

# **Warm Welcome**

By Robotech\_Master and JonBuck  
With Jetfire

# Prologue

*March 17, 159 A.L.*

*Zharus Orbital Traffic Control, Alohavator*

Traffic Controller Second Class Chelsea Swinburne leaned back in her chair, feet propped on the console in front of her, as she flipped through the pages of the latest paper book she'd picked up at the Toptown duty-free shop. Not one of the digital books as was her usual wont, this one was a throwback to an archaic 20th-century format called "Choose Your Own Adventure." A sort of early precursor to hypertext, it involved instructions at the bottom of the page regarding which page to turn to if you make a particular decision.

This wasn't one of those old twencen books, though, but a new imprint from Rosebriar Press featuring modern stories about modern problems. This one was a romance novel by Iphigenia Rose, in which you could either stay a cute girl and romance a handsome hunk, or crossride and *be* the handsome hunk romancing the cute girl. It was an interesting conceit, though given the necessity of staying within a normal page count, the actual effect was to present several interrelated short stories rather than a single novel-length adventure.

But Chelsea didn't really mind. The idea at least had some novelty to it. And since she'd already explored all of the non-crossride branches of the story, it was just about time to see what it was like *being* the hunk now. She was just about to "turn to page 9 if you choose the male otter RIDE" when a loud BONG! rang out through the control room. The book went flying one way, Chelsea went another, and a moment later she was picking herself up off the floor. "Ow. Polecat, what the *hell* was that? I thought you kept all the alarms on silent."

"Sorry, Chel," the tower's Evolved Intelligence, Polestar, replied. He projected his full-sized avatar in hardlight, a brown-haired young man with metallic skin in an Zharus Orbital Traffic administrative uniform, leaning over the monitor on Chelsea's console. "I have all the *usual* alarms locked down, but that's not one I had any reason to expect to trip. And all the more reason to make sure it was noticed if it did. It's a...*big* jump splash. Never seen anything like it."

Chelsea blinked. "What...is it a fleet from Earth? Or the Totalia expedition returning early?"

"Splash vector indicates Earth as its likely origin, but it's a single point source, not a fleet."

Chelsea peered at the monitor. "What? But with that magnitude of splash, if Earth is the point of origin..." She ran some quick calculations in her head. "That would give it more mass than the largest cruise ship, and we don't even have any of *those* scheduled to arrive for weeks."

"Indeed." Polestar frowned. "Well, it's only about four light-minutes from the nearest DINcom array buoy. I've already sent a challenge; we should be hearing back soon."

Chelsea picked up her book and put it away. She had a bigger adventure to

choose right now. “But what do you think it is? Some kind of...super-dreadnaught? But why would Earth send only one ship and not a fleet?”

Polestar rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I have some guesses, but I don’t think I want to speculate without further information. This is going right to the top in Zharustead.”

“All right, fine.” Chelsea sat back down in the chair and crossed her arms, waiting for further developments.

A few minutes later, the screen pinged as a transponder code came back in response to the challenge. Chelsea squinted at it uncertainly. “Wait...what’s this? DC zero zero four? I thought I had the codebook memorized, but I don’t recognize that one. I didn’t think any diplomatic-class codes were in use below DC one zero zero.”

“That’s an old one, all right. There’s not much call for it now, so it’s not *in* the current codebooks. I’d be surprised if a ship has been sent out squawking DCO04 in a hundred years or more.”

Chelsea turned to look at him. “Yeah? What is it, then?”

“DC zero zero four. Diplomatic code, utmost urgency,” Polestar quoted, then paused for dramatic emphasis.

*Probably timing it to the millisecond*, Chelsea thought darkly. “Yeah? So what is it?”

Polestar looked to her, eyebrow raised. “Colony Ship Under Way.”

# Chapter 1

*Pharos Outer System, Earth Transit Point  
Ranger Patrol Ship Sunstreaker*

“This is Pharos Ranger Cassiopeia Sehzade, calling unknown vessel. This is Pharos Ranger Cassiopeia Sehzade, calling unknown vessel. Please acknowledge. I’m on approach, and would like to dock and come aboard for an inspection. If this wouldn’t be a good idea, please let me know.”

Cassiopeia gripped the controls of her ship, *Sunstreaker*, as she slowly, carefully closed the distance to the newcomer. *Sunstreaker* was a giant, sleek, and very yellow wedge of a spacecraft that bore some resemblance to the Lamborghini Countach vehicle mode of its Transformer namesake. Two large cavorite impellers aft could give quite the kick if she wanted them to.

But large as it was, *Sunstreaker* would be a minnow next to a whale when it reached the incoming colony ship. The thing had to be the size of a small mountain. Size and distance out in space were deceptive without a suitable frame of reference, and as she approached, the ship kept getting bigger and bigger, and bigger and bigger still, and just when she thought it couldn’t possibly get any larger, she looked down at her panel and found she was still several clicks away from it.

In appearance, the ship seemed to be a long cylinder, or perhaps rod would be more accurate. Along the cylinder were clusters of smaller cylinders, or modules, attached in several rings. The ship had a cluster of a dozen large cavorite impellers at the stern, and the small bell of a vestigial hydrogen ramscoop at the bow. But it also showed signs of more recent modifications, in the form of FTL drive rings that had been stuck on the bow and stern. The retrofitting was pretty blatant; much of the ship had the dusty, pitted look that came from a long period mothballed in deep space, where miniscule debris could have an effect much like sandblasting. But the drive rings, and a few other components here and there, were all shiny and new.

Cassiopeia intentionally closed the distance slowly, at a fraction of normal approach speed. She’d not yet received any response to her hails, which suggested there might not *be* anyone awake to respond. And if the ship was completely automated, who knew what its Ad-I might make of her? If it wasn’t programmed to respond to comm signals, her first warning that her approach was unwelcome could be some kind of defensive weapons fire. A slow approach would give her more time to take any evasive action necessary—and might give that hypothetical computer more time to decide not to treat her as a threat. Of course, it also gave her a lot more time to *worry* than a faster approach would have.

“Come on, unknown vessel, if you can talk to me, talk to me. Even just a nice recorded message or warn-off would be swell.” She didn’t seriously expect any answer, but at least the talking was something to do.

“Probable match found,” her ship’s AI reported. “89% match to *Dandelion*-class colonization vessel. Last vessels constructed circa 23 After Landing. Primary purpose: Establishment of initial groups of colonists on pre-terraformed, unsettled world. Self-deploying with preloaded materiel and accompanied by *Honeybee*-class cargo vessels.

Utilized in initial colonization waves of Zharus, Eridani, Kepler, Zheng He, and Ibn Rushd. Fully automated with no crew required.”

“Yeah, I’d sort of guessed that last part.” *Sheesh, I must be nervous if I’m replying to my Ad-I now.* “Take evasive action *immediately* at any sign of hostile response.” The order was almost certainly unnecessary, because the computer was already programmed to do that anyway, but verbalizing it made her feel a little better.

“Understood,” the Ad-I replied calmly. She envied it that calmness.

What the *hell* was a two-hundred-year-old colony ship doing *en route* to Zharus, broadcasting a transponder code that stated it was on its way to introduce life to an inhabitable world? It didn’t make any sense. But this ship had clearly not been part of the original slower-than-light wave, for which the class had been designed. This one had been retrofitted with a recent FTL drive, which meant the latest it could have left Earth was something like eight to ten months ago.

“Someone on Earth is playing silly buggers, and I *don’t* like it,” she muttered.

*Sunstreaker* kept right on getting closer, and the colony ship kept right on growing larger. They passed the 10 klick mark...9...8...still no signs of hostile activity. No hostile response at 5 klicks, either. Or 2...1...

Cassiopeia blipped the forward thrusters to slow her down even further as she approached the airlock to the command module at the bow of the ship. 900 meters... 800...700... She was close enough to make out individual details on the hull, and the lettering of the ship’s name: *E.C.S. Steady Hand*. “Do we have any records of a ship named *Steady Hand*?” she asked the AI.

“Records from Zharus’s colonization phase indicate that name was given to the fourth of five reserve ships intended to be used in the event an irreparable technical fault developed with one of the primary ships. Only two of the reserve ships were required to colonize Zharus; our records do not indicate what became of the reserve ships that were left behind.”

“Fantastic.” Cassiopeia kept her own steady hand on the controls as she guided the ship in closer. *Well, I’m right up next to it, and I’m not dead yet, so I guess that’s something. Shall we press our luck?* “Initiating docking procedures.” At least the standardized docking airlocks hadn’t changed since these old ships had been built. It was just a matter of lining the ship up, then letting the computer extend a hardlight docking collar to latch into place.

Before stepping into the *Sunstreaker*’s airlock, she put on her armor. Cassiopeia had put her flesh body on ice at Xolotlan and uploaded into an RI-based full body replacement that looked like her original. She only needed armor as a precaution rather than needing to breathe. She closed her ship’s airlock door behind her.

The exterior lock indicator light on the *Steady Hand* remained red and wouldn’t respond to any standard signals. She looked for the manual controls. Fortunately the upgrades to the colony ship hadn’t included removing them. All it took was a few pumps on a lever to open the valves that let the air out of the lock, then a switch for a backup actuator to open the doors. She was surprised to find there was no hiss of escaping air and the inner door was already open.

*Well, of course they wouldn’t need atmo for an uncrewed ship. Fortunately I don’t need atmo for RI me, either.*

A quick sideband request to her ship’s AI pulled up a command module schematic for the *Dandelion*-class, as well as archive photos of the ship’s bridge. The

schematic was helpful in finding her way through the cramped corridors to the room, but when she got there she found it didn't much resemble the photos anymore—the ancient consoles had been ripped out and replaced with modern technology. She had the inane thought that this would totally ruin the vintage ship's collector value. *As if the drive retrofitting hadn't done that already...*

The bridge wasn't really laid out like a crewed starship bridge, because the starship hadn't been made to operate under a live crew. Hence, there weren't viewports to the outside, or command stations laid out around a captain's chair. Instead there was one big display screen, surrounded by a number of smaller monitors. A pair of computer terminals were situated beneath it, with a couple more along each wall. These would have been workstations for the programmers and sysadmins working on the ship's automation, on those rare occasions when they might need to come aboard to work locally instead of by remote. It would also serve as a systems administration center for that automation after the ship had landed and begun to unpack itself.

As Cassiopeia approached, the big screen came to life, displaying a video with audio broadcast via suit comm channels.

The person on the screen was an older woman, with half-glasses over narrow hazel eyes, brown hair pulled back in a tight braid, a stern expression, and a subdued business suit.

"Greetings. I am Adjutant Priscilla Donahoe, Terran Unified Government. Welcome aboard the *E.C.S. Steady Hand*. If you are watching this video, the ship's expert system identified you as a member of Zharus's local space patrol forces and permitted you to approach and dock. If you had not been...you would have not gotten such a warm welcome, I assure you." She smiled thinly.

"Please pay attention; this message will not repeat. You may wish to engage any audiovisual recording devices you have available to you, should you want to review it later.

"First, the important part: this ship is inbound to Zharus to deliver a new load of colonists to a location that recent surveys indicate qualifies as non-settled, non-developed terraformed land, under the terms of the Colonial Charter authorizing Earth to colonize any such area not in current specific use by an established political entity. Coordinates will be supplied; please ensure the landing area is vacant when the ship approaches.

"This ship is intended as a field test and demonstrator of our very latest technology for automated colonial ships, as a turnkey solution for planetary colonization. You are invited to observe, but *not* to interfere. This ship is equipped with our very latest anti-tampering and defense technology, intended to deter piracy and other interference. Please convey this warning to the appropriate authorities: this ship will respond to any attempts to suborn it with appropriate force, potentially up to and including self-destruct. Part of the reason you were permitted to board is so that you may assure yourself and those authorities that we actually *are* carrying the colonists we state we are, so you will respect these warnings and not do anything to endanger their safety.

"This ship will land on the designated coordinates, then unpack itself into an initial settlement camp before waking the first batch of colonists. On a freshly-established settlement, these would include construction and medical crews, for the purpose of building out residential areas and awakening further colonists to expand the

colony further and so forth. I have little doubt that Zharus already has sufficient crews to significantly accelerate that process.

“After this video ends, you will have sixty minutes to perform an inspection of the passenger and cargo areas before the internal defenses activate. After that, you will have ten minutes to retreat to a range of at least 5 km before external defenses activate. After that, no further ships of any type will be permitted to approach until the *Steady Hand* makes planetfall.

“I hope you do not have any questions, since this recording would have no way to answer them. Please do not attempt to tamper with this ship or awaken any of the passengers prematurely; the defense systems would activate regardless of time left on your inspection.”

Donahoe made a show of looking at her watch. “Your sixty minute countdown begins...now.” The video disappeared, replaced by a ticking countdown clock.

“Well, gee, thanks for the warm welcome,” Cassiopeia muttered. But she bit back her irritation; there wasn’t time for it right now. She sent another sideband request for more schematics. If she only had an hour to scout this place, she needed to do the best job she could.

As she moved toward the stern of the ship, she noticed the bulkhead doors in front of her slid open as she approached. Well, good. At least the ship didn’t want to waste her time.

She stepped into the transit car that served as a sort of horizontal elevator to whisk her further back along the ship, stopping it at the juncture where the first ring of pods connected to the ship. She picked a direction at random and headed into that pod. There was an airlock that cycled, and she found herself in atmosphere on the other side. She didn’t need to breathe it, of course, but the armor’s sampling equipment verified that it would have been breathable if she needed to.

On the other side of the airlock, she found herself on a deck filled with cryogenic storage units. She picked one at random and walked up to it, peering at the status display on the monitor at the end. The display said this was a Mrs. Janelle Henderson, age 43, formerly of Red Deer, Alberta. The status indicators were all green, and the chrono display showing the amount of time frozen showed about sixteen and a half Terran months. A quick scan through the glass with her armor’s “tricorder” attachment confirmed that this wasn’t all elaborate fakery—that was a real frozen sleeper, and her suspended vitals were just as the display said they were.

She spot-checked another few cryo units, then did a quick count of how many decks full of them were in this pod. Then she moved to another cargo pod and spot-checked some people there. So far all real, all healthy, and all deep-frozen. And a quick mental calculation of the number of cryo units per deck, number of decks per pod, and number of pods on the ship provided a potential number in the hundreds of thousands if they’d filled every one. *Whole lot of mouths to feed...*

*So, where’s it headed?* Cassiopeia headed back to the Command Pod. There were still ten minutes left on her clock. “All right, I’ve taken your tour. You said the landing coordinates would be provided. So where are they?”

With a “ping,” a digital file hit her near-field receiver. Cassiopeia pulled it up and found coordinates, approach vectors, and every other piece of information she could want about where and when the ship was going to come down. She took a few moments to peer blankly at it, then shook her head. *Well, that’s it. Time to burn space.*

Cassiopeia headed back to her ship and disengaged with a few minutes to spare, and didn't waste any time about retreating to beyond the five-klick limit. Once she was sure *Sunstreaker* was safe, she took a deep breath and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

*Well, I guess that's that. Now here comes the "fun" part.* Cassiopeia opened her comm panel, selected one of the few remaining DINcom units that linked her back to the Rangers HQ, and began composing a report.

*Zharustead  
Prime Councilor's Office  
March 18, 159 A.L.*

Prime Councilor Michelle Yu read over the report presented by the Chair of the System Security Committee, Zhi Rho. Also present was the sleepy-looking First Executive of Nextus who had just flown in, her white rabbit RIDE, Michelle's bobcat LRIDE assistant, and a flock of colorful songbird recorders perched around the room. The First Executive was also absorbed in the same report, Rho having asked for both of them to be present at the highest priority.

"Well, this is a real pickle," First Executive Huzma Gibbons said. She brought up a map of the land Nextus claimed. There were fifty million citizens in Nextus, settling an area larger than California on Earth, but even those numbers barely registered on a supercontinent the size of Gondwana. "Here's the area Earth claims is unsettled. The spot they want to land that ship isn't on our expansion schedule for another two hundred years, but it is ready when we need it."

"Looks like you need it now, Huzma," Michelle said.

"The Civic Planning Bureau will go nuts after I invoke an Executive Abeyance. There are a few people who live close enough that we're evacuating them as a precaution." She highlighted the area on a shared map. The landing zone was hundreds of kilometers east of Nextus proper, and hundreds west of their coastal resort city Harbortown.

Huzma glared at the report, rabbit nose twitching. "Who do you suppose they put on that ship? Seventy years ago they sent the Wednesday colonists on rickety barely-FTL ships they thought would fail, to exterminate their dissidents."

"But they *did* learn their lesson from the fallout of that incident," Michelle pointed out. "I doubt they would pull something like that again—loss of life on that scale could prompt uprisings even on colonies they had thought they'd quelled. They wouldn't want to risk that after they'd done all this work pacifying them."

Huzma nodded. "Still...*are* there more dissidents on that ship? That one might be old, but so's the *Great Eastern*. And they supposedly loaded it with brand new tech. How many of these ships do they plan on sending if this purported 'test' is successful?"

"I suppose we can *hope* that they're just using this one as a field test where people will be around to help if it goes wrong, and actually start planning to open up colonies on entirely new worlds with them afterward," Huzma said. "But we're probably not that lucky."

"Hmm. Or they could be aiming at planets where new metamaterials have been discovered, like that 'Barsoom' Madison Brubeck scouted," Michelle suggested. "It's probably too much to hope that word of *that* discovery hasn't leaked by now. For that matter, they might even be thinking of sending ships to Totalia once they learn where it

is. It wouldn't take too many of those to outnumber its native population."

"We'll have to send message torpedos with word to Totalia and the mining expeditions at Barsoom, at the least," Huzma said. "But beyond that, we probably shouldn't buy trouble. More trouble than we already have, anyway." She shrugged. "I suppose we should be thankful for small favors—they'll be close enough for us to help out easily if anything goes wrong with their descent, rather than being somewhere inaccessible like an island in the middle of the ocean. And if these passengers aren't all *terrorists and murderers*, rather than people Earth just finds *inconvenient*, it seems likely that we could coax at least some of them to migrate to Nextus proper—and other polities might recruit new citizens as well. What polity *wouldn't* benefit from a sudden influx of new taxpayers?"

Michelle raised an eyebrow. "But won't that send your unemployment rate through the roof?"

