for that.”

Zane waved a hand airily. “Hey, I just wanted to make sure she couldn’t back out at the last moment is all. So I needed a few witnesses.” He grinned at Rhianna. “It’s possible I *may* have miscalculated, as it suddenly occurs to me I’m going to be in a position to pay for that for a long, long time.”

Madison laughed. “Well, you made your bed. Luckily, it sleeps two.” She turned to Rochelle. “So, when are you and what’s-his-name going to get busy? Where is he, anyway?”

“Chet and Nils took Maxima out to the fleet last month via cargo freighter. As for the getting busy thing...I dunno. We haven’t exactly had the most normal relationship so far. I’m not even sure you could say we’ve had a relationship at all. It all happened out of order thanks to those damned wacky nanites.”

“Nextus Nano’s taken them completely off the market until they can redo the interaction studies,” Uncia said. “It’s not even supposed to be *possible* to make them...do what they did. Ugh.”

“We started out copulating like bunnies, *then* we got to know each other.” Rochelle shook her head. “Now we’re not sure whether we want to start up again, because we’re both too afraid we might be ‘taking advantage.’ I tell you, Maddie, don’t have relationships out of order. It doesn’t, uh, begin well.”

“Well, you’ll have a couple of months to get to know each other again on the trip,” Madison said. “Maybe you can date.”

“I suppose we can try it. There won’t be much else to do.”

“Outside of drills and strategy sessions and stuff, anyway,” Zane said. “We’ll have weeks and weeks to worry ourselves sick about how badly we’re going to mess up when we get there.”

“Now don’t you start.” Rhianna poked Zane’s shoulder.

“Start? Who said anything about starting? I’m *continuing*. Maybe in a couple of years I’ll be able to *stop*.”

“No wonder you want Aggie to take the business off your hands.” Madison shook her head. “You always were a worrier.”

“They *both* were,” Kaylee put in. “course, I gave Terry plenty to worry about.”

Madison cocked her head, then swiveled her seat to look back at the

control panel. “Oh...looks like our departure clearance just came through. Next stop: Cerberus. I’ll lay in the course...there.” She turned back to face the others. “So! Who’s up for a ship tour?”

September 12, 158 AL
Fleet Launch: T-8 Days
Pluto Dome, Cerberus

“I did say, did I not, that if I got out here to find you’d taken over the whole project on the trumped-up authority of those orders I cut you, we’d have Words?” Zane said, grinning at the horse Integrate seated comfortably behind the desk.

Melisande bowed her head. “Yes, sir, you did.” Of course, it wasn’t exactly the surprise Zane’s words had suggested back then, either. She’d actually contacted Zane via Cerberus’s DINcom installation shortly after dealing with Nguyen. He’d been most helpful in sending along additional resources, such as Valerie.

“Those words are...‘well done.’” Zane shook his head. “We really flubbed this one. We even had a note from the *Clementine* back in January that things seemed a bit too disorganized out here even *then* and ought to be looked into.” He rolled his eyes. “It got stuck in my spam filter.”

Melisande shrugged. “These things happen.”

“Yeah. Well, anyway, if I’d known you had that kind of talent for organization, I’d have given you a bigger job at the outset. You even managed to get the architecture school together at the same time as you were fixing everything else.”

“That was mostly Valerie. She’s like my emergency backup brain, handling the little things while I sweat the big stuff. Don’t know what I’d do without her.”

“Even so,” Zane said. “I’m definitely giving you both big raises—and seats in my command center with my other closest advisors.”

“I’m flattered,” Melisande said. “But really, it’s not all that different from overseeing any big construction project. Maybe it was bigger than all the other ones I’ve done, but that just means more people to delegate stuff to.”

“Well, congratulations. You just became one of *my* people to delegate stuff to.” Zane grinned again. “Insofar as it doesn’t interfere with your architect duty.”

“Oh, that thing.” Melisande chuckled. “Going to make me work for a living, huh? Well, you’ve got yourself an alpha mare.”

“We’ll work you pretty hard,” Zane promised. “Won’t give you time to brood during the trip. After all, I don’t think you want to be a broodmare.”

Melisande tossed her head. “Ouch. Don’t quit your day job.”

“But this *is* my day job.”

“I’m *sooo* sorry.” Melisande laughed. “Well, I guess this is it, then. Time to finish packing and board the train?”

“Wagon train to the stars, pulling out real soon.” Zane stood. “And it’s time for me to go run around like a headless chicken some more. See you on the ship.”

Melisande nodded. “See you there.”

September 14, 158 AL

Fleet Launch: T-6 Days

Fitting everything in and on to the *Great Western* was a giant three-dimensional puzzle. Her triangular central docking superstructure had seven hundred fifty meters of cargo clamps on its thousand-meter length, plus a hundred twenty-five meters wide. Big cargo hatches that would eventually be covered by ships, were still open, providing access to the empty modules inside the ship. The *King of Hearts* took up much of Side A, with the RSS *Heart of Gold* behind her. Also due were the Scout ships *Daydream Believer*, the *Turbinia*, and the *Satellite of Love*. Although FTL-capable themselves, it made better sense to take them along this way so their crews could mingle with those of the other ships.