Huzma shrugged. "For a while, maybe. But more people means more suburban communities, which means more businesses and expansions of existing businesses to serve them. Sooner or later, it all balances out. We'll put them on Basic until they get oriented. Nobody ever stays on that for long."

"We will provide funding and material, if you request it," Michelle said.

"I'm sure we can cover even that number of unexpected citizens, Counselor, but the offer is appreciated," Huzma said.

"If Old Terra had actually *asked* us if we wanted to help with their test, we might have agreed," Huzma's RIDE said. "We've generally ended up *liking* the people they've sent us the past few decades."

"You're probably right, Bea," Huzma said. "But Old Terra always begs pardon instead of asking permission. When they bother to beg pardon at all, instead of smugly contending it was their *right* to do it without permission anyway."

"Because they're a bunch of autocratic assholes," Bea said. She looked at the recorder birds. "And you can quote me on that."

Michelle laughed. "Well. Time to call a press conference and let our world know what's coming," Michelle said.

Huzma rolled her eyes. "*Terrific*. I can already hear those biddies in Sturmhaven now. I'm sure what's left of the Valkyrie right wing will complain that we somehow *orchestrated* this, to try to *outgrow* our old adversary."

"Prime Councilor, I'm going to see what more we can suss out from the information the Rangers sent us," Rho said. "The recordings they took of the cryo chamber status displays did include a few names and ages of passengers, which we might be able to match up to information from the Earth census and exported mesh data. Perhaps we can find out who these people are and determine if they have anything in common."

"That strikes me as an *excellent* idea," Michelle said. "Let me know what you find out."

"I'll be returning to the SSC offices, then," Zhi Rho said, standing up. "Councilor, Executive, we'll keep you informed." She left the room.

"Well, I'm going to call an All Polity Meeting when I get back to Gondwana," Huzma said. She Fused up with Bea. "If they're going to send more of these things we'll need to be prepared."

"And I'll do the same with my Provincial Governors," Michelle said. She sighed.

“But first...”

“Already scheduled the press conference for an hour from now,” the bobcat LRIDE said.

“Thanks, Abi. Whatever would I do without you?” She gave her partner a petting on her cheek ruffs.

“Hire a human secretary, probably,” Abi purred. She leaned into the petting.  
“Don’t stop.”

## Chapter 2

*Uplift*  
*Steader Entertainment Archives*  
*March 17, Nearing Midnight*

*:And I thought looking at furry convention records would be fun,:* Clara grumbled. From the first ConFurence in 1989 to the last known convention just as Peak Oil hit in 2045, attended by all of fifty locals in Sao Paulo, Brazil. There wouldn't be another until the fandom re-emerged late in the 22nd century. Clara was very familiar with *that* history. Looking at the early years felt like it should have been more exciting than it turned out to be.

*:Ja, I know what you mean,:* Lubyanka said. They'd spent the last few hours reviewing ConFurence fursuit parades put up on one of the numerous video streaming services of the time, getting up to the late 1990s. There were a white shewolf Lubyanka liked and a white stag that were particularly good. But after seeing so many at once... *:Perhaps is time to stop for the day?:* the she-wolf RIDE suggested. She felt her partner's assent. *:I will tag and bag what we've done for Umla.:*

Steader Entertainment didn't lock their employees to any particular schedule, especially since the RIDEs shared the work. Sometimes the job still felt like a sinecure, but Clara reflected that at least they *were* getting something useful done. Over the last several months, they'd located a great deal of ancient furry media, including some so obscure that she was pretty sure no one on Earth had even heard of it in living memory. And six months back, they'd finally gotten a few completed bundles of it posted for sale, including to Earth tourists.

Clara frowned as the recollection brought something else to mind. As one of the curators of the collections, she was in the loop to receive comments and feedback from their customers—and since the collections had gone up for sale, they'd heard from a number of customers who said that Earth had mysteriously canceled not only their return cruise tickets but also their Terran *citizenship*, effectively leaving them marooned on Zharus. And at least *some* of those customers were people Tom remembered meeting at furry conventions, though none of them had been especially close friends.

They had reported it to their lawyers, the Stonegates, who had promised to poke around and see if they could get to the bottom of it, but they hadn't found anything concrete just yet. Still, Clara found this to be a moderately disturbing omen.

*:Bohze moi! Look at what's on the media!:* Lubyanka threw up a virtual display panel in front of her, showing what appeared to be a press conference. Clara recognized Michelle Yu, the head honcho of the Laurasian government, and there was also Huzma Gibbons who was pretty much the same rank in Nextus. Behind them was a display showing what appeared to be some kind of huge spacecraft against a field of stars.

“...colony ship from Earth could carry hundreds of thousands of colonists in cryogenic sleep,” Yu was saying. “It will arrive on our world in just under four days.”

“There are no crew aboard to discuss the matter,” Gibbons added, raising her voice to be heard over the agitated murmurs of the crowd. “The ship is completely automated. A recording and data file its computer provided make clear that it will be

landing in unclaimed wilderness a few hundred clicks east of Nextus. We'll have exact coordinates, as well as mark off what we consider to be a minimum safe distance for observing the event, over the next day or so."

Clara felt the bottom drop out of her stomach. *:So...Earth just happens to send a few hundred thousand people on the spur of the moment?:*

*:Da, the timing is suspect, Clara. But Earth has far more so-called 'undesirables' than Furries.:*

*:That just means they could lump them all in together. For all I know, our families might be on that thing.:* She shook her head. *:Comm the others. I think we all need to go see the Stonegates.:*

Roy Stone and Arlene Gates's shared office was generally spacious, as Zharus offices usually went, but with four people and their RIDEs added to the two people and two RIDEs who occupied it, it started to feel downright cozy. The four Earth refugees and their rescued RIDEs all arrived at about the same time, and the receptionist waved them right on through.

"I take it you've seen the news," Arlene said. "So have we. And my instincts are going full 'red alert'."

"I've sent a query to the System Security Committee," Roy said. "But they haven't answered it yet."

Tom pursed his lips. "You think it might be Earth dumping every single member of the furry subculture on us at one time. Don't you."

"Along with everyone else who would otherwise have been affected by the Virtual Life Separation Act," Arlene said. "And possibly their *entire families*, just to make sure the people left behind don't get radicalized when the government crackdowns hit *them*. They might finally have found a loophole in all the political maneuvering we did to kill it. That ship could contain *hundreds of thousands of people* in cryosleep."

"But you don't know that for *certain*, right?" Lubyanka asked.

"No, we don't," Roy said. "But what other reason could there be? Since the advent of faster-than-light drive, no one uses those old colony ships anymore. That one was retrofitted with FTL drive to get it here, and the only reason they would go to *that* kind of expense is to Make A Statement."

"And, really, what other group of people would they want to be rid of badly enough to send hundreds of thousands of them all at once?" Arlene sighed. "So much for our Grand Gesture."

"We always knew it would only be a delaying action at most," Roy said. "Almost anyone Earth sees as 'undesirable' could only make Zharus stronger in the end."

"And the hypocrisy is that they *still* want Zharus and every other colony under their thumb like they've done on Proxima and Centauri," Arlene said. "Their goal is a culturally homogenous planet, which makes it easier to control. But I could go on for hours on this."

"And have, before they threw us off the planet," Roy said.

Darrik put a forepaw on Roy's shoulder. "Easy there."

Roy chuckled. "I didn't mean to imply that was a *bad* thing. I went on for hours about it, too. Her mother just about threw a fit."

"Still...what if we were the cause of it?" Hobbes wondered. "Breaking out of their military installation...hiding in a furry convention..."

Tom shook his head. “Even if we were, I doubt it means anything in the long run. I mean, the way Earth was going, if it wasn’t us, it would have been someone or something else sooner or later. Furries are good at staying under the radar, it’s true, but the radar keeps sweeping lower every year. Sooner or later you run out of room to dance the limbo.”

“Well, I know this for sure,” Clara said. “We need to be there when that ship lands.”

“It seems like the least we can do,” Kim said. “Especially since...well, if they do like they have done, and send off the entire *families* of dissidents just in case, it’s possible our *own* families might just be aboard.”

“Especially if they figured out who we were after the fact,” Tim added.

Clara felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. “Well, they’ll know who *I* was, at least, thanks to Lubyanka filing the paperwork on my sex-change.”

Lubyanka’s ears drooped. “I just thought it was what one did when in Rome. I didn’t want to make waves.”

Clara patted her on the head. “Oh, don’t worry about it. What’s done is done. The important thing is that we be there.”

“Could you use your connections to try to get us *in* there when it lands?” Tom asked. “Call us...I dunno, Earth culture experts or whatever. Even leaving aside the subculture and family angles, we work for Crazy Joe Steader, that’s gotta have at least *some* relevance.”

“No guarantees, but we’ll see what we can do,” Roy promised.

*Zharustead*  
*Prime Councilor’s Office*  
*March 22, 159 A.L.*

Prime Councilor Michelle Yu waited for the new Ambassador from Earth to respond to her summons. He’d managed to stand them off for almost an entire week, while the incoming colony ship came closer and closer. The message was clear, and not a very palatable one.

A low-bandwidth live feed of the ship from the Rangers’ own vessels was projected over her desk. A veritable flock of colorful songbird LRIDEs sat on their perches around the office, quietly recording. Most of them could do much more than just record.

Then there was the bobcat LRIDE, her assistant, watching the projection, tail swishing. “They *would* be like this,” the cat purred. “You sent for them a half hour ago. Xenia was always prompt.”

“They just want to remind us that they’re not at our beck-and-call anymore, Abi,” Michelle said.

“Since they replaced Xenia with that slimy fuddy-duddy they’ve gotten even worse,” Abi said. She pawed at the video feed, which paused for ten seconds to buffer. “Wish they’d fix this bandwidth problem with these things. But I’ll bet you ten dollars they’ve already built their own units on Earth.”

“No bet. The patents are public, and I’m sure Earth has more than a few tons of raw Q they’ve managed to smuggle out,” Michelle said. “Speaking of Q, once this meeting is done, call the head of ZITA. We need to finalize releasing those export

restrictions so Integrates and RIDEs can travel freely.”

“At least,” Abi said. “Not like they’ve actually been *enforced* for almost a year now.”

Finally, the desk intercom pinged. “Earth Ambassador Clyde Blomqvist is here. Should I send him in?”

“It would only be fair to keep *him* waiting for half an hour or so,” Abi grumbled.

“Yes, but we *like* to think we’re above that sort of thing.” Michelle sighed. “Send him in.”

Earth’s ambassador oozed into the office. Well, all right, *walked*, but Michelle couldn’t help feeling like there was something slimy about him whenever she saw him. For all that he had a Nordic surname, none of the denizens of Gondwana’s Cape Nord would have given him the time of day. He was a greasy little man, with slicked-back dark hair and the sort of mustache that had been sported by untrustworthy used car dealers back in the 20th century, so the Steader media archives suggested. He was in a grey business suit, and carried a briefcase in one hand. “Madam Councillor,” he said.

“Mr. Ambassador,” Michelle replied. “Have a seat, and let’s get down to business.”

Blomqvist nodded and sat, resting his briefcase beside his chair. “I’d like nothing more.”

Michelle cleared her throat. “We have summoned you here to request an explanation for the matter of the *E.C.S. Steady Hand*, which has so kindly let us know that its unalterable destination is in Nextus’s backyard. We had not been informed of any new mass colonization effort, and given that we *live* here, and might have had plans for that land ourselves, we would have considered it a courtesy.”

“I’m sure you would have, Madam Councillor,” Blomqvist said. “But as my superiors on Earth have informed me, it is not a courtesy that is actually due you.”

“Explain yourself,” Michelle said in tones of ice.

“Gladly. Under the colonial charter, which was ratified in 2301 and remains in effect to this day, we agree to recognize the local sovereignty of any polity, city, or *settled* territory on Zharus. And so we have. We’ve even recognized the so-called ‘Enclaves’ of these so-called ‘Integrates.’” Michelle actually saw his hands twitch, as if he had suppressed an urge to punctuate the words with finger-quotes. “However, any *undeveloped and unsettled* land remains the property of Earth, no matter how near or far it might be from a polity or other settlement, and no matter whether some polity has called ‘dibs.’ We have the right and power to place new settlements at any time and in any unsettled area we see fit. And so we are.”

“For the first time in a hundred years,” Michelle said flatly.

Blomqvist shrugged. “I won’t deny that Earth has suspended its colonization efforts over the last century or so, with the growth of fast faster-than-light transportation and the need to keep our remaining people at home to rebuild the planet from decades of war and privation. But we’ve kept the old ships available against a time when it might be deemed desirable to plant new colonies. That time has now come.”

“You should still have consulted us. We could have helped you choose a better landing spot. Even as recently as 108, at the founding of Aloha, we *were* being consulted on where to place new colonies.”

“To put it bluntly, Madam Councillor, your ‘help’ is neither required nor desired. Earth has adopted a *laissez-faire* policy toward the colonies in the past, and we allowed

your Assembly some say in landing sites, but we were never *required* to do so by the Charter. Administrations change and so do policies. We will place our colonists where we want them, anywhere within the territory that is ours by Charter. The location we chose was available by law, and it meets our needs.”

“Your ‘colonists.’ Don’t you mean your *exiles*? This looks very much like another one of your mass political purges, once again dumping the people *you* don’t want on *our* home.”

Blomqvist smiled apologetically—but not *very* apologetically. “How we select our colonists is our own business, Madam Councillor.”

“It becomes *our* business after they land here.”

“Only if you choose to make it so. We’re not sending these colonists to *any* of your polities; we’re making them a settlement of their own, which we hope will be the nexus of its own new polity. I’m told that the ship is programmed to create its own little city all around itself after it lands, before it even starts waking the passengers up.” His smile broadened. “In fact...I suggest you pay *close* attention to how it does what it does. There’s been quite a bit of technological progress since the First Fleet arrived here, and the ship has been retrofitted with more than just a faster-than-light drive.”

“I see. And do you plan to share with us the roster of colonists and cargo aboard? Any further plans you have for landing *more* colonists here?”

Clyde spread his hands. “For myself, it would make my job easier if I *could* share those things with you, but my superiors were quite adamant that they simply aren’t any of your concern.”

Michelle interlaced her hands. “I see,” she said coldly. “It is certainly disappointing to see Earth continue to behave in such a high-handed manner, and I must protest this unilateral action in the strongest possible sense.”

“Your protest is duly noted, Madam Councillor. But with all due respect, you don’t exactly have a lot of room to be lecturing *us* about ‘unilateral actions.’ I remind you that Earth was not consulted or notified of the plans to send an expedition to the unauthorized wildcat colony Totalia until it was too late for any but the most cursory of message-torpedo consultations between Earth and our embassy here—to say nothing of sending more a qualified diplomatic mission from Earth to take part.”

Michelle raised an eyebrow. “Why, Mr. Ambassador, are you saying that you *didn’t* send any ‘qualified diplomats’ to your Zharusian embassy, where the Earth diplomats who *did* go to Totalia came from? One wonders what those people you *did* send were here to do. Work on crossword puzzles?”

For the first time, Clyde seemed to lose a little of his cool. “That’s beside the point,” he growled. “In any case, I have nothing further to say at this time.”

“I see. Then I guess this meeting is over. Thank you for your time, Mr. Ambassador.”

Clyde stood, and picked up his briefcase. “Thank you for seeing me, Madam Councillor.” He did not offer to shake hands, and neither did Michelle.

The Earth Ambassador walked to the door, then turned to look back at her. “You know what? This is not the last time we will send a ship here. We’ve let you have your own way, and make yourselves into the laughing-stock of the galaxy, for the last century. But the open spaces on this world *are* still ours, and we *do* have plans for them.” Then he was through the door and gone, without waiting for a reply.

*Just had to have the last word, the officious twerp.* Michelle glared at the door

for a minute before keying up a direct line to Huzma. The hour was very late on the other side of the planet, but with matters the way they were Huzma wouldn't be sleeping.

"Well, I know this isn't a social call," Huzma said.

"The Earth Ambassador finally deigned to meet with me," Michelle said. "Huzma, the founders of Nextus found a loophole in the Charter that allowed them to found a politically independent nation."

"Polity," Huzma said politely.

"That's precisely what I'm getting at. All Zharus needs your polity's bureaucratic mastery now. Look at the Charter again. We need to know just how much independence from Earth it grants us."

"We'll go over every codicil and amendment with a micron comb," Huzma said. "But even if we find something, I'm not sure how useful it will be. If we try to fight Earth in Earth's own courts, we may be at a disadvantage that all the loopholes in the world can't balance out."

Michelle shrugged. "The diplomatic battle with Earth may already be lost no matter what we do—but if we can put up a good fight, it may still be enough to sway any fence-sitters to our side when that diplomacy...continues by other means, as the saying goes."

"Do you really think it will come down to a war with Earth?" Huzma asked.

"I wouldn't count it out," Michelle said. "This may very well be the opening move of the first battle. If nothing else, we have to try to stall for time until the Totalia fleet returns. We certainly don't want to fight a war on two fronts."

## Chapter 3

*Artesia River Valley*  
*March 25, 158 A.L.*

Zharus was bigger than it looked, Tim reflected. He had a hard time judging distance on the global map, just because he came from a world with a quarter of the surface area. All of Earth's continents could have fit in just half of one Zharusian hemisphere. As a result, one got used to thinking of a global map as describing features of a certain size, and had to keep reminding yourself that wasn't right.

For example, between Nextus and the east coastline of Gondwana, it looked like there was just a tiny little sliver of land. But when you actually *went* there, it was an uninhabited area larger than the state of Texas, with maybe a dozen people to be found in the entire thing save for a few vacation resorts on the coast itself.

A dozen people under *normal* circumstances, at least. At the moment, it seemed like half of Zharus had turned out to watch the new colony ship land. The area was so crowded that everyone with a RIDE had Fused just to take up less space. Tim and Quentin stood together with Kim/Madeira, Clara/Lubyanka, and Tom/Hobbes, right up behind one of the metal crowd-control barriers Nextus's polizia had erected to keep the crowds back from the danger zone. Tim tried not to bump anyone with the clamshell guitar case magnet-clamped to Quentin's back. They'd brought it along just in case a little music might help calm the new arrivals down.

According to facts that history-buff Kim had dug up, the landing site was one of a number of vast plains that had been engineered by the original terraformers when they'd seeded the old-growth forests in this part of the world. Rather than require future settlers to spend extra energy clearing vegetation, they had designed the forests to have vast round clearings several clicks in diameter in the most desirable areas, kind of like holes in Swiss cheese. Then they had done something to discourage the forests from encroaching on them over the next couple of hundred years. Tim wasn't quite clear on exactly what, but it certainly seemed to have worked. You could still make out the unnaturally regular circular border of this clearing from overhead on approach.

The information the ship had provided indicated it planned to land dead-center of the clearing, which allowed the Nextus staff to wall off an area several kilometers in diameter while still leaving plenty of room for crowds to gather at the edges. With modern lifter technology, there shouldn't be any danger of the ship crashing, though dozens of Integrates from surrounding Enclaves were also on hand to throw up protective hardlight and lifter fields to safeguard the crowds if anything went wrong.

"Do you see anything yet?" Clara asked for what seemed like the dozenth time.

"Even my sensors won't be able to pick it out for a good little while," Lubyanka said patiently. "It's at least 30 minutes from touchdown, possibly more if it takes another orbit first."

Clara sighed. "I know. I just..the waiting is the hardest part."

Tim could sympathize. He honestly wasn't sure whether he hoped his and the others' parents *were* on board the arriving ship, or whether he hoped they *weren't*. If they were here, there was going to be a lot of explanation required—of the four of them,

Tom was the only one who actually looked the same as he had before they'd met the RIDEs. (Well, not counting the new nose.) Rhianna Stonegate had told them all about *her* experience meeting her family when they'd unexpectedly turned up on Zharus, and Tim really hoped that their own reunions went better. He wasn't terribly hopeful on that score, though.

And then a dulcet voice spoke from behind him. "Quentin? Quentin, is that you?"

Tim felt Quentin's surprise, tinged with delight, as he turned around to face a slim fennec fox, her immense ears cocked forward. "Athena?" Quentin said. "I haven't seen you in...well, *forever*."

"I know!" The pair of them moved together and shared a friendly embrace and mutual muzzle-lick of greeting. "I hadn't expected to see you again, and yet here you are. Who's your new partner?"

"This is Tim Clifton. He rescued me from Earth, so I kidnapped him to Zharus. Long story."

Athena giggled. "It sounds like one! I'm with Jamie Skyler, one of a family of Earth tourists who probably have just as long a story. I helped rescue his family after pirates marooned them in the Dry Ocean, so she's my partner now."

"Hi," Tim said. He took a moment to parse the pronouns. "He, she? So... crossrider?"

"Afraid so," a different girl's voice said. "That's kind of why we couldn't go back to Earth. My whole *family* crossed, all at the same time."

"Wow," Tim said. "Me too. Well, not my *family*, but two of my three friends and I ended up 'switching teams' along the way."

"Did I hear you say you met your RIDEs on *Earth*?" Jamie asked. "That's hella *weird*. How'd they get there?"

"Apparently some Earth spies bought them and snuck them away. Like he said, long story." Tim glanced around, noticing that the three other Fusers were showing interest in this newcomer. "Oh hey, I should introduce my friends. That's Madeira, Hobbes, and Lubyanka; inside are my wife Kim, her brother Tom, and our friend Clara, respectively. Tom's the one who stayed cis."

"Nice to meet you all. I'm Jamie Skyler, the human, and my crunchy candy shell is Athena." She turned, and beckoned to another pair of RIDEs standing nearby—a male lion and female Maine Coon housecat. "That's my Dad, Dana, and Isolde," she indicated the female cat, "and my Mom, Kelly, with Gordon."

Tim chuckled at the breezy use of pronouns. *Am I ever going to get used to this planet?* Then he remembered that Jamie and her family were *also* from Earth. *Well, then, maybe I will after all.*

Encouraged by Jamie's gesture, the lion and cat came over, and Tim repeated the introductions. "What brings you all here?" he asked.

"Well, being that we're recent expatriates of Earth ourselves, we kind of felt a responsibility to be on-hand and do whatever we can to help," Dana said.

"Of course, I doubt we'll even be allowed in, but we felt we should at least be here, just in case," Kelly added.

"That's kind of why we're here, too," Clara said. "And...well, we think we *might* know some of the people on board. It's part of that long story Tim mentioned."

"I think we'd like to hear it, when there's time," Isolde said. "It sounds intriguing."

Another RIDE came up behind them—this one a busty red vixen similar in appearance to Madeira. “Hey there. Just heard a report that it’s definitely on the way down. Going to be interesting to see what it looks like from the outside. Well, not that I ever saw it from the *inside*, either...”

“Charlene McClaren, and Fiona,” Jamie said. “An old friend who’s been hanging around with us for a while.”

“*Very* old friend,” Athena added. “She rode the first one of those ships to land on Zharus. Though she was named ‘Charles’ at the time.”

“I read about you,” Kim said. “You have that big lawsuit going on over the interest from your investment.”

“Aye, that she does,” the fox said in an Irish lilt—Fiona, no doubt. “Sure and aren’t the courts just doing every little thing they can to slow it down, too? But he has a fine pair of barristers, and I’m sure he’ll win in the end. However long that might take.”

“I think your lawyers are our lawyers, too, if you’re talking about the Stonegates,” Kim said. “They’re around here somewhere. They came out here with us.”

“Oh, really?” Charlene said. “I’ll say hello if I see them.”

Then came an announcement broadcast by the Nextus Policia. “Impeller plume is in sight to the west. Get a good look, everyone. You probably won’t see something like this again.”

Tom snorted. “Yeah, until they send the *next* batch of undesirables out here.”

It was a glowing purple dot to the west, growing rapidly, accompanied by a deep bass rumble.

“How did they land ships that size before lifters?” Tim wondered, using Quentin’s optics to zoom in.

“Inertial displacement capacitance fields, or something like that,” Charlene said. “I’m not really certain, myself. Considering I came down on one as a corpsicle, watching this here and now on the ground is *very* strange indeed.”

The crowd of people was whooping and hollering and making other generally excited sounds, but something moved Tim to reach around and pull his guitar off his back. He started strumming gently and singing an old David Bowie song about a starman waiting in the sky.

The ship grew bigger as it came down, like one of those old vid clips of a Big Falcon Rocket first stage landing. As Tim watched through Quentin’s optics, it gradually took on shape—a long spike standing straight up on a trail of violet fire coming down slowly but surely, heading right for them.

“Was it really such a good idea for everyone to come out here where we could all be squashed flat if it fell over, or blown up if it exploded or something?” Kelly wondered. “But I suppose it’s too late for an attack of common sense at this point...”

The ship grew large enough to see with the naked eye, still hanging impossibly still in mid-air as it slowly descended. It came close enough to count the cargo pods ringing its midsection. It drifted into place over the center of the clearing, then gradually lowered itself down: a gray metal skyscraper 2,500 meters tall and 750 meters wide at the base, lit up like a Christmas tree with steadying lifters and warning lights. Humming cavorite impellers churned up the soil beneath it. Then the field intensified, scattering plants, dirt, and rocks in a widening area. There was so much racket that everyone in RIDEs engaged noise filters and switched to short-range comms to continue carrying on conversations.

“Okay, we want everyone to move back a kilometer,” the Policia broadcasted. “We think it’s digging for bedrock, and that’s thirty meters down. That’s a *lot* of dirt.”

“First time I’ve ever seen a bone that buried itself,” Lubyanka observed as they all lifted to oblige the law enforcement.

“So that’s how the catacombs where they found me were made,” Charlene mused.

The dirt was flying everywhere. The Integrates who’d been hovering in the air on standby were now projecting angled hardlight shields to keep the stuff off the audience’s heads. The occasional clod or clump still got through, eliciting whoops or yelps from unlucky onlookers, and laughter from those around them—until they got pelted too.

The ship sank into the topsoil surprisingly quickly, occasionally firing quick bursts from impellers along its length to keep it level. After only a few minutes, it settled with a solid THUMP that knocked a few of the audience members off their feet, and the spray of dirt ceased.

Then began a deep, thrumming vibration, and suddenly seams appeared across the width of the ship, cutting it into about a dozen segments of various lengths. Then the segments rose from the base, splitting and moving apart in a carefully choreographed dance. Some of them split into multiple pieces, moving and fitting into slots and ports that opened on other segments. Some landed vertically, others resting on their sides. The segments with cargo pods attached landed next to a structure made up of several of the pods, and then the section of hull mounting the pods *peeled away* from the center and slid into an opening in the side of the structure—looking for all the world like a giant ammunition belt feeding into a machine gun’s loading port.

Isolde swore. “What is it?” Dana asked.

“I just did some calculations,” the cat said. “To move that much mass, so smoothly, with even the most efficient lifters possible...they need enough energy density that those things *have* to have sarium batteries on board. Big ones.”

“Whoops, looks like our secret’s out,” Gordon said. “And they’re rubbing our nose in it just like you’d rub a kitten’s nose in their misplaced poop.”

Several more sections were clustering around the ship’s base, where the engines and power plant were located. Among those was the segment that had been at the very apex of the ship, and had contained its bridge/command center. This one lowered itself to the ground, and the airlock hatch slid open in the side. All eyes went to it...but nothing emerged.

“I guess it’s just saying it’s now open for business,” Tim guessed. “So who’s going to go in?”

“Looks like they are.” Clara pointed to a small group of armored figures, who were moving cautiously toward the hatch. Some of them appeared to be Scouts or Rangers, but there were also a couple of Marshals there. “Hey, isn’t that Aleka Petrovna?”

“Well, except for the horsey tags, that’s the face she presented in Genderplay VL,” Tom said. “There was some speculation they’d sent her to NeoRus out of spite, what with that Russian name she chose. Glad to see that wasn’t the case.”

Clara sighed. “I’d love to meet her.”

“One of her teammates is my great-times-N grandson, y’know,” Charlene said. “Nice guy. Coyote tags.”

Tim watched them go in, and wondered what they were going to find.

### *E.C.S. Steady Hand Landing Site*

It was the first time Cassiopeia had ever set foot on Zharus soil. She really wasn't a huge fan of natural gravity. (You just couldn't turn the silly stuff *off!* What kind of sense did that make?) But she was the only one who had been aboard the colony ship in its original configuration. So naturally she'd been ordered by Zordon to accompany planetary security forces when they entered the ship.

She had, of course, agreed. But she just felt completely out of her element—and she wasn't looking forward to the little hazing ritual other spacers performed when one of their number had their inaugural visit dirtside. (It involved natural Zharus mud, brought kilo by kilo back from planetside by those spacers who made the trip regularly and were willing to spend some of their weight allowance that way. The mud was then baked and irradiated for the purpose of killing any potential biological contamination, before being reconstituted with distilled water, solely for the purpose of being smeared all over the unfortunate spacer to celebrate “losing their dirt virginity.”) But she'd taken part in enough such ceremonies from the other side to recognize that she did indeed have it coming.

Accompanying her were several members of the Nextus military and Marshal Aleka Petrovna, with her two RIDE partners, Vanna the horse, and Zoey the coyote. She didn't know the details, but knew Aleka was some kind of exile from Earth. Since this was supposedly a ship of exiles, having her here had presumably made sense to whoever made those kinds of decisions.

“Hey, you're uploaded?” Zoey said after pinging her sideband. “Friend of ours did that, too. Hated having a meat body. Can't say I blame him.”

“It does have some benefits on patrol in the black, Marshal Zoey,” Cassiopeia said. “Are we ready to go in? This looks like the former airlock I used before.”

“And it's all open, inviting-like,” Aleka said. She had a gold star on her leather duster. “What other surprises have they got in store for us?”

“I'm too big to fit in there,” Vanna said. “Zoey? Your choice if you wanna Fuse.”

“Emergency only, as usual,” the coyote said.

“That's fine, Zoey,” Aleka said. “Might as well get started, everyone. Let's see what the Terrans want us to see now.”

The outer and inner airlock doors were both open; there was no need for a sealed compartment now that the ship was on the ground. The passage led into the command center just as it had before, but now all the screens and consoles were live, replete with blinkenlights—and sound effects that Cassiopeia *swore* had come from that old *Star Dreck* show that Clementine and her crew were always nattering on about.

“Well, *now* they're just pulling our chains,” Captain Constantin grumbled. The Nextus soldier waved a sensor about. “I'm detecting sarium batteries. Everywhere. Not just our meta, either. I think there's *celerite* circuitry in these systems.”

“When I boarded out in space, a recording was triggered when I approached to about a meter from the main screen,” Cassiopeia said. “They may do the same again. I'll warn you right now...this could get *smarmy*.”

“We'll do our best to withstand it,” Zoey promised.

Cassiopeia stepped forward...and once again, the older Earth woman appeared on the screen. “Greetings. I'm Adjutant Priscilla Donahoe, Terran Unified Government. Welcome aboard the *E.C.S. Steady Hand*. Perhaps some among you boarded and

triggered my earlier recording on system approach; perhaps not. It's in the archive, in case you should wish to review it.

"In any case, welcome! In my mind's eye, I imagine you coming aboard armed and armored for bear, anticipating who knows what act of treachery from the dreaded Earthling barbarians. My sense of the dramatic leads me to imagine drawn guns and shifty eyes peering into every dark and shadowy corner. Just as well I can't see the reality of things; I imagine I would be disappointed.

"Of course, coming prepared does you credit. A good healthy dose of fear of the unknown is what let the human race survive long enough to reach the stars. But I wish to remind you, we of Earth like to make sure everything is *exactly* as it appears. And the charade Zharus has put on was effective for perhaps a decade, perhaps *less*."

"Or perhaps fifty-odd years or so and they just don't want to admit it," Cassiopeia muttered.

"Feel free to take this ship apart, once the colonists are awake. We haven't booby-trapped it, or even rigged it to self-destruct rather than be examined. We want you to learn *everything*. You'll find we know far more about your own technology than you think. Possibly even more than *you* do, in some respects." Donahoe smirked. "Of course, you have no way of knowing how much *more* we've learned than what is displayed here. And I'll tell you for free that we only needed the *basics* to retrofit this ship.

"Consider this ship a demonstration. And a notice. The export restrictions on qubitite will not be tolerated for much longer. They have brought so many benefits to your world that should be shared with *all* of human space. True artificial intelligence, practical nanotechnology, massive energy storage, the *uploading of human minds*." Her tone turned from smarm to threat. She slammed a fist on her desk. "*Faster-than-light communication!*"

Then she yawned, theatrically stifling it with a hand. "But threats are just so *boring*, aren't they? You should be celebrating—your oddball little planet has just gotten a fresh shipment of yet more oddballs. More new friends and playmates! I'm sure you and they will get along *famously*."

"Moving on to practical matters, those consoles over there are configured to monitor and control the defrosting process." She pointed to the left. "Next to them are the controls for the construction automation that will begin the process of building out the settlement from the raw materials of the ship and on-site."

Donahoe pointed to the right. "Those panels over there control the smelting and fabbing facilities that the engines are being reconfigured into, and next to it is the control board for the power plant and sarium battery banks. And the consoles up front are administration, monitoring, and archive data storage. If you wish to make changes to the automated programming—for example, to wake the passengers faster than residential space has been built out for them here—you have that ability. All the tamper-protections have been disabled. You *might* want to read the manuals before you meddle, though. They're right up here in archive storage.

"In any case, we hope you enjoy our little gift to you. So long for now...but we *will* be seeing you later." She smiled coldly. "Oh yes we will." The video winked out.

Cassiopeia shivered. "*That* sounded uncomfortably like a promise."

Zoey glanced to Aleka. "You're our Earth expert. Do you think they mean it, about the lack of booby-traps and such?"

"The entire statement they want to make is this ship and the people on it. They'd

regard traps as muddying the waters,” Aleka said. “I think we can move to the next phase. Get the engineers and medtechs in here to suss out what’s going on and whether we want to interfere.”

“My instincts would be to let it run its course,” Cassiopeia said. “Well, except for waking the passengers as fast as we can take them away, of course. But for the rest, let them show us what they want us to see. We might as well get every last scrap of information about what we’re dealing with.”

“How many souls on board, Captain?” Zoey asked the Nextus officer.

“Six-hundred and forty two thousand, three hundred fifty five,” Captain Constantin said. “Holy shit. The specs say that this ship could’ve taken up to *two million*.”

“Colony-in-a-can. Just add dirt and air,” Cassiopeia said. “What a *waste*. They could be using this to open up whole new worlds for you dirtsiders to settle. Instead, they’re using it for the moral equivalent of egging our skimmer on a grand scale.”

“They said this ship was a test, Ranger,” Aleka said. “And a colony only really needs about ten thousand people for genetic viability. How many habitable planets have the Scouts found the past hundred years? They could start planting Terrans on a dozen unclaimed worlds in just a few years.”

“Not that they’d want to,” Zoey said. “If they wanted to do that, they could have *helped* all those wildcat colonies, instead of scooping them up and dumping them here. The fewer colonies there are, the easier it is to keep them all in line. I’d take that line about it being a ‘test’ with a few tons of salt. *Qubitite salts*.”

“And some celerite for seasoning,” Constantin said. “Seriously. Q and C *don’t* play well together. And they’re both integrated into the systems on this very ship. How in the hell did they do it?”

“However they did it, clearly they want us to find out.” Casseiopia frowned. “Maybe they even *want* us to reverse engineer it and develop it further, so they can steal it back from us down the road.”

“This is far above my pay grade,” the Captain said, starting to shove his chair back. “I think I’m going to go get the medical teams and...wait. This is odd.”

“You’ll have to be more specific, Captain,” Zoey said.

“I wish I could. There’s a room in one of the cargo storage pods. It just up and started flashing when I was looking at the schematic.” He tapped it on the screen, and a small text panel opened up. “Huh. It just says, ‘Attention: Hobbes, Lubyanka, Madeira, Quentin.’ Those names ring a bell to any of you?”

“No, but they do to *me*,” a kangaroo Integrate who had just arrived said. “Greetings. I’m Agent DanSkippy, from System Security. I would have arrived sooner, but I was busy trying to find a tap into this ship’s systems in another module. It’s very locked down. With a type of DINsec I’ve never seen.”