And then there were the non-ship components that had to be fitted in. The Ark containing the genebanks and biosphere gifts for Totalia; the two carrier modules for the smaller in-system ships (one specifically for the Rangers, one for Spacers and other flyers). War materiel and supplies were being hauled within the superstructure to save on exterior docking space.

The bright side to the delay was that each day it took to load cargo

widened the gap between the departure of the *Rickenbacker*, which had jumped out two weeks earlier. The Western would leave in one more week —assuming they could get the cargo loading finished by then. Given the differences in speed between the two ships, they should reach the rendezvous point just about simultaneously.

The final stages of preparation were out of Melisande's hands, directly. The ten Cargomasters knew their jobs better than she did, and supervised the loading of the Totalia Relief Fleet and the Barsoom Mining Fleet. Including the *Great Western* herself, a total of ten ships. Three were departing for Barsoom to mine Nullifite and investigate the archaeological evidence for intelligent alien life.

Zane considered this, watching the playback of the Mining Fleet's departure in the Pluto command center with Madison, Melisande, and the other Fleet planners. "If it wasn't for Totalia, I think that would be the news of the day. Even if they're a billion years gone, actual *proof* that there have been other civilizations..."

"Yeah." Madison chuckled. "Though you never know, maybe they're not as gone as we think. Maybe the qubitite remembers."

Melisande snorted. "Well, *that's* not creepy at all."

"We still don't know what natural process could actually create the metas," Rhianna added. "So they might be entirely artificial."

"What if there weren't any? What if they *are* all completely artificial?" Madison grinned. "If they were natural, you'd think we'd find them in more than one star system each. Cavorite, that's probably natural since it's all over, but the others? One spot each, no exception we've found yet. It's weird. Almost like they built meta factories, one per star system."

"Could be, could be. It's been long enough that most every sign of production facilities is gone, at least. Except for maybe those oddly regular caves of yours. Just what they made left behind, recycled with each planet's geology."

Melisande snorted. "Though that doesn't explain why there are Totalium rocks all over that star system."

Madison grinned. "What if it's the remains of a Totalium Dyson sphere?"

"Oh, now *that's* just crazy talk." Zane laughed. "And of course, we'll

never know for sure, barring some alien archives popping up.”

“You never know, they could exist. Probably not on a planet, though, or even near one. But if they built any interstellar outposts like the pirates do, out in the empty spaces between the stars where there’s nothing to smack into or erode them...”

Rhianna nodded. “Yeah, but as Dr. Dent would say, ‘Space is big. Really big. You won’t believe how vastly, mind-bogglingly big it is.’”

Madison chuckled. “True. Even positing that such a thing might exist, we could put every person in every colony in their own scout ship and send them off into space in all directions and still never find it. But we can dream!”

“I’m more interested in dreaming about what these new metas will do for us. And dreaming up ways to get as much Nullifite as quickly as we can.” Zane waved a hand. “I’m glad we were able to keep Nullifite and Barsoom out of the diplomatic briefings, but I’m sure word will leak sooner or later. I doubt we’ll be able to keep Barsoom to ourselves if Earth or even Kepler come calling.”

“I suppose this will give more ammunition to the people who’ve been saying we need to build up our militaries again.” Rhianna sighed. “On the one hand, I wish it weren’t necessary. On the other...”

“...it’s kind of going to *be* necessary pretty quickly.” Zane pursed his muzzle. “Even if it weren’t for Nullifite, we’ve fooled Earth about Q just about as long as we could. I just hope they give us enough time to get experienced folks back from Totalia to help train up more people here.”

“Let’s not borrow tomorrow’s trouble when we’ve got enough to keep us occupied today.” Melisande tossed her head, shaking her mane. “We’ve all still got a lot of work to do.”

“Yeah, I hear you,” Zane said. “Our two Totalian Ambassadors are squeezing as much out of their time here as they can. They’ve had some very good luck during their stay with us, but until they get here safe and sound it’ll be a claw-biter for me. Never can tell.”

Rhianna grimaced. “The Mads want to keep picking my brain over the DINcom FTL-break problem. I can’t think of an excuse not to this time, so I’d better...”

Zane purred. “Oh, I think there are other...activities we can do to pass

the time, Rhi.”

“I’m just *sure* you’re talking about giving Chauncey one last check-up before he’s loaded up for shipping, rather than something of a more *personal* nature.” Rhianna looked at him. “*Aren’t* you.”

Zane tried his best to look as if he hadn’t swallowed any canaries lately. “Oh, of course! No other thought in my mind! Scout’s honor!”