“Add that to a list of tech they’re rubbing in our faces,” Zoey said. “Now, about the names?”

“They’re the names of four RIDEs who had been kidnapped and brought to Earth, then subsequently escaped back to Zharus with the help of an Integrate and four humans,” she said. “Who *happen* to be in the crowd watching all this unfold.”

“Hmph,” Aleka said. “I guess we’d better go fetch them.”

While they waited to find out what was going to happen inside, Tim was

strumming more tunes on his guitar to pass the time, and Kim, Quentin, and Athena had joined in with the singing. Meanwhile, the ship wasn't idle. Some of the modules had unlimbered devices that looked remarkably similar to the construction fabbers used to fast-build small houses for new suburbs on Zharus, and those devices had been hard at work laying the foundations and walls for neat, ordered rows of sleeping quarters. Meanwhile, more cargo pods had entered the buildings that were unloading them.

"Hey, look, Marshal Petrovna's coming out," Charlene said. "And...she's heading right for *us*?" The horse and coyote RIDEs came along on her flanks.

"I'm pinging the Stonegates," Lubyanka said. "Just in case we should need legal representation."

A second later, a pair of white fox Fusers emerged from the Policia mobile HQ and headed that way, arriving just before the Marshals. As they stepped up, the RIDEs' heads slid back, revealing Roy and Arlene's faces. "Hello, Marshal Petrovna!" Roy called out. "It's good to see you again—and good to see *you* in the Real."

"Oh my Lord! It's Roy Stone and Her Honor Judge Gates!" she shouted back.

"Well, it's just 'Esquires,' now—we've started a legal practice in Uplift—but thanks for remembering!" Arlene said. "And speaking of, we noticed you were coming toward a couple of our current clients, and just thought we'd see what was up."

They got close enough so they no longer needed to shout. Aleka shook both their hands. "Well, regardless it's good to see you in the Real. I've had this 'bod for a few years now. Have to say actually *becoming* the woman I was in GVL was more jarring than I expected."

"We know how that is," Arlene said. "It can be jarring on the people around you, too. When we got here and learned our son Ryan was now our *daughter* Rhianna..."

"Rhianna Stone...gate," Zoey drawled. "Huh. Small damned universe. Am I right? She even built a friend of ours a custom brainbox. When she was still a he. Never made the connection."

"We never asked who her parents were, Zoey." Aleka facepalmed. "I'm going to have to stop in at Bea's and have a seven-degrees-of-bacon sandwich next time I'm in Uplift."

Quentin cleared his—or Tim's—throat. "Far be it for me to interrupt the happy reunion, but I'm a little curious why you're here."

"Oh, that," Aleka said. "Well, the fact is...it seems someone left you four kidnapped RIDEs a message inside."

Clara blinked. "Say what now?"

"There's a room in one of the cargo bays marked 'attention' you four RIDEs' names," Zoey said. "We thought we should probably have you on hand when we opened it. If you want to come, that is, it's your choice."

"I'm one curious kitty now," Hobbes said. "But we'd like our partners along, too, if you don't mind. And if *they* don't mind."

"If it's a message to them, it probably concerns us, too," Tom said. "After all, we're the ones who helped them escape. But they didn't have any way of knowing *our* names...we hope."

"They were about to cut into my brain," Hobbes said, shivering. "Honestly, I'm not even sure I *want* to see anything they want to show me...but I don't think I'd be able to live with *not* knowing, either."

"We're with you, Hobbes," Madeira said. "I don't think I want anything Earth

would want to give us either...but if they cared enough to put our names on it...we have to know why.”

“We’ll be there to protect you, of course,” Zoey said. “And you can even bring your lawyers, just in case whatever it is respects a good writ.”

“You’re too kind,” Roy deadpanned.

“Well, let’s go, then,” Lubyanka said. “It’s traveled 20 light-years to reach us; let’s not let it wait any longer.”

The cargo bays in question were not among those being strip-fed into the defrosting complex. These had been positioned as annexes to another building made up of different sections of ship, with carefully ordered corridors connecting them up. They followed the map from the display panel, and finally ended up at the bulkhead hatch to the room in question.

“So...you’re *sure* it’s not going to be some kind of a death trap,” Lubyanka said to Zoey.

“As Aleka said, the purpose of this whole thing is to send messages,” Zoey said. “Booby-trapping it would make for a mixed message, and Earth’s not fond of those.”

“Well, then. Let’s see what we’ve got.” Lubyanka reached out and tapped the “open” key.

It took a while for them to understand what they were even seeing. It seemed to be a series of shelves, with rows of glass jars, ordered by size. The liquid in the jars was bubbling; there were green status lights and digital displays. Then the lights came on, and they got their first good view of what was *in* the jars.

Zoey growled. “Those. Fucking. *Assholes*. They pulled a Fritz!”

Tim felt his gorge rising, then felt the nausea recede as Quentin overrode his vagus nerve. The series of canopic jars contained...body parts, sorted by size. Cheetah-furred hands. Feet. Arms. Legs. Internal organs. Torso. And at the top left, in one of the biggest jars, Cheetara-Harriet’s face stared blankly out at them.

“Call Camelot IntieMed,” Aleka said, voice carefully calm. “Get them here *now*, full burn.”

“On it,” Zoey said. “They’re on the way.”

“And call Quinoa Steader,” Hobbes said. “She’ll...want to know. She may be next of kin, not sure. Fuck! Fuck fuck *fuck fuck!* Those fucking bastards!” he snarled.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Aleka said. “Those are life-support jars, and Integrates are tough. The odds are good she’ll make a full recovery. They found some of Fritz’s victims in the coffeehouse the same way, and most of them are back on their feet now. But...yes, it’s *almost* as bad as it looks.”

“Perhaps physically,” Hobbes said. “Shit. We owe her our lives, Marshal Petrovna.”

“Then that’s why they wanted you eight here,” Zoey said. “This whole thing was about sending messages, and that one was meant for you.”

Tim swallowed, even though he hadn’t actually had to vomit. “Uh...Marshal? There’s...something else you may need to know. When we...rescued the RIDEs, and they hooked up with us, we hid out at a local furry fandom convention—and they figured out we were there, *and* we made a pretty public display of leaving it.

Kim nodded. “Even if they didn’t guess who we were...none of us made any secret that we were furies. If they decided that was the last straw, and declared furies in

general *persona non grata*, and their families...”

Roy spoke up. “*Their* families may be among the passengers. If a roster of the names is available...we’d appreciate if you could run a search.”

“Consider it done,” Aleka said. “For that matter...*any* of us who’ve been exiled in recent years could well have friends and relatives on that roster, if they decided to tighten the sweeps and send people they let slide previously. Six hundred thousand is a lot of dissidents.”

“Another cheerful thought, in a day chock full of them,” Arlene said dryly.

DanSkippy glared at the offending jars and made an angry noise. “I need to go update the Prime Councilor and First Exec what’s going on here. Excuse me. What a *fucking* lovely day this is. I’m going to kick those Terran bastards’ *teeth* in.” He turned and hopped away.

*You’re damn skippy*, Tim thought, but knew better than to say aloud.

## Chapter 4

*Zharustead  
Prime Councilor's Office  
March 25, 159 AL*

“Furthermore, exports of raw quibitite to Earth shall not be subject to any tariff. We will pay fair market commodity price, of course. But any additional export fees or inspections will be regarded as punitive, and retaliatory fees of Terran goods will be assessed,” Terran Ambassador Blomqvist said. “Nor will you attempt to restrict what research or applications we see fit to use it for. Not that we would inform you.”

Michelle Yu had kept her best Diplomatic Face on the entire speech (more of a *rant*), which had over a dozen demands for Zharus to open all sorts of trade barriers, among other things. “Ambassador, as long as we’re making unrealistic demands of one another, how about this? You return every one of our citizens you have kidnapped, unharmed and *intact*.”

“May I remind the esteemed Councilor that you didn’t even *consider* them ‘citizens’ until recently,” Blomqvist said in a voice dripping with condescension. “Now that they are no longer considered ‘equipment’ we will gladly return any of your RIDEs still in our possession. Although some, regrettably, may not be as intact as you would wish. After all, we were simply reverse-engineering ‘equipment’ at the time, and you know what they say about omelets and eggs.”

“There is also the matter of Harriet Steader,” Yu continued. “What you did to her was nothing less than torture.”

“I have it on good medical authority that she was completely unconscious before the process commenced,” Blomqvist said. “*Can* you torture someone who isn’t awake to feel the pain?”

“Irrelevant,” Yu said, anger rising, and more than a little bile. “You *took her apart* like a frog in a twencen high school anatomy class.”

“Oh, *please*. She was an alien spy who committed *multiple* acts of espionage and sabotage. We would have been entirely within the letter of the law to have her executed. Instead, we were *very careful* to deliver her back to you, alive.” He smiled ingratiatingly. “Indeed, *every part of her* is alive and in perfect health, according to the most recent life-support system readouts we had received.”

“*Every part of her* was cut up and stuck in little jars!”

“Granted, but...so what?” He shrugged. “Even that’s not a permanent condition for her kind. You sent her to Camelot, where...how does the old rhyme go? All of the king’s horses and men? But doesn’t King Arthur use *coconuts* instead of horses? It’s very confusing.”

Yu considered her next statements. The eyes of present and future Zharus would be upon her, recorded from two dozen different angles. Whatever might lie down the road—Zharus thriving, or its total destruction—this would be history taught for centuries. To her right was the Eridanite Ambassador, Elena Marino, who had received more or less the same demands on her own colony. She stood up and faced down Blomqvist.

“In other circumstances, Ambassador Blomqvist, your trade proposals might be reasonable, even mutually beneficial. *If* another type of government had proposed them, the whole of settled space might be enjoying a renaissance of science, technology, and trade not seen for centuries. But *yours* is not a government that respects democracy, or freedom, or even bodily autonomy.

“Old Terra had been trending towards totalitarianism for nearly two centuries now. There was a time before that, just after we came out of the Oil Crash, when freedom and democracy prevailed. That’s when *most* of the Colonies were founded, Mr. Ambassador. And we mostly still carry those ideals—with a few notable exceptions. But since a few decades after the founding of Zharus, the slide towards planetary dictatorship on Terra has been unmistakable.

“You are acting in *bad faith*. We will *not* accede to the demands of a government that ships ‘undesirables’ and political dissidents offworld. We will *not* accede to the demands of a government that kidnaps, tortures, and murders the citizens of Zharus. And we will *not* accede to the demands of a government that has the brazen hypocrisy to demand we *still* live under their thumb after so many of Zharus’s newest citizens were expelled from Terra because *they weren’t wanted*. “

Blomqvist’s face turned so red with anger he could only mutter.

“You and your staff are hereby expelled from Zharus, as is our right, per the Zharus Colonial Charter, Section Four, Subsection D, Codicil Gamma. Now get out of my office. We’ll be sending Earth a diplomatic message torpedo regarding your status right...now.”

The Terran Ambassador’s aide whispered something into his ear, probably regarding the veracity of the Charter provision. Michelle knew Huzma’s people had found it completely ironclad. Only a few low level diplomatic staff could be left behind to maintain their Consulates on Laurasia and Gondwana. With any luck, former Ambassador Xenia DeGaulle would be recalled to duty.

“Well then,” Blomqvist said crisply, closing his tablet and standing up. “Terra is pleased to know where Zharus stands, in such admirably plain terms, with punitive actions duly supported by the Charter. We are, after all, a culture based on bare truths with no hidden agendas. My staff and myself will be on the first shuttle to Omphalos. I bid you good day.”

Michelle motioned for him and his people to leave. “Just *go away*.”

When the Terrans had fled and the room was secure again, the Eridanite Ambassador spoke. “That was far more eloquent than *I* would have been, Councilor. Be reassured that Eridani stands with you.”

“Mikel Steader has spent decades building an informal alliance between us,” Michelle said.

“I’ve been authorized by my government to make it formal, should events call for it,” Ambassador Marino said. “And they unquestionably do, Councilor. Our metamaterials may not get along, but that’s no barrier to us, really.”

“Sarium batteries, Q-based processors, and celerite circuitry,” Michelle said. “How is that even possible?”

“We should find out. Earth has already, after all.”

Michelle looked at the latest report from the engineers at the *Steady Hand* landing site. “I should also tell you they’ve found NeoRussian data storage crystals.”

“That makes them three-for-three on metas, then,”

“I’ve summoned the NeoRussian Ambassador,” Abi said. “He’s on his way. But if they were given the same song and dance on NeoRus, we wouldn’t hear about it for weeks.”

“Zheng He, Ibn Rushd, and Kepler don’t have metas,” Michelle said. “At least, that we know about. So it might be just the three of us getting threats.”

“I don’t like where this road leads,” the Eridanite Ambassador said gravely. “But we’re bound to travel on it together, Councilor.”

A heavy silence fell.

The Camelot Integrate trauma team had come and gone, carefully packing all the bottles into padded cases and departing so quickly it was almost as if they’d never been. Aleka and the other Marshals had returned to the command center to see to any other duties, and the four immigrants, two lawyers, and their RIDEs stood off to one side. No one had actually *asked* them to leave, so they decided just to stay out of the way for now in case they were needed again.

Most of the activity involving comings and goings of medical technicians seemed to center around the building that was taking in the stripped cargo pods, so by unspoken assent they started to drift that way. That would presumably be where the first batch of colonists was being awakened, and Roy thought he might be able to trade on his reputation to at least get them a look at the list of names to see if anyone they knew was on it.

But as they started to approach, Aleka and Zoey came running up again. “Oh, good, you’re all still here. We’ve got a problem.”

Roy raised an eyebrow. “One we might be able to help solve?”

“Maybe. Somewhere in all the bureaucracy, everyone thought somebody *else* was going to provide the team of refugee counsellors to be there when the first passengers start waking up. So, nobody did.”

“A classic Nextus BUCU,” Zoey said.

“They’re getting one together *now*, but they’re at least an hour from being ready, and the first batch is coming out of the defrosters in just a few minutes. So we’re going to have to make do with who we’ve got on hand.”

“Which, fortuitously, just happens to include three of the best-known celebrities to have been tossed off the planet in recent years,” Arlene said with a wry smile.

“And four young folks who just happen to be recent refugees themselves,” Lubyanka put in.

“Fortunately, the first batch should only consist of a few dozen people at most,” Aleka said. “The techies tell me that, in a *genuine* colony mission, it would be the chief engineers, medicos, administrators, and so forth, whose job would be to get everything prepped to wake the larger batches.”

“Of course, given that none of these colonists were exactly *willing* as far as we know, and they knew *we’d* be here to handle the heavy lifting, it’s anybody’s guess who’ll be in this one,” Zoe added.

“We’re also canvassing the crowd to see if anyone else with the right expertise came to watch,” Aleka said. “But for now, I guess we’ll be enough.”

“If a few more recent refugees wouldn’t go amiss, there are four human/RIDE pairs out there who’d also be good choices,” Quentin put in. “The Skylers and Charlene McClaren. They were watching the landing with us, and they’re probably still there.”

"I'll go fetch them," Zoey said.

"The First Colonist's here, too? Interesting." Aleka shook her head. "Well, let's go see what we've got to work with."

The awakening room was laid out in a grid of eight rows of eight cryogenic capsules, all of which featured a panoply of blinking lights indicating something was going on. Scrub-suited med-techs circulated among them, checking readouts and peering into the glass lids.

Near the entrance, a display panel listed sixty-four names and ages. Tom stepped up to read down the list, and shook his head. "No one I know, though some of them are about our age, so they could be fellow furrries."

"So, not any of our families," Clara said. "Not sure whether to be disappointed."

"Probably just as well," Tim said. "I mean, it would just be one more thing on top of everything else. If they're here, hopefully we can wait 'til stuff has calmed down more before we get them out." *Like, oh, a couple of years, maybe?* He wasn't even sure whether he was serious or not, but it just occurred to him that maybe staying asleep for a while was the best place for them—just so neither they nor he would have to deal with the...sudden changes. But he felt ashamed of himself for even having the thought—of *course* they should be woken up. He'd just have to deal with what came after that.

Across the room, the indicator lights on the pods started to flick to blue—the wake-up indicator light. The lids started to rise, and medtechs moved to help their occupants sit up.

And as they did, the entire far wall of the room, which had simply been blank, revealed itself to be a giant display screen—by lighting up with the stern, matronly face of Adjutant Priscilla Donahoe.

"I'm *really* starting to hate that woman," Aleka muttered.

"Good morning, everyone! I am Adjutant Priscilla Donahoe. Pursuant to the Significantly Increasing Normality by Nominating, Evacuating, and Recolonizing Subversives Act of 2489, you are all hereby stripped of your Terran citizenship. If you disagree with this decision, you may file an appeal at the nearest Terran embassy."

"Oh, it's *that* bitch again," one of the newly awakened said. He appeared to have the worst hangover ever, with dark circles under his eyes. "Last face I saw in FVL before they shut us down. Where the hell am I again? I'm still a little unclear on that." He turned his head to look at Aleka with an expression of recognition. "And you I remember from GVL."

"Moving on from that, welcome to your new home! As have so many others before you, you have come to the shores of sunny, bright Zharus, where you will be free to begin brand new lives for yourselves out from under the thumb of a government many of you demonstrated that you found too oppressive. Far be it from us to require you to chafe under the rule of a regime you so despise!

"Regrettably we were not able to send your pets or livestock along with you. But rest assured we will do our utmost to rehome rather than euthanize them. We are a *civilized* world, and do not believe in penalizing dumb animals for the misdeeds of their human masters."

"Oh nooo, *Mittens!*" another of the awakened groaned.

"If you look around yourselves, you may find other members of your immediate family, if applicable. If anyone is missing, they may be in another batch of revivals. We

*tried* to batch families together, but that was not always possible. You may wish to check the passenger roster, on display on the settlement's command center. If their names are not on the list, they're probably still back on Earth. But there shouldn't be *too* many such omissions. We did our best to be as thorough as possible.

"Once you are on your feet, please move through the door at my left to the revival lounge. You should find seating and refreshments there—and perhaps some of your new neighbors to welcome you to your new home.

"We of the United Terran Government wish you only the best in your new lives." Donahoe smiled ingratiatingly, then the display winked out.

"I guess we should go ahead and get to the lounge," Tom said. "Probably the best place for talking to everyone at once." As people climbed out of their cryo capsules, the empty capsules sank into the floor, replaced moments later by new, full capsules.

"Probably best," Arlene agreed. "They'll want to clear this room for the next batch." The newly-awakened were still shambling slowly toward the door, so there was plenty of time to get in ahead of them, even just walking at normal speeds.

The lounge was another room of similar size, but this one had big fabbers along the back wall, and a bunch of flat-pack tables and chairs that had probably come out of those very fabbers not long before. A table was set up with glasses of some sort of electrolyte fluids drink. Not too many of the newly awakened seemed interested in them at the moment.

"What the hell is going on?" one man protested. "I'm...on Zharus? They just asked me to come into the tax office for some paperwork, and then I woke up here?"

"I was stopped for a speeding ticket, and then *arrested!*" another complained.

"We're really *on Zharus?*" one teenager said. "And we didn't even have to pay for tickets? Hella *sweet!*"

Aleka and the Stonegates stepped up to the front of the room. "Hey, everyone, could we have your attention?"

"Who're you?"

"What does *she* want?"

"Hey...isn't that Aleka Petrovna?"

"No way—she was a *guy* in the Real."

The two fox RIDEs de-Fused from the Stonegates, so they were more plainly visible. "Some of you might recognize *us*, at least..." Roy observed.

Their appearance served to bring more of a hush. Aleka had been known in certain circles, but the story of the two otherwise-*normal* people who took a moral stand had drawn nearly everyone's attention on the news when they had been deported.

"Yes, you're on Zharus. Welcome, everyone," Arlene said. "We realize you didn't expect to end up here, but we hope you'll be able to make the best of it." As she spoke, Tim noticed the Skylers and Charlene coming in at the back of the room.

A portly man snorted with derision. "No. Just no. This is some kind of prank. My hacker friend got into my implant again. Zharus? Bullshit! Larry's been wanting to drag me there for years. It's just a goddamn VL sim."

"Sorry, Ed, it wasn't me." Another man, this one with cougar ears and tail, stepped forward. "It looks like they got me, too."

"And you're just the first of many," Charlene put in from the side. "This ship carried six hundred thousand of you. You're just the first to wake up."

"FVL was just something I did for fun," Ed went on. "After work. You know, blow

off a little steam. “ He looked at Aleka again, now blushing a little.

“I know what that expression means,” Aleka said. “But here you’re among friends. Go ahead.”

“I...was more into genderplay than the furry stuff,” Ed admitted.

“You *did* make a very nice cougar, Ed,” Larry said without a hint of mocking in his tone.

“Well, I...uh...” More blushing.

“The hella cool thing is, you don’t have anything keeping you from bringing that into the Real now,” Jamie Skyler said. “If you want. No more looking over your shoulder or keeping it ‘toned down.’ And they even bought your ticket.”

“Er,” Ed said.

“No pressure from me,” Larry said. “Promise.”

There was a sound of pure disgust from another woman. “So, you people are why I’m here? My brother was into this...stuff. I never was. He went for a vacation on Zharus and stayed there. Here. When I find him I’m going to *strangle* that little—” She clenched her fists. She glared at Arlene and Roy. “You two are just the *worst*, do you hear me? You ruined my life!”

“Oh, come on now,” Kelly said. “How about blaming the ones who actually *drugged you and stuck you in a spaceship?*”

“I was a model citizen,” she declared. “If my brother hadn’t been into this...stuff, I’d still be home. I honestly didn’t *care* what he was into.”

“It’s only a model,” Tim declared in *sotto voce* English accent.

Kim giggled. “Working at the Steader Archive is *ruining* you, you know that?”

“Actually, I think it’s the influence of all the Camelot folks I hang with online. It is a silly place.”

“If you can be a ‘model citizen’ and even that’s still not good enough for your government, maybe it’s just as well you’re not there anymore,” Dana observed. “We were more or less model citizens back home ourselves. Didn’t rock the boat, didn’t have any subversive hobbies. But we had a little tourist accident and couldn’t go back to Earth ourselves, and all in all we found it wasn’t so bad. Maybe you will, too, once the shock wears off. And who knows how many of your friends and family are here now too?”

“But...my life back home. Everything I worked so hard to build...”

“You can build it again, better,” Kelly said. “Try to look on the bright side. You’re not in jail, or a gulag, or a re-education camp. You’re on a friendly, welcoming planet with a less oppressive government and events opportunities. They threw you in the briar patch. Get back on your feet and make something new with your life.”

“I guess it’s not as if I have a choice...” the woman mumbled, somewhat mollified.

“Next group is ready,” a med-tech from the wake-up room said.

“We’ve got plenty of room, send them in,” Aleka replied. “Please, everyone, have some refreshments. You haven’t eaten in over a year.”

There was some nervous laughter at that, but a few people did step forward to try the cups of blue juice or order something from the fabber.

“When it gets too full, come on outside.” Aleka inducted a door nearby leading out to a sunlit patch of excavation dirt. “Maybe grab a chair or something. We’ll have a professional counseling team here in an hour or so, but meanwhile we’ll all be available to talk and field your questions about getting used to life on Zharus.”

“Just...what sort of ‘tourist accident’ was it?” Ed said. It sounded as if he’d figured it out and just wanted confirmation.

“The kind of thing you probably read about in official warnings,” Dana Skyler said. “Involving ore pirates marooning us in the Dry Ocean at sunset without any protective gear. Also, an idiot husband and a hot-tempered wife. Long story.”

“Ah. Well. Okay,” Ed said. “Thanks. Excuse me.” He walked over to the refreshment table.

“Maybe find me later, I’ll go into details. *Bon appetit.*”

The next hour saw three more batches of awakened dissidents, each about the same small size. The techs were taking it slowly and making sure they had the bugs worked out before they cranked it up—not to mention giving the counselling teams more time to arrive. Tim hoped they brought an army of them, as many people as were going to be needing it.

Somewhere along the way, they’d mostly moved outside, with Aleka and the Stonegates staying in the lounge to welcome the new arrivals. As for the sixteen of them, the eight humans and eight RIDEs, they’d spread out and de-Fused, and were *just about* able to fill the conversational needs of everyone who felt like talking. Jamie in particular had managed to strike up conversations with a group of boys and girls the same age, and she and Athena were demonstrating some of the finer points of Fusing and mode-switching.

Most of the crowds who’d gathered to watch the landing had dispersed, now that nothing more exciting was happening than “ordinary” construction-fabbing. That was just as well, as it gave more room for the crowds emerging from the defrosting complex to spread out—and the crowds of counselors and bureaucrats from Nextus to move in and set up operations. The Nextus Admin team had claimed the first several completed housing structures as their offices, and were cycling lines of people through to set them up with Zharus ID and permanent comm numbers and Basic Accommodation stipends. They probably had their work cut out for them.

Nextus had asked the other polities to allow them to supervise the landing, and they had largely agreed, but now that the ship was down and dismantling itself, Tim expected the others would be showing up with bells on, and within a couple of days the place would look like a state fair with tents everywhere for each and every polity to run its very own recruiting sideshow. *Just as well this was a one-way trip, or they might just scare some of these people right back off the planet again.*

Now that the professional counselors were here, Tim expected to be politely told to get lost, but they didn’t seem to be interested in shoving them out. In fact, the ones he talked to seemed genuinely glad they were here, as practical examples of naturalized refugees to supplement their professional veneer.

“Well, great. We’ll stay until you kick us out.”

“Hope you brought a toothbrush,” the lynx-tagged Nextus Corpsman said. “Because if that’s the case, you could be here for a while.”

The reactions of the new arrivals ran the gamut from delight, to to anger, to acceptance, to a few who just stood there staring at everything in states of shock. Many of them asked the same questions of him over and over, but Tim didn’t mind answering. They were a lot of the same questions *he’d* had when he arrived, so he could answer them from direct experience. “Yes, you do have to wait three years before you could

change back. Yes, ma'am, it is different peeing standing up. No, there's nothing 'artificial' about RIDEs' intelligence, it's the real deal. No, not *every* girl on Zharus is a crossrider, it just *seems* that way. And some of us guys are, too."

Of course, it was the RIDEs and Integrates that drew most of the furry refugees' attention. *Especially* if said RIDE or Integrate happened to be the species of their chosen fursona. Tim overheard a conversation among the Admin staff at one of the Basic recruitment offices that suggested a number of RIDE creches and dealerships might also be setting up here the next day—even RIDEalong RIDEworks with their "unhatched" traditionally-booted RIDEs for anyone who wanted to try Fusing. Tim hoped they would make every effort to explain the long-term consequences of cross-Fusing before they let anyone try it.

*:Eh. No big deal. Not like it's permanent, right, big guy?:* Quentin said, picking up on his partner's thoughts.

*:Well, it might be a big deal to them.:* Tim shrugged. *:Eh, well, what happens happens.:*

They stayed to help out well until after midnight—then when they got tired, they Fused up for a good night's rest while their partners carried on the getting-acquainted work on their behalf. This was going to take a while.

## Chapter 5

### *Camelot Integrate Medical Center (CIMC)*

“This is going to take a lot of effort, Artemis. Are you certain you want to do this?”

“SysSec needs to know what she knows. I’m the only one who can heal her fast enough,” Artemis said. The deer and the dolphin walked down the dragon-sized hospital corridor. “Otherwise it’ll be months, or perhaps never.” Some victims of Fritz’s beheading (or, rather, *bebodying*, since their heads were what was *left*) were still comatose and healing nearly three years later, having been in that condition for decades. Artemis had sped things up as much as she could, but without all their parts it was slow going. As a shapeshifter, Artemis’s own regeneration from the neck down had taken mere weeks. “Harriet’s parts are all still there and have only been in suspension for less than a year. All I have to do is give her Fusers a nudge.

“But I do have to *touch* them for this to work, Doctor Nayme. I’ll do what must be done to bring her back.”

The doctor nodded. “You don’t *have* to do this, you know. You’ve already done so much...”

Artemis shook her head. “I did *too* much, before. Anything I can do now will still never be enough to make up for it. But I must still try. Is everything ready?”

“It is,” the doctor said. “The jars are arranged as you requested, the healing tank is prepped, and your assistants are standing by.”

“Then I will begin.” She cracked her knuckles, then walked into the large healing tank until she was up to her waist in translucent fabber goop. She raised her arms, extending lifter fields towards the jars.

The Terrans hadn’t disassembled Harriet completely—they’d left her head completely intact and her skin was mostly in place. The largest jar held her vivisected torso, others contained arms, legs, hands, tail, and feet. Then came her internal organs. Heart, lungs, stomach, intestines, what Integrates still (mostly) shared with humans. Then there were the technorganic organs specific to Integrates—lifters, sarium batteries, q-based co-processors, hardlight lenses (weapons and shielding). She floated each into place, touching each part once before doing so, supercharging the nanites that infused every part of an Integrate’s body.

Each dismembered part recognized where it had been cut free, the edges reaching out to their former neighbors and adhering together, sealing without a scar on the inside. Once the internals were complete, she pulled the edges of Harriet’s skin together where it had been cut apart.

There were times when Artemis still felt the old, godly delusion around the edges of her thoughts. Doing this kind of work made it quite strong. She was a Greek goddess breathing life back into a dead form. Artemis was more than an epithet—it was her RIDE half’s name, which hadn’t helped the mental illness that developed.

Being aware of it let her resist it, of course. In a way, it also helped that the Greek myths were full of sinners laboring under eternal punishment for their crimes—Sisyphus, Tantalus, Prometheus, and so on. She just shifted her focus to those stories,

and found they suited her just as well.

Finally, Harriet's head rejoined her neck.

There was still one more step. She had to make the reassembled body realize it was whole again. Gently, she pushed the cheetah Integrate out into the center of the tank, floating on her back. The slimy liquid was up to her neck now. She washed it over Harriet's body, then gently grabbed the reassembled Integrate by her shoulders, taking a deep breath.

Deep inside, she felt the code of her own Fusers awaken, surging into Harriet. Before, she had used this trick to do evil things to her followers. Change their sex. Make their minds malleable. To make them sing her praises. She knew now it was because she'd caught a Greek mythology meme complex *bad*. But that never excused her actions.

Harriet breathed in sharply. Her eyes snapped open. Then she started to flail. And *scream*. "Bastards! Bastards! *Get your hands off me!*"

"Need a little help in here!" Artemis shouted. The doe Integrate looked up at the orderlies. A small dragon and a rhino lifted over and wrapped Harriet up in a restraining field so she wouldn't hurt herself. "Doctor Nayme, could use your help in here, too."

"Right." The dolphin Integrate dove into the tank, coming up in front of Harriet. "Disoriented, but I think we can get her to ICU for observation. Well done, Artemis."

Artemis lowered her eyes. "Only doing my job. The important thing is that she be healed."

Dr. Nayme nodded. "Thanks to you, she will be."

"I'll look in on her a little later," Artemis said. "For now, I need to clean up and recenter myself." She lifted out of the tank, using lifter fields to squeeze most of the fabricator goo out of her fur, and pulled a robe from a hook at one side of the room over to her. "I'll see you soon."

*March 26, 159 AL*

The next morning, the eight Earth expatriates and their RIDEs got together for breakfast at one of the many picnic tables that had been set up for the newly awakened. While they were eating food from communal fabbers, and discussing how the events of the day had gone, Aleka and Zoey stopped by. "Good news—we've heard that Camelot did an amazing job of putting your friend Harriet back together again. We're flying up to see if she's in any shape for System Security to visit, and thought you eight—" she nodded to the four Earth furries and their RIDE partners "—might want to tag along."

"You bet!" Clara said.

"We owe her our lives," Hobbes said. "Of course we do." The others chimed in with similar expressions of assent.

"Great. Finish your breakfast, then meet us at the airfield over there in half an hour."

Madeira nodded. "We'll be there."

*CIMC ICU*

Clara wasn't quite sure what to expect on approach. She'd never been to Camelot before. The Enclave was originally built into a cave complex under a feature called

Rampart Ridge, but since Fritz's removal it had burst from underground and turned the area into a medieval-esque city with touches of modern architecture, all protected by nearly invisible climate domes. Verdant gardens overlooked the Dry Ocean from many a balcony.

They landed in a small berth in one of Camelot's many, many docking areas, and headed into the network of caves where the Enclave still kept its most vulnerable areas, including its medical complex. They turned a corner into the waiting room, to find a pair of Integrates waiting outside a glassed-in medical room. On the left, a deer in a toga. On the right, Quinoa Steader.

Aleka nodded to them. "Quinoa. Artemis. How is she?"

"She's been sleeping peacefully all night, since I reassembled her," Artemis said. "The healing sleep is good for her, but she should be awakened soon for feeding and changing her bedding out, and that also seemed the best time for a visit. A *brief* visit, mind you—I don't want her being overtaxed."

"Believe me, I don't want that either," Quinoa said. "I just want to see her again, and talk to her. Or whoever she is now."

Artemis nodded. "No more than three visitors. She'll be able to *see* the rest of you through the glass, and you can see and hear them, but I don't want you crowding her."

"Seems fair," Tom said. "Clara, you and Lubyanka met her first. Why don't you two go, along with Quinoa."

"All right," Clara said. "If Quinoa doesn't mind."

"Sure." Quinoa glanced to Artemis. "May we?"

The deer nodded. "Come, then." She opened the door and went in, and Quinoa, Clara, and Lubyanka followed.

Clara shuddered as they approached. Harriet was looking much better now, but her body was still criss-crossed by a web of scar tissue, and she couldn't help remembering all those ghastly bottles.

Artemis leaned over Harriet, then stepped back, and a moment later the cheetah-woman's eyes flickered open. "Huh...wha..."

"Relax," Artemis said. "You're safe now. You're in Camelot, on Zharus."

"I...why can't I move?" she rasped.

"We have a paralysis field on you just now. We didn't want you to thrash about and injure yourself until we could explain to you that you are *safe* now. Those who hurt you are light-years away."

Harriet's eyes widened. "Camelot...an Enclave. Oh God. Does...does Fritz know I'm back?"

"When were you last on Zharus, Harriet?" Artemis said. "Things have changed. A great deal. Fritz is no longer a problem for *any* of us." She smiled tightly. "I wouldn't be here if he were. I spent years on the top shelf of his trophy room."

"He...killed my favorite aunt. Couldn't...stay where he was in charge." She sighed.

"He's not in charge of anything now, except his own prison cell," Quinoa said, stepping forward. "Hey, 'Harold.' Remember me?"

Harriet blinked. "You...seem familiar..."

Quinoa raised an eyebrow. "You tried to foist KITTY off on me, and you don't know who I am?"

The cheetah-woman's eyes widened. "Quinoa?"

"In the flesh-and-metal." Quinoa spread her wings for a moment. "I never

thought I'd say this about *Harold Steader*, but...I'm glad you're okay."

"For...*some* meaning of 'okay.' Nnngh...I ache...in places where I'm not supposed to *feel*."

"The scar tissue will take a few days to begin repairing itself," Artemis said. "It's a side effect of me supercharging your Fusers to put you back together. I'm afraid it's worse than if we'd let you heal 'naturally'. But we need you awake and on the mend."

Clara felt the time was right for her to step forward now. "Hey again, 'Harritara,'" She waved, and reached down to pat Lubyanka on the head.

Harriet blinked at them, then looked up at the glass, seeing the others beyond it for the first time. "Humans...RIDEs...in an Enclave? Things *have* changed."

"We just thought you'd want to know...your plan worked. We ended up in Crazy Joe's back yard...along with several tons of durian fruit, I hear."

Harriet laughed, until she started coughing and had to catch her breath. "Really? That must have been something to see...and smell..."

Clara grinned. "Julius wouldn't ever let us hear the end of it. Always kept sneezing and wrinkling his nose whenever we're around, like he can somehow *smell* the stuff on us."

Harriet stared at her. "*Julius?* But...he *died*. At...the end of the war..."

Quinoa smiled. "He got better. Heh...sorry, couldn't resist that line, this being where it is. Seriously, it's...a long story. I'll share it when *you're* feeling better."

"How did...I get back here?"

"I think that explanation would be more than you can take right now," Artemis said.

"Last I remember..." Harriet shivered. "No, not going to remember...right now."

"We found you in the a cargo module of a colony ship Earth decided to send us," Lubyanka said.