Madison snorted. “Can an honorary Scout really claim Scout’s honor?”

Rhianna rolled her eyes and turned to Melisande. “You see what I have to put up with?”

“That you haven’t yet skinned him for a rug speaks volumes for your restraint.”

Zane stood up and tugged on his khaki shirt. “As always, send a ping if you need us, Sandy.”

The mare nodded. “See you soon.”

Chapter 7

September 20, 158 AL
Fleet Launch: T-0 Days

Bridge of the King of Hearts

This was it. The day, the hour, and soon the minute. The rear of the bridge was filled to capacity with minor celebrities—the Scouts who’d started the affair, the Steaders, Melisande, Socah Gates, and others. The lower level, where the actual work went on, was clear of outsiders, of course—except for the one person actually in charge.

For the two dozenth time, Zane paced from one side of the bridge to the other. *You’d think he was just about to have kittens or something*, Captain Armand Xun thought wryly. For the two dozenth time less one, he considered putting him into one of the emergency acceleration couches and engaging the restraints. *Probably wouldn’t go over too well, though.*

“Calm down, Zane,” Rhianna Stonegate said. “Slow down your time compression if you want to speed this up a little.”

“Time compression? Who says I’m *using* time compression?” Zane shook his head. “I just keep having this feeling like we’re forgetting something. But what? I’ve *already* gone to the bathroom...”

“I felt the same way the day before I left Earth,” Rhianna said. “It’s just jitters.”

“A whole star system *depends* on this. Maybe more than one. What if I screw it all up by...well, being *me*?” Zane facepalmed. “Argh.”

“This is on all of us, Zane,” Darrek said.

“It’s on me more. I’m the one in charge.” He sighed. “I need a drink, a tranquilizer, or a Vulcan Nerve Pinch. Or maybe all of the above.”

Rhianna put an arm around him and stood on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek. “Just remember what you did to Fritz,” she said. “If you could do *that*, you can do anything.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Zane shook his head. “I didn’t have so much time to *think* about Fritz, though.”

“We’ll reach the jump point in three minutes, everyone,” the *King of Hearts*’ EI announced. “LRF established. Subspace nodes charging. Ready to submerge.”

:*Thank you, my friend*,: Captain Xun sent. The Eridanite Captain was delighted with this change to the 40-year-old Pinnacle. EIs were masters of automation, and Astrogon had had weeks to get used to his new shell.

:*No problem, Captain. You should see this. Everyone’s glued to the viewers. Then again, it’s my first FTL voyage, too. I have every sensor peeled*.:

Zane chuckled. “So, what is it I’m supposed to say? Second star to the right, and straight on ‘til morning? Do I maybe point at the screen and say ‘Engage’?”

Rhianna shook her head. “You’re not bald enough for that, hon.”

“I guess you’re right.” Zane paused. “Huh. I wonder if that’s why Cyberdani captains tend not to have any hair?”

The Captain laughed. “Something like that, Mr. Brubeck.”

“We’re going to kick Raph Clark’s ass!” Teenette added emphatically.

“For the restoration of our *true* government,” Darrek said. “Hopefully the people you sent ahead will make our job easier.”

Zane nodded. “It’s going to be a while before we find out.”

“They seemed like good people to me,” Madison said. “Looking forward to seeing them again.”

“Jumping...now,” Astrogon announced shipwide. “Welcome to subspace. Time to exit, about eighty-seven days.”

“Well, time to get comfy,” Madison said. “What’s for dinner?”

“How about dinner and a show?” Captain Xun suggested. “This is still the Star Circus, and this Pinnacle is one of the *Eastern*’s best, if I do say so myself.”

Zane grinned. “If they can keep us entertained for fifteen weeks, they’ll be amazing.”

Rhianna laughed. “Well, you can’t say they don’t have a captive audience. C’mon, let’s get off the bridge so we’re not in Captain Xun’s way.”

“Right.” Zane nodded. “You know how to reach me if you need me.”

Captain Xun nodded back. “We do indeed, Mr. Brubeck. Go and enjoy yourselves.”

“We’ll do that.” Madison smiled at him. “Thanks for your hospitality, sir.”

“We’ll try not to make too much of a mess,” Zane said.

“Go enjoy yourselves,” Captain Xun said. “As the old adage goes, ‘leave the driving to us.’”

Captain Xun breathed a sigh of relief as all the VIPs filed off the bridge. He couldn’t exactly complain given that they were paying his salary, but things always flowed easier when only the people who were *supposed* to be there were around. But at least they seemed to know that, too. He settled back into his chair and relaxed. “Well, that’s it,” he mused. Nearly three Zharusian months in subspace ahead and thousands of people aboard to keep entertained.

Xun smiled. This was the Star Circus, after all. Entertainment was their calling. He had plans to make for Totalia. Once hostilities were over, the formerly-lost world was in for a *hell* of a show.

TO BE CONTINUED...