"Let's take this one step at a time," Artemis cautioned.

"It'll do...for now." Harriet yawned. "Really...want to sleep. Can I sleep now, Doctor?"

"Let us get you up for just a moment so we can change out your bedding. And we have some light foods, if you feel you could keep something down. Then, yes. You can sleep. Your friends can return another day."

Clara shivered as she came back out with Lubyanka. "That...wow. I'm glad she's back, and hope she's better soon. But she's just so...I mean..."

"*Da*," Lubyanka said. "On Earth, she was full of life...and full of *herself*. Seeing her so weak, fragile..."

"She'll get better," Quinoa said. "We Integrates are tough. Give it a few days, and she'll be...well, as close to her old self as she'll be able to get. Which will hopefully be pretty close."

"We should fly back to the *Steady Hand* until she's better able to receive visitors," Aleka said. "The rest of you are more than welcome to come back whenever we do."

"I'll be staying here for now," Quinoa said. "But I'll see you when you come back."

## Chapter 6

*Artesia River Valley*

*Steady Hand Landing Village (And Zharus Welcome Party)*

*March 29, 159 AL*

A week after landing, there was nearly no sign that the complex of prefab buildings had ever been a 2,500 meter spaceship. A 500-meter tower remained, which acted as the high point for communication equipment controlling the construction drones.

The local soils were rich in silica, aluminum, and rare earths, and there was an iron ore deposit nearby. Earthmoving equipment were busy stripmining the land, dumping the raw material into gigantic fabber hoppers, using Zharus's own nano-fabrication technology to disassemble it. Dirt went in, was converted to fabber matter, which was then piped to the massive printers creating the settlement. There were already sufficient homes for ten thousand, mainly as modular apartment blocks rather than single family homes.

"Is this how Landing City was built?" Jamie Skyler asked Charlene.

Charlene shook her head. "No, we didn't have this kind of fab tech back then. I wasn't around when it was *being* built, of course, but I remember reading in articles at the time that the engines would turn into a smelter that would melt down the unneeded parts of the ship and reforge them into metal girders and plates and nuts and bolts and such for use in construction the old-fashioned way. Plus there were two pure cargo ships the same size for every one carrying people. Not to mention the Neumonformers that were sent ahead to clear the way."

Clara checked the timer Lubyanka had set. Today was the day the four were dreading. Whether it was by coincidence or intention, all three of their families were scheduled to be woken shortly, all together. It was *probably* coincidental—the three families all came from the same region back on earth, and they'd been connected through their kids who knew each other, so the awakening-scheduling algorithm would have had sufficient reason to place them together. There was no reason to expect the Earth authorities knew about Clara and friends' roles in freeing the RIDEs, or their names would have been on the door of Harriet's closet along with the RIDEs'.

Still, it was *tempting* to posit this as another one of Old Terra's grandstanding messages. Let them be mustache-twirling evil all the way to the bone.

She and the other four were waiting just outside what had come to be called the "Defrosting Lounge" with their RIDEs. The Skylers and Charlene had shown up, too, as moral support. Not too far away, the Stonegates and their foxes were talking to a distinguished-looking man with elk ears, who was absently stroking the neck of the elk RIDE standing next to him.

The lawyers had promised to be on hand when their parents awoke to provide legal as well as moral support, but that they seemed to know someone else here too was interesting. And satisfying curiosity would at least distract her from waiting for the timer to tick down the last few minutes. She wandered over that direction.

"...will, I fear, probably not be best pleased with me," the stranger was saying—

his tones and locution reminding Clara of an old college professor she used to know. “For *existing*, if for no other reason...”

“Hey,” Clara called as she approached. “What’s up?”

“Clara, hello,” Arlene said. “This is my eldest—and right now *only*—son, Ferris, and his partner, Franklin.”

“Pleased to meet you. You’ve got someone coming in this shipment, too?”

“Ferris’s ex-wife and children. They’re coming out about two batches before the one with your families in it. We only just found out,” Roy said. “We were so busy focusing on searches for everyone else’s families in the roster that we quite forgot our own.”

“Happily, my children still bear my surname, even if my former wife does not.” Ferris smiled wryly. “When the technicians noticed the names on the roster for today, they were considerate enough to notify my parents in case there was a connection to them.”

“This caught us all by surprise,” Arlene said.

Clara smiled faintly. “Something tells me this is going to be a day for surprises all around.”

“At least this is a reasonably pleasant one,” Ferris said. “We had been concerned for some time about how we might convince them to emigrate, but it turns out the government did the job for us. I suppose I can no longer say they never did anything for me.”

“I do believe I see them now,” Franklin said. “At least, going by your recollections of them, and the photo you kept in your wallet.” He nodded toward the exit from the lounge, through which people were slowly emerging. Among them were a brown-haired woman, with a tow-headed teenager and a young girl who looked much like a smaller version of her mother.

The children were wearing pajamas, and the woman was in a nightgown wearing a fabled trenchcoat over it. The passengers had been frozen in whatever clothing they’d been wearing at the time they’d been taken, and a significant number of them had been wearing night clothes, or even no clothes at all—presumably it was easier for the Earth police to execute capture raids when they could simply flood the house with gas while their victims slept. In that light, the counselling staff had taken to using the lounge fadders to build up stocks of covering clothing in various sizes that they could offer to the newly-awakened.

The woman scanned the crowd in the waiting area outside the lounge. It didn’t take long for her eyes to fall on Ferris. The new elk ears, antler stubs, and even the cervine nose were not sufficient disguise to render him unrecognizable. “*You*,” she said. “I might have *known* you’d have something to do with this.”

“Not *directly*, my dear,” Ferris said. “But I came immediately when I learned you were here. Hello, Marjorie, Vickie, Cecil. I’ve missed you all. Regardless of how we might feel about one another, Marjorie, I’m glad you’re here.”

“Daddeeee!!!” the children chorused, running to him. He knelt to catch them in a hug, one in each arm.

Ferris shed some tears. “It’s been far too long since Earth. You’ve both grown up so much. It took three years for us to reach Zharus on a half dozen tramp freighters.”

“Where are we, Daddy?” Vickie asked. “I went to bed, and then we were here. Where’s here?”

“Zharus, honey. You’re on Zharus. And your Daddy has some fuzzy ears and a funny nose now, and a new friend who gave them to him.”

Marjorie crossed her arms. “I suppose I *do* have to admit, the look suits you. And that nose! You look like a college professor satyr.”

“I have Anthropology Adjunct Faculty status in a couple of polity universities here. Nothing permanent yet, but the tenure process is no less difficult on Zharus than it is on Earth.” He flicked his ears. “And they do look fine on me. Don’t they, Franklin?”

“They do indeed,” the elk RIDE said, stepping forwards. “Hello, Marjorie. I’m Franklin, your former husband’s keeper, so to speak.”

Surprisingly, Marjorie didn’t even stare at him like many of the freshly-defrosted did. “Franklin the elk? *Roosevelt* elk? As in Franklin Delano Roosevelt? You sound like him in those history viddies.”

“The very same. Those who created me had a rather...punny sense of humor, let’s say,” Franklin said.

“And you’re a RIDE. So this really is Zharus.” She looked up at the sky. “They came for us while we slept, Ferris. My last memory is going to bed for the night, then suddenly that...*woman* is giving me a speech from that screen.” She put her hand over her eyes. “All we have are the bedclothes on our backs. I had a *thriving* home design business! Gone! Family mementos, heirlooms, the childrens’ toys, our pets...*all gone!*”

“I’m sorry,” Ferris said.

Marjorie rolled her eyes. “And you’re still too *nice* to say ‘I told you so.’ If I’d thrown in with you lot when you left like you asked, I could at least have brought the mementos and heirlooms.”

“What good would it do for me to rub your nose in something smelly? We can’t change the past. We can only build for the future.” Ferris shrugged. “I know you’ve found my habits irritating, but I’ve always meant you well. Even if I *didn’t* still care for you, you are the mother of our children.”

“I’m standing right here, Dad,” Cecil said.

“You can count on us to do all we can to help as well,” Roy said. “None of us have a lot of money, but we do at least have connections.”

“Oh, hello Roy,” Marjorie said. She raised one eyebrow. “Nice foxy ears.”

“We’re a matched set,” Arlene put in.

“Never thought of you two as furries. But this is Zharus, so I suppose everyone can be a furry.”

“Including us furries,” Clara said. “Hi. Clara Martin, recent exile from Earth myself. And my friend, Lubyanka.”

“*Clara* Martin? There was a big to-do about a ‘Clark Martin’ in FVL a few months...uh...last year. Apparently you vanished completely from the net after the F3 convention in Springfield. Combined with the news blackout around the convention, it was the source of endless rumors.”

Ferris looked puzzled. “Marjorie?”

Vickie whispered in her Dad’s ear. “Mom’s a furry. A dragony kitty cat.”

Ferris stared at his ex-wife. “Really? I never saw any hints of this when we were married.”

Marjorie threw up her hands. “I’d be a lot angerier about this if I *wasn’t*, you know. Besides, I only picked up on it after the divorce. Had no reason to tell you about my new hobby. Then they forced you to leave the planet.”

“Guilty as charged, I’m afraid,” Clara said. “It may even be why you-all ended up...*here*. Thanks to Luby, here...” She shrugged. “Can tell you later, if you want. Right now, my friends and I are waiting on family of our own. They should be out in another twenty minutes or so...and I don’t know if *our* reunions will be this friendly.”

“So, everyone on that ship was a furry, or the family of a furry?” Marjorie said.

“Well, not *everyone*,” Lubyanka put in. “I doubt there were *that* many furries on Earth, from the research I did while I was there. But there were plenty of other oddballs and dissidents of other kinds they could shove in while they were at it. Like combining shipments when you order from an online auction.”

Vickie tugged on her father’s sleeve. “I’m hungry. Can we get something to eat?”

“Of course,” Ferris said. “They’ve constructed a few cafeterias for the freshly thawed. We can have a family meal and discuss what comes next.”

“That sounds like a marvelous idea,” Roy said. “We’ll join you in a while—we promised Clara and her friends to be around for moral support when they meet their own families.”

“We have just a *little* experience when it comes to arriving on Zharus to find your children dramatically changed,” Arlene added.

Clara smiled at them. “Thanks,” she said. Then she nodded to Marjorie. “Best of luck with things. Oh...when you get comms, buzz me? Your ex-in-laws have my number. My friends and I work at the Steader Archive, and we’ve put together some bundles of furry media I think you’ll be interested in.”

“We’ll surely do so. It was nice meeting you Clara, Lubyanka.” Ferris lifted Vickie up so she could ride on Franklin’s back. “I hope the reunion with your own family goes much better than you fear.”

“Thanks. Take care.” Clara nodded to them, and then she and Lubyanka wandered back over to wait with the others. Clara savored the nice feeling from meeting a fellow furry friend of friends while it lasted, because she had her doubts it would last long past the next half hour.

She went to find her friends, and found them sitting in a Fuser-sized picnic table with Athena and Jamie Skyler. Tim and Quentin had become quite attached to the guitar Kim had bought, *despite* Clara giving him a much better one as a wedding present. But they were good singers, so Clara didn’t mind. Their current tune was new to her ears. Athena danced to it, and she was *very* good at keeping to the music. Fiona and Madeira danced with her. But there were so many other RIDEs and Integrates that a trio of dancing vixens weren’t even drawing a crowd. Tim and Quentin’s voices sung together.

*Para bailar La Bamba  
Para bailar La Bamba  
Se necessita una poca de gracia  
Una poca de gracia  
Para mi, para ti, ay arriba, ay arriba  
Ay, arriba arriba  
Por ti sere, por ti sere, por ti sere*

*Yo no soy marinero  
Yo no soy marinero, soy capitan*

*Soy capitan, soy capitan*  
*Bamba, bamba*  
*Bamba, bamba*

It was a cheerful little song, and brought a little smile to her face even if it did feel kind of like whistling in the dark against the knowledge of what was to come.

And, really, what did it matter? Her parents had always told Clark they'd love him *no matter what*. And she imagined her friends' parents had told them the same thing, because that was just what parents *did*. If they really meant it, she was just about to put it to the test. If they hadn't...well, that would be good to know, too.

Tom sat on another bench, Hobbes resting his giant head on his lap, eyes closed, with a deep bass rumble-purr. Everyone knew tigers weren't supposed to be able to purr, but there was a point where realism had to give way to a large, cuddly robotic kitty cat. Tom stroked the friendly tiger between his ears. Clara felt a *warmth*, looking at Tom.

:*Perhaps I might also give you something warm and furry to pet?:* Lubyanka suggested, putting her head under her right hand. Smiling, Clara sat down next to Tom, then obligingly stroked the giant grey shewolf. :*Now, the waiting.:*

The thawed came out of the lounge at a steady pace. Some gave a little cheer and dance as they came outside, then excitedly went in the direction the Nexus docents pointed them. Beyond the Zharus ID registration was a series of tents and exhibits resembling a swap meet-slash-jobs fair. There were information booths for dozens of companies from cosmopolitan Florencia in Laurasia to art colony Burnside on Gondwana's west coast. Even Camelot had a tent—a very *large* one, on account of the dragons. All Zharus had rolled out the welcome mat for Old Terra's rejects.

Others were just confused, distraught, looking at the sky with more than a little fear. The eagle-eyed counselors spotted them immediately and rushed to their sides. But it wasn't all excitement or confusion. Five minutes were left on the timer when they heard a furious shout that made the activity outside come to a halt. "YOU BITCH!" then the sound of a commotion inside. A couple security officers rushed in.

Arlene sighed. "That...sounds very bad."

"Very," Valda agreed. "There might be a delay before your families come out."

"That woman is *so* going to get what's coming to her someday," Clara muttered. "Really easy to be all self-righteous from 20 light-years away..."

"I'm still kind of awed at the chutzpah of saying they were *civilized* 'cuz they were going to be sure and take care of peoples' *pets*," Dana said. "I can't believe I used to be happy living there."

"I'm *ashamed* I used to be happy living there," Kelly replied. "It was just so easy to close our eyes and ears to what was going on as long as it didn't touch *us*."

"Well, that's not exactly a problem any of us are going to have again," Jamie said. "Thank heavens for small favors, huh?"

A couple of minutes later, a couple of orderlies carried a stretcher out with a very tranquilized man on it. Tom glanced at him as they passed. "Nobody we know."

"They'll set him up for some VR counselling, probably," Kelly guessed. "Not a surprising reaction. Really, I'm surprised there aren't more like that."

"There's been reports of some of the thawed in the same family attacking whoever they thought was responsible for their expulsion, hence the security," Darrik

said.

“Last group before your families are some unfortunates in brainboxes,” Roy said. “I understand most of those were ‘lifestylers’ who either spent all of their time in FVL or had body replacement ‘zoots’ they wore on a daily basis.”

“They’re as close as you could get to RIDE Fusing on Earth,” Clara said.

“*Da*. Saw many at F3 before went pear-shaped,” Lubyanka added. “Impressive for such limitations in technology.”

“They’ll be taken out a different exit by medicos,” Arlene said. “So the next group out should be it.”

“Of course, depending on how many decide to stay longer in the lounge, we probably won’t get them all at once...so who do you suppose will come out first?” Tim wondered.

“We’re about to find out,” Clara said. “Look.”

The door opened again, and people started filing out. All four of them watched carefully—and then, there they were. A dark-haired, clean-shaven man who looked a lot like Tom, only older, with touches of grey at his temples. He was wearing a business suit of recent Terran cut that the freeze-and-thaw process had left looking moderately rumpled, and he wore an expression of utter bewilderment. To his right was a woman of similar age with dark, curly hair, in sweats with a rabbit on the shirt, looking similarly numb. Between them was a blonde-haired girl of about 15, in a blue sundress, who was looking around excitedly.

They seemed to be too stunned to do much other than shuffle forward, and certainly weren’t looking for familiar faces. So it was down to the girl to say, “Omigod. Is that *Tom*? Tom!”

*That* snapped her parents out of shock double-time. “Tom?” The father said. “Tom, is that you?”

“Afraid so, Dad. It’s...good to see you aga—” He wasn’t able to complete the sentence before he was caught up in a double-hug by his astonished parents.

“What *happened* to you? Where have you been? You just...disappeared!” his mother said. “We were so *worried!*”

“Except for that thing in that Kansas City warehouse,” the girl said. “But we thought that was an image-matching false-positive. The security camera footage was fuzzy...”

“Uh...yeah. It’s...kind of a long story.” Tom glanced over his shoulder at the others. “Oh hey, everyone, these are my Dad, Cary Lane, my Mom, Leigh, and my kid sister, Penny. Introductions in the other direction will *probably* take a while.”

“Is Kip here, too?” Leigh asked, looking around. “I don’t see him...”

“Uh...yeah,” Tom said again. “About that...he had an accident. Nothing serious!” he hastened to add, seeing his parents’ stricken expression. “He’s perfectly all right. It’s just...you might not recognize him. Er...that is, *her*.” He motioned Kim forward. “Mom, Dad, Sis...this is my *new* sis...*Kim* Lane.”

Kim swallowed hard and took a step forward. “Uh...hi, Mom...Dad. I know I look different, but...I’m still me, really.”

Leigh stared at her. “Kip?” She tilted her head. “Oh my God, you *are*. I can see it. You have your grandmother’s eyes.”

“It was kind of an accident, really, and—oof!” Her mother pulled her into a hug as well.

“The police wouldn’t tell us *anything*,” Cary said. “Even *me*.”

“Worst year of my *life*,” Penny said. “Tom and Kip—uh, Kim, missing, maybe even dead. Mom and Dad going nuts. Those spooky guys coming to visit and talk with Mom and Dad a couple times.”

“What about your friend, Tom? Clark? Did *he* get caught up in whatever you did?” Leigh said. “I saw his parents in that defrosting lounge, but they didn’t feel like talking.”

“And Kip’s girlfriend?” Penny added. Then she looked at the others standing around and blinked. “Oh. *Ohhhhhh*.” She pointed at Clara. “Bet’cha *you’re* Clark...” and she pointed at Tim “...and *you’re* Tina.”

“It was kind of an accident,” Tim said. “I’m Tim, and that’s Clara, now.”

“Kind of an accident-on-purpose,” Kim said. “It’s...a bit of a long story, and kind of embarrassing. But...we can change back in a couple years. If we want to.” She grunted. “Mom, you’re squishing me.”

“I’m sorry, honey. I’m just happy you’re alive.” She let go.

“I’m not sure *why* we’re here,” Cary said. “I know what that crazy lady on the screen said. Sounded like pure distilled BS to me. This is supposed to be Zharus, huh?” He looked at Hobbes, as if seeing the tiger for the first time. Then Madeira and the other foxes. Then Lubyanka. “Yeah. This is Zharus. Maybe it wasn’t BS.”

“It’s Earth casting its nets wide, as usual, to snare everyone remotely connected to putative ‘dissidents,’” Roy said. “By the way, I’m Roy Stone, and this is my wife Arlene Gates.”

“Pleased to meet you, Lane family,” Arlene said, extending her hand.

Cary raised an eyebrow, before shaking her offered hand. “I recognize *you*. Public dissidents numbers one and two. I see my children are still making subversive friends.”

“We’re here, in part, because we’re their legal counsel,” Arlene said. “And for the other part, when we arrived on Zharus we found a son who had preceded us here had *also* become a woman.”

“I see,” Leigh said. “I don’t suppose we can go somewhere more private and learn the details?”

“In a few minutes, hopefully,” Roy said. “We’re expecting Clara and Tim’s families. Once the gang’s all together, we’ll get your Zharus IDs, then have a skimper van to take back to a hotel in Nextus, where we have a conference room reserved. *Then* we’ll bring everyone up to speed.”

“That’s fair,” Cary said. He looked at Hobbes and sighed. “Please don’t talk yet. I know you can, but it’s been a very hard twenty-four hours for me. *Subjectively*, I mean.”

Penny just smirked at Kim. “So, you’re a *girl* now, huh?”

“You always said you wanted a sister, squirt. Well, you got one.”

“I *never* said I wanted a *big* sister. I wanted a *little* sister,” Penny pouted. “Tom had a little brother. *I* wanted a little sister.”

“She’s *riiiight*,” Leigh said, smiling.

Kim giggled. “Well, I guess you’ll just have to make do.”

Tim perked up as a woman stepped out of the lounge. She was about the same age as Tom’s parents, though the antiagathics available even on Earth had more or less frozen her age somewhere in the late thirties. She had piercing blue eyes and long blonde hair done up in a braid, and she was wearing a red jumpsuit with a “Gizmonics Institute” logo on it. Clara shook her head. Clearly, one of the volunteers running the

fabber had a sense of humor. She wondered how many of the refugees even got the reference.

Tim started to move forward, then stopped. “Uh...Tom...could you...?”

“Oh...sure.” He stepped forward. “Hey, Ms. Clifton?”

The woman stopped, hearing her name called. She rubbed her eyes. “Tom Lane? What are you doing here? Have you...is Tina here too?”

“She is...but not as you knew her.” Tom nodded to Tim, who stepped up next to him.

“Uh...hi, Mom,” Tim said. “I kind of had an accident...”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, thank *God* you’re safe! I was afraid something terrible had happened.”

“Well, I’m glad that turning myself into a man qualifies as ‘not terrible,’” Tim deadpanned.

“What does something like that matter? You’re still *my child*, no matter what pronouns you use. You’re alive, you’re safe...you’ve got friends. You can pee standing up. I’m sure there are compensations. Now that I’m here, I might just try it myself.”

“Really?” Tim’s baffled expression made Clara giggle.

“Tina, you’ve always exposed me to new things—”

“It’s ‘Tim’ now,” Tim interrupted.

“*Tim*, you’ve always exposed me to new things, new ideas. It’s why I had a child. I will *always* follow where you lead me.”

Tim laughed. “Oh, Mom. Or should I say Dad? This planet is so confusing.”

“And on a more serious note, I’ve *never* been okay with the things our government had been doing, or with their asinine preoccupation with surface appearances. I *wanted* to march with the Stonegates—oh, hi, over there, Stonegates!—but I felt like I needed to keep my head down for the sake of my child. More fool I, my child beat me to Zharus, *and* to crossriding.”

Tim facepalmed. “I would’ve worried about this meeting a lot less if I’d *known* about that.”

“I was a bit of a wild child, but that was before I had you. I suppose I should have been more candid with you about my younger years. I’d had my eye on Zharus for some little while, but Earth always considered my occupation too important, so the price of tickets for both of us was far too prohibitive, even if I sold off every organ and shipped out in a brainbox. And trying to briar-patch was just too risky, given the chance that the government would react in unexpected ways.”

“Like sending us to NeoRus or Eridani instead,” Tim said. “It’s happened. I get it. Maybe I should introduce you to Quentin now.”

“Yes, maybe you should,” the serval RIDE said. “I’m also willing to do the crossride. Your son made a rather...*snap* decision in our particular circumstances.”

Tim’s mother smiled. “I appreciate the offer, but I should get settled first. And I should probably put a *little* more thought into the matter than he did.”

“I agree. There are legal matters that should be taken care of, Mrs. Clifton,” Roy Stone said. “And you could have it done without a RIDE, if you don’t wish to partner.”

“I’ll keep those options open. I think a RIDE sounds very interesting. It might be nice to have a partner who knows what I’m thinking. My ex-husband sure as hell didn’t.”

:*We appear to be two-for-three so far*,: Lubyanka said privately. :*Are Terran*

*families usually so small?:*

*:We've been told from a young age that three billion is the ideal population for Earth. We still have a billion fewer to go,:* Clara said. *:Tom's family is a bit unusual—and the Stonegates are really unusual. Mostly it's one child per.:*

*:No 'true vumon ov Sturmhaven' would have fewer than five,:* the she-wolf said. *:Was our responsibility to populate the planet, after all. And such a large planet it is...:* Clara snorted. *:You've gotta be yanking my chain.:*

*:Is truth! In old days, only one male was permitted. Times have changed, though. And I certainly do not expect the same of you.:*

Tim and his mother went over to join the Lanes, leaving Clara and Lubyanka waiting for her family, with the Stonegates for moral support.

And there they were. She'd know them anyway. Her father, Martin Mitchell, was an older man, with a touch of gray in his beard and a pair of glasses from eyes he'd never had the money to get fixed or wanted to replace with cybernetics. He was a retired librarian who worked on old clocks and machinery, and they'd lived on 80 acres of farmland in the country an hour outside of Springfield where he could indulge his hobbies in his first retirement. Her mother, Julie, another ex-librarian and teacher, liked to ride horses. Her dark hair was also threaded with gray, and her right arm was cybernetic—a relic of an accident with the power take-off of the antique tractor.

They were looking around in the same confusion and bewilderment as everyone else, holding hands as they moved out into the new world. Clara knew they'd had horses and dogs, and were probably still staggered by suddenly losing them. And that on top of suddenly losing *her* a year before.

Clara swallowed. She could call for Tom to come help with the introductions—they knew him, of course, since he'd come over to visit a time or two. But this felt like something she needed to do herself. Brushing her hair back self-consciously, she stepped up to them as they approached. "Uh...hello..."

Martin Mitchell peered uncertainly at her. "Hello, miss. Do I...know you from somewhere?"

"Yes. Yes, you do. You know where you are, right?"

"It would be hard for us not to," Julie said. "That horrible woman just made it very plain."

"You remember what happens to a lot of Earth tourists on Zharus, right? The particular way they can get changed by accident?"

They both stared at her. Then they really *looked* at her. "My God...Clark?" Julie asked.

Clara sighed in relief. "Yes, Mom. Though it's 'Clara,' now."

"That must explain the paperwork you filed for a sex change, before you disappeared," Martin said. "But...that was back on Earth."

"It's...very complicated," Clara said. "I kind of got kidnapped by a stolen-and-escaped RIDE, who was looking for a place to hide and a way to get back here."

"That was my doing," Lubyanka said. "Due to some rather extraordinary circumstances."

"And she kinda took me along with her, because after...the Fuse changed me, it wouldn't really have been the healthiest for me to stick around back on Earth."

"We were so worried about you!" Julie said.

"I sort of figured that, and I'm sorry." Clara sighed. "I...didn't really have any

opportunity to tell you what happened. And I was afraid that if I tried to leave a message for you, it might not have looked good to the government.” She shook her head. “But it seems the government decided you were ‘tainted’ anyway. And here you are.”

“Look at you,” Julie said, putting her hands on Clara’s shoulders and examining her. “You’re completely changed. I never thought I’d end up with a grown daughter.”

“I...hope it’s not too much of a shock to you,” Clara said weakly. “It wasn’t exactly a willing change, but I’ve gotten used to it. I may change back in two more years, I don’t know. Relationships can get really complicated on this planet.”

“If it was something you *decided* to do to yourself, I would probably have some things to say about that,” Martin said. “But...accidents do happen, I guess.”

“I would like to hear what these ‘extraordinary circumstances’ were,” Julie said, looking at Lubyanka. “But I guess we aren’t the only ones. We saw the Lanes and Mrs. Clifton in the room with us. And I see them over there with their kids—I presume, since I only see Tom. Unless...” She raised her eyebrows. “I see.” Then she noticed Arlene Gates. “And I *also* see.”

“Hello, Mrs. Mitchell,” Arlene said in her best lawyerly tone. “We represent your child and her friends.”

“Mrs. Mitchell!” Tim’s mother said. “How have you been? And how is your arm? Sometimes the cryogenic process can cause some glitches; have you noticed any odd behavior since you woke up?”

“A little itching where the simskin meets the real, but nothing else just yet,” Julie said. “Thank you for asking, Ayla.” She sighed. “It’s all gone. I’m surprised they didn’t take my arm, too. They stole everything else from us.”

“It seems to be an aspect of the government mindset that anything you attach to you is thenceforth a part of you, and removing it would be a civil rights violation.” Roy shook his head. “They can export you entirely, but they can’t repossess your arm. No one ever said people had to be consistent.”

“I sold my legs and my right arm to afford our tickets here,” Arlene said. “Most of my family were forced to make similar sacrifices. And they had the audacity to make us pay for *our own* recolonization.”

“We ‘paid’ for it, too,” Martin sighed. “Everything we owned except the clothes on our backs is gone.”

“Well, not *quite* everything,” Arlene pointed out. “If you sell that arm, you’ll have a decent amount left over even after you pay for them to regrow your lost one. Probably should do it soon, though—once the cybered-up among the other 600,000-plus people start selling, it will probably depress the market for a while.”

Julie looked down at her arm. “Get it regrown? I hadn’t even imagined that was possible. Or at least affordable. I guess it just hasn’t sunk in yet that we’re really on Zharus.”

“We’ve been living here for the last year,” Clara said. “We’ve learned a lot, and we’ll be happy to help get you set up in town. Maybe you could open a clock shop or something.”

“Would there be any call for that? I thought people could fab anything they wanted.”

“There’s something to be said for authenticity, and someone who knows a lot about the subject could probably do a much better job with the designs,” Roy said. “Plus, hand-assembled goods are worth more money even if they were assembled from fabbed

parts. Anyway, we can discuss it over dinner. If you'd care to come along, we've arranged some temporary quarters for you, and we'll be happy to help you all get your new lives started."

"That first step are ZIDs and permanent comms," Arlene said. "Then we can go to Nextus and get into the nuts and bolts of what happened with your child and her friends."

"We're living in Uplift," Clara said. "We've got jobs there. But you can live pretty much anywhere you want, once you decide on where that is."

Julie and Martin Mitchell glanced at each other. "I guess we might as well."

"I suppose I don't exactly have anything planned either." Clara's father smiled faintly. "We're in your hands; show us what to do."

"The first thing to know is that this will be the most efficient bureaucratic process you've ever taken part in," Arlene said. "But first, let's get the whole group together and get everyone on the same page. You've had a hard subjective twenty-four hours. Time to relax and get your bearings."

"And I guarantee you'll see ten more impossible things before noon."

## Chapter 7

### *Camelot, Ye Olde Shoppinge Malle*

Over the week that followed her “de-Humpty-Dumptying,” as Harriet called it, Harriet-Cheetara gradually increased in strength and energy. Quinoa rented a room in a nearby convalescent support house and stayed for the duration. Finally, Artemis cleared Harriet to take short excursions into Camelot proper, to get some exercise and get back in the world, as long as she didn’t wear herself out and took Quinoa along as a caretaker. The same day that Clara and friends expected their families to be awakened, Quinoa and Harriet went down to a local shopping mall to walk around and window-shop.

After several days of conversations, Quinoa was pretty sure that a lot more of Harold was left in Harriet than she tried to pretend. She’d grown up around Harold, after all, and knew all his old mannerisms. Harriet used a lot more of them than Quinoa would have expected if she was all Cheetara. (And there was also the little matter that she’d chosen to go by the name *Harriet*, rather than by Cheetara.)

But if Harold wanted to use the Integration as an excuse to reinvent herself and try to be a better person, Quinoa certainly wasn’t going to rain on her parade. Not after she’d made so many mistakes as a new Integrate that *she* had to reinvent herself, too. And for the most part, Harriet seemed to show genuine regret for her actions.

Except...

“Quinoa, kind of a funny story. On Harold’s last crossride he thought about renaming herself ‘Kale’. Because I’ve—he’d always liked your name,” Harriet deadpanned as they strolled down one of Camelot’s busy corridors. “He actually talked one of his younger friends into doing the same and calling herself ‘Chia’. You remember Chia, right? You never met her before the cross.”

Quinoa laughed. “Yeah. She was having trouble adapting when we met. So I helped her along. She never mentioned knowing Harold, though.”

“She wouldn’t have. Just another one of his hare-brained schemes making another friendship turn sour. Even had a female hare RIDE all ready to go. Of course, he ended up discarding the hare and went with me—Cheetara, he got on a *Thundercats* kick—instead. And we Integrated. Hell if I know why. So here we are.”

Quinoa sighed. *Discarding* the hare. She just couldn’t let it pass, if Harriet was going to bring it up like this. “Why did you do it, Harold? Why did you break so many poor RIDES’ hearts?”

Harriet looked down and sighed. “Well, Quinoa, it’s like this. How much do you know about what happened to my Aunt Ophelia?”

Quinoa bit her lip. “Not...much. Uncle Joe doesn’t talk about it. I know it had *something* to do with Fritz, from his war days, but he never talked about it either...and nobody else on the Integrate scene would have wanted to tell tales on him even if they knew.”

“He cut her up like so much meat. Just like me—except since she was a human, she couldn’t get better. Hung the bits of her on meat hooks, and cracked jokes about it. You’ve lived with him, you must know how he was.”

Quinoa swallowed. It was a side of Fritz she’d always known he had, but had kept

telling herself he wasn't *like* that anymore. Until she'd finally been unable to keep up the pretense any longer.

"If being an Integrate meant I'd become someone who could do something like *that*...I didn't want to. All the more when I heard about how Fritz had established himself as the Grand Poobah of all Integrate-kind. I didn't *ever* want to have to live under the thumb of someone like that."

"Oh..." Quinoa breathed.

Harriet shrugged. "Back then, I'd bought into the theory that keeping the same RIDE partner for a long time caused you to be more likely to Integrate. And I *didn't want* to Integrate. But I didn't want to give up RIDEs either. So...I switched off every so often." She shrugged. "I had the money, I could afford it. I honestly thought I was being clever, and felt sorry for all the poor suckers who had to stick with *one* RIDE and maybe end up Integrating."

"I see, I guess..." Quinoa said slowly. Put in that light, it did seem more understandable. She still couldn't *condone* it, but she could understand it.

Harriet sighed. "The *worst* thing is, that theory was probably all wet anyway. You know how long I had *me* before we Integrated? *One week. One stupid week.*"

"It was about three for me and Quorra," Quinoa said.

"See? There you go." Harriet sighed. "So then I left the planet as fast as I could, because I didn't want Fritz to get his hooks into me. All the while bitterly regretting I'd ever been so *stupid*. I guess having another mind in mine—a mind of the kind I *had* just been using and throwing away—helped me to see things in a different light. After I get my strength back, I'm going to find every RIDE I ever hurt and try to make it right."

"Uh..." Quinoa stammered. "There's one, at least, you should avoid. Um. KITTY turned feral Intie. Um. He...well...he's in prison. He was part of Fritz's inner cadre near the end. Tried to kill me. *Did* kill a lot of people. Goes by Cylon now."

Harriet sighed. "Another heaping helping of responsibility on my plate. Life was so much *easier* when I was just a shallow idiot, you know? I didn't have to *care* about things then. Didn't even know what I was missing."

Quinoa tapped herself. "Who knows *exactly* what that feels like? This sphinx-girl. I did some...not nice things. Seems like Uncle Joe and my Dad were the only sane ones in the family. The rest of us were just *crazy crazy*."

"I loved my aunt, but I also knew she was a traitor. But she deserved a *trial*, not the summary execution Fritz gave her." Harriet clenched her fist. "Maybe I should go to NeoRus after I'm all healed. If I see Fritz I'll probably kill him. And I don't want to spend the next hundred years in the slammer."

"Fritz is on eternal community service, because Captain Ryder is still in his head and didn't have any part in the crimes Fritz committed," Quinoa said. "In fact, Ryder did everything he could to stop him."

"I guess I get that. *I* didn't have any choice in getting stuck with *me* either." Harriet sighed. "The really ironic thing is, after I left the planet so I wouldn't have to deal with Fritz, those stupid idiots Earthside did exactly the same thing to me that Fritz did to my aunt. It's almost enough to make you believe in karma or something."

"Were you conscious?"

"They cut off my head and made me watch as they sliced up the rest of me, Quinnie," Harriet said. "They *must* have known I'd survive. For that matter, they knew how to *catch* me in the first place, so they must have bought some clues from

somewhere. I've gone over the whole thing with System Security multiple times. I can only guess that if they got RIDEs and put people in them, sooner or later they got their own Integrates, too. Should have guessed it back then, really. After all, who knew better than me that they *did* have RIDEs?"

"Oh..." Quinoa said. She just wasn't sure how to reply to that. She'd thought *she'd* had it so rough—being trapped by Fritz up on the counterweight mansion, having to rebuild her own body from the inside out to escape the trap and then dive from orbit, fighting Cylon-*nee*-KITTy all the way down. But comparing it to something like *this* made her feel like the callow girl Myla had scolded for not thinking through her "rescue" of Sophie. When she thought about what Harriet had gone through, she was horrified—and guiltily glad that it hadn't been *her*. "What're you going to do now?"

Harriet shrugged. "Get better. See if my old Steader bank accounts still have anything in them. Try to adjust to this strange new world we're living in. And start tracking down and apologizing to all those RIDEs I screwed up. Maybe I'll start with 'Cylon.' At least I know where he is now."

"Kevin ended up in Alpha Camp," Quinoa said. "Last I heard he was still there."

"Much obliged." Harriet shook her head. "It's funny. When I sent those four schmucks off in the durian crate, I felt kinda sorry for them for the hard time I knew they'd have getting used to life here. Never imagined *I'd* have the same problem."

"Things changed pretty quickly in the last couple of years," Quinoa said. "For the better, I think."

"Oh, no argument here. If I'd only known, I'd have shipped myself back along with the kids and the RIDEs. Would've saved myself a nasty papercut."

Quinoa smiled in spite of herself. "You know, I never thought I'd say this about *you*, but I'm glad to have another of the older generation of Steaders on the planet again."

"Believe me, I'm glad to *be* back," Harriet said. "Knowing Fritz is out of the picture almost makes it worth what I had to go through to get here. Even on my worst day, I'll still think of that and smile."

"By the way, where is Joe these days? I'd like to meet Julius in person, finally. I guess he's not in-system, otherwise he would've come to visit by now."

"You missed them by a few months," Quinoa said. "Uncle Joe and Dad—and Julius and Socah Gates, who you wouldn't know but she's an old friend of Joe and Dad's—their minder from the Earth tourist trip—shipped out last September for a new wildcat colony that turned up last year. I'm in the loop for what's going on back there, but I don't want to blab anything I shouldn't. If we can get you clearance, I can talk about it."

Harriet turned to look at her. "Dad'? Mikel? He finally came home?"

"Yeah, for barely long enough for his feet to touch ground before shipping out again. But Mom came home, too, and she's going to stick around—she's retired from the circus and settled down in Nautica Undersea. I can take you to see her when you're well enough to travel."

"Your mother and I never got along too well, the few times we met. I think she always thought I was an obnoxious little twerp," Harriet said. "And what hurt was, at the time she was pretty much right."

"She'll still be glad to see you, I'm sure," Quinoa said. "What use is coming back from the mostly-dead if you can't mend a few fences?"

“I guess you’ve got a point there.” Harriet chuckled. “All right, sure—when they clear me to travel, I’ll be happy to go meet your mom again.”

“Have they given you a new DIN yet?” Quinoa looked up at the hand-painted sign for Ye Olde DINne Shoppe. *Every* store in the mall had a variant of Ye Olde \_\_\_\_\_ Shoppe with as many extra e’s on the end as possible.

“Hadn’t gotten around to it, no. Think I should?”

“Without a doubt. They’ve made great strides on them in the last couple years. The people most responsible for it—and who I’d have *wanted* to have do one for you personally, the way they did for me—are off on the Totalia mission with Uncle Joe. But given they’ve shared their technique, pretty much anyone here should be able to make you one ten times better than the old style.”

Harriet shook her head. “I remember when this was one of the technomages’ best-kept secrets. Now they have people making them in shopping malls.”

“Let’s go ahead and get you one. You’ll want to be at your best for interfacing with this brave new world of ours.”

“All right. I’m skeptical they can be as great as you make them out to be, but hey...surprise me.” Harriet followed Quinoa into the shop.

The proprietor was a chrome-skinned woman with neon orange hair and more neon orange lines on her body. “Oh my. Quinoa Steader in my shop! What can I do for you ladies?”

“My cousin Harriet just arrived from Earth and she needs a new DIN,” Quinoa said. “She’s was still using an old ‘Rod 1.0’ model.”

“You poor kitty cat,” the chrome woman said. “I’m Chromia.”

“Pardon, are you one of those Evolved Intelligences? I remember a news item from Nujose just before I left the planet,” Harriet said.

“That I am! And I so enjoy helping my Integrate cousins get connected again. Of course, I generally only see any given customer once. But the need remains and DIN tech is seeing some steady improvement. Now, what model can I get for you? We have three product lines to choose from, based on what your needs are.”

“Three now?” Quinoa said.

“All based on the method used to create it. The Freerider models are noted for their durability and resistance to burning out. The MunnTech series has better data throughput overall, but do have a tendency to burn out at high transfer rates. And your Technomages reworked everything from first principles and came up with their own solution. In my opinion it’s currently the best option, since it combines the best features of the previous two. But...”

“‘But’?” Harriet said.

“Well, the data error rates are still higher than the others combined.”

“I suppose I’ll just take one of each,” Harriet said. “I took *hundreds* with me off-planet.”

“Wonderful! Come over here and have a seat and we’ll get you squared away and back online.”

Harriet nodded, and followed her to the fitting chair.

*Nextus  
Biltmore Hotel Conference Room*

Kim and Tim showed off their wedding bands to their disbelieving families. “I proposed just a couple days after we were thawed out,” Tim explained. “Then we held the wedding in June. Very traditional.”

“If we’d known you were going to end up here, now, we would have waited,” Kim said. “But we had no idea when we’d see you again. So we made sure to have a *very* good recording taken, so we could show you whenever we did.”

Ayla Clifton smirked. “So I ‘lost’ a daughter, gained a son, then gained a daughter right back again. Oh, I *do* love this planet.”

“We always suspected it was going to happen,” Cary Lane said. “We just thought it would be a little later...and that we’d be sitting on the other side of the aisle.”

“We’d even been talking about, well, having children,” Kim said. “But we hadn’t made a decision on that yet. Honestly, I don’t think I’ve settled into womanhood quite *that* much.”

“To be frank, dear, even before all this, neither had I,” Tim said, giving his wife a hug. “But, well, by way of explanation, let’s just say that the switcheroo was a very clarifying experience in how we felt for one another.”

“Turnabout romances are pretty common here,” Kim said. “As you can imagine.”

Cary smirked. “I’d say that’s Impossible Thing number what? Fifteen?”

“*Seventeen*, Dad,” Penny said.

“I suppose I should go ahead and admit that Tom and I are, uh, seeing each other,” Clara said. “Get all the awkwardness out of the way now.”

“Sexuality is often consistent with crossriders,” Arlene explained. “So, heterosexual remains such, and so forth. I have two cross-daughters, one of whom is engaged, so I’ve done extensive research. It’s normal.”

“Interesting,” Julie Mitchell said. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing, Clara—Clara?”

Clara shrugged. “When have I ever?”

Tom put an arm around her shoulder. “But we’ll figure it out.”

“Clara, we’re going to have to have a little mother-daughter talk,” Julie said.

“Yeeees, I can see that we are,” Clara said. “Don’t worry, I’m *using* protection.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant...”

The conversation was interrupted by a chime from the comm on the table. “Oh, hey, we’ve got a call,” Tom said. “I think it’s Harriet. Full hardlight projection. Shall we pick up?”

Clara grinned. “Whew, saved by Ma Bell. Sure, let her in.”

Tom tapped a control, and a moment later the cheetah Integrate they all remembered appeared before them. She still looked a little peaked, and still had a visible network of scars though they had faded considerably. But other than that, she seemed back to her old self. “Heya, kids. I’m told I gave you quite a fright when we met on the ship. Not that I remember any of it.”

“That’s...putting it mildly,” Tim said. “If I hadn’t been Fused, I’d have lost my lunch.”

Harriet shook her head. “Sorry about that. I just don’t travel well. I’m afraid I’m never at my best after a long trip. You could say I go all to pieces.”

“I’m glad you’re well enough to joke about it,” Clara said. “But...*God*, Harriet. I don’t think I’m ever going to forget that freak show.”

“I trust you’ll all ace the upcoming quiz on Integrate anatomy, then.” Harriet

smirked, then shivered. “But...yeah. I *gotta* joke about it. Coping mechanism. I gotta cope *somehow*, or else I’ll go right off my tiny little nut. But how’ve you lot been? Quinny tells me you’ve all settled in, and two of you have even gotten hitched. Congrats! I’m sorry I missed it.”

“We got high-def holographic recordings of the ceremony,” Kim said. “We’ll be happy to share them.”

“Thanks. Might just take you up on that.” Harriet grinned. “Wow, this new DIN stuff is great.” She held up her right hand, on the back of which a sapphire twinkled merrily. “No way could I have done a full-telepresence link-up like this before without them burning out like firecrackers. But it’s hardly even warm.” She looked around. “But I see you’ve made some new friends...and they even shipped you your families. Nice! Hey, everyone, I’m the one who sorta helped you all get thrown off the planet. Sorry-not-sorry about that.”

“What’s done is done,” Cary Lane said. “I’m *still* not happy at being uprooted like this, but you weren’t the one who gassed us while we were eating dinner. We were thrown off the planet like so much garbage.”

Harriet nodded. “Yeah, that’s rough. They put me through the garbage *disposal* first.”

“We had a dozen horses and four dogs,” Julie Mitchell said. “Not to mention all that land. Is there any chance of suing to get any of it back?”

“I wouldn’t plan on it,” Arlene said. “Their decisions on civil forfeiture for the assets of expelled dissidents are ironclad.”

“It’ll just have to wait ‘til we go conquer the place,” Harriet said breezily. “Then we can take whatever we want. I have a few particular body parts in mind, me...” She paused. “Hmm. I have gotten a little bloodthirsty, haven’t I. Sorry. I’m not used to being in polite company.”

“After what you’ve been through, Harriet, I can hardly blame you,” Tom said, looking a little green.

“I should probably go take my ghost at the banquet...” She looked down at herself. “...*Frankenstein’s Monster* at the banquet routine somewhere else. I’m glad you lot are getting on well, and glad the rest of your families got off that decrepit mudball. Call on me any time, for anything. Ta!”

“You’re welcome to visit us in Uplift any time,” Clara said. “See you later.”

Harriet waved jauntily, then winked out.

“I guess I’m still not quite clear on what an Integrate is,” Cary Lane said. “But I suppose I’ll learn, and soon.”

“That was one right there, Dad,” Kim said helpfully. “You just missed her.”

“Huh. She looked just like those cartoon characters you like so much. I thought it was just an FVL avatar.”

Leigh elbowed her husband. “Don’t be dense, dear.”

“In a past life, that ‘cartoon character’ *made* my life, then ruined it. Then in this one, she saved it and sent us back here,” Hobbes said. “I’m still a little ambivalent.”

“I think it’s time y’all told us how all this unfolded,” Julie Mitchell said.

“I guess we’ve got the time,” Clara said. “The story starts with Luby, here. So why don’t you start telling it?”

Lubyanka nodded. “I’m still not sure what it was that woke me up...”

## Chapter 8

*Zharustead*  
*Prime Councilor's Office*  
*April 1, 159 AL*

“Councilor, I’m very impressed by that dressing down you gave Blomqvist. It was fully justified, and I am in full agreement,” NeoRus Ambassador Ivan Tolstov said. “But the fact is that my own government is nearly forty light-years from here, and the question before us today cannot be resolved without their official position.”

Today the Prime Councilor’s Office was more full than usual. The Ambassadors from NeoRus, Wednesday, Ibn Rushd, Zheng He, and Eridani were all present. The subject at hand: how to turn their *de facto* independence from Old Terra into a *de jure* one.

“I’m afraid my own colony will choose to remain neutral,” Ambassador Walid Kalim of Ibn Rushd said. “As we have no native metamaterial, we feel Old Terra will overlook us, at least for a while.”

“This is also our position,” Ambassador Jeong-Ho Wen of Zheng He said. “We share your sentiments about Earth aggression, but we must be pragmatic. Our populations number in the several hundred millions. In fact, *all* of the other colonies together account for one billion compared to Zharus’s four.”

“*And* neither of us has ever been at war with anyone except those blasted Kepler pirates that always lurk about,” Kalim said. “We have no standing militaries to speak of since our system Rangers take care of the pirates.”

“Be assured, though, we aren’t so foolish to think that they won’t come for us eventually,” Wen said. “We will consider ourselves neutral, perhaps, the way the United States did in the early years of the Second World War.”

“An apt comparison,” Kalim agreed. “We will assist however we can and join when the time is right.”

“Zharus can *always* depend on us,” Wednesday’s Ambassador added. Emil Dahl slammed his fist on the desk. “And Old Terra will find our world a very *expensive* nut to crack if they decide to throw their weight around.”

“I note Kepler isn’t here,” Tolstov said.

“They’re no more trustworthy than Proxima or Centauri,” Michelle said. “I’m sure Old Terra has already bought off most of their cartels already.”

“Agreed, but it’s the principle of the thing.”

“Regardless, this is something each colony will have to put to a vote, and quickly,” Michelle said.

“As they said in medieval America, we either hang together, or we each hang separately,” Eridanite Elena Marino said. “If this issue is put to a general referendum in each colony, Earth will notice what we’re doing, and *will* act to stop it. Mikel Steader spent over a decade in the Centauri system delaying their ‘Earth-Alignment Acts’. Some of Blomqvist’s demands are very similar legislation from all of us.”

“Whether the vote is via public referendum or legislative, the problem remains that distance and communication speed is the barrier between us,” Tolstov said. “If only

that DINcom breakthrough worked over interstellar distances.”

“I have a solution to offer,” Marino said. “Given the importance of this discussion, I’m offering the use of our highest priority diplomatic message torpedoes to all Ambassadors here. They can get to NeoRus in three weeks. That gives your government long enough to debate the issue and send us a response in two Zharus months.”

Everyone stared at her, dumbfounded. “That’s about five hundred times the speed of light, isn’t it?” Michelle said.

Marino smiled. “Zharus is hardly the only world who has had incredible breakthroughs lately, Councilor. We’ve thus far been unable to produce even a small Scout ship that can approach that speed. But research is continuing, of course. And at this point it’s prudent to assume Earth at least knows about them, even if it can’t produce them.”

“Normal message torpedoes can do about half that,” Tolstov mused. “But even without that DINcom thing, this would be a game-changer in the business sphere.”

“We have more important issues than buying and selling crap, NeoRus,” Dahl said.

“Just illustrating a point, Wednesday,” Tolstov said. “We should all prepare messages on this and send them immediately. If our our esteemed Eridanite Ambassador has that many of these superfast torpedoes available.”

“Oh, we do. Believe me, we do,” Elena said. “We’ve been anticipating something like this for some years now.”

“What do we call this upcoming event, if things go like we hope?” Tolstov said. “The Colonial Independence Congress?”

“If I may,” Dahl said. “The Colonies have had effective political independence since we were founded. In the STL days, it was simply not practical to do otherwise. Our own Charters are explicit about having independent, autonomous governance from Earth.

“Even NeoRus has those stipulations, despite being founded well into the FTL era,” Tolstov said. “So what are you getting at, Emil?”

“It’s not a question of independence, it’s *sovereignty*. The section of our Charters that allows them to claim unsettled land are outdated. That is what we’re asserting rightful control over,” Dahl said.

“But to do that, we might have to chuck the whole Charter out the door,” Michelle said. “My experts in bureaucratic legalese in Nextus said that we have to renegotiate the Charter as a whole. Not just pieces of it. Ironically, that’s a result of the last amendments made after Nextus *itself* was founded on a loophole.”

“So it’s all or nothing, then,” Marino said. “Independence and sovereignty go hand-in-hand for nations. Through we’re not even proposing forming a single nation among ourselves like the first United States.”

Michelle sighed. “But we *are* creating a *de facto* military and economic alliance against an increasingly tyrannical regime on humanity’s homeworld. Should their government change for the better, so will our openness towards them.”

“Michelle, why don’t you call the First Exec in Nextus again,” Dahl said. “Have her people draft a declaration, a statement, whatever we decide to call it. Make it as ironclad as they can. Something we can send to all our worlds and have them vote on it.”

“On it,” Abi said. “Ah...we’ll have something drafted within half an hour. There

are times when Integrate fast-time really comes in handy, and this is one of them.”

“Thank you, Abi,” Michelle said. “This might take a few revisions between us today, but everyone, now is the time.”

*Artesia Valley*  
*Steady Hand Command Center*  
*April 22, 159 AL*

“That’s the last of the constructors shut down, Captain Constantin,” a raccoon-tagged NextusMil Engineer at the Admin controls said. “We have full control of the system now.”

“Thank you, Corporal.” Captain Joseph Constantin spent a few subjective hours in fast-time going over the “manual” the Terrans had provided and comparing it to actual observations. It had proven rife with inaccuracies, mostly lies of omission and hidden “features”. Clearly, just because they meant the ship as a “demonstration” didn’t mean they were going to make it easy to understand. (Or else, maybe they’d just farmed the manuals out to the same people who had used to write the documentation for washing machines and refrigerators...)

The task of thawing the passengers/exiles was now being handled by Zharus-built systems. About two hundred thousand had been already woken. Now the process could be sped up via a vastly expanded facility and the exiles split between various Gondwana polities. With the construction equipment shut down, a somewhat utilitarian city with housing for approximately two hundred thousand remained. Unlovely even by Nextus’s stolid standards, it nonetheless was fully ready to move into, and a significant portion of that 200,000 who’d been awakened so far had done just that.

Not all of them planned to stay permanently—many of them were still researching their options, and not knowing anyone else on the planet, they figured they might just as well do it where they were close to so many other people who were in (or at least had come from) the same boat. But others thought it was a decent enough little place, closer to nature than they’d lived on old Earth, and felt they might as well settle down and make a go of it with so many other same-boat people. And there were even a few new residents who’d migrated from elsewhere on Zharus, drawn by the urge to provide goods and services or proselytize to the newcomers, learn more about the old mother planet from the people who’d lived there, or else just be somewhere things were *happening*. There were even representatives from Nextus Admin on hand to help the residents set up some form of representative local government and hold a vote on what they wanted to call their new home.

In short, it was going from pre-fab neighborhood to living, breathing *city*, practically overnight.

If there was enough demand the Nextus Corps of Engineers was fully prepared to resume construction—with more efficient designs that were much easier on the eyes, in Constantin’s view. *Everyone* had a home in Nextus, even if it was a single-room efficiency for one person down on their luck.

*:These Terran apartment blocks are uggggggleeeee,:* Joseph’s inner raven said. They were a humaniform Integrate, normally—the raven was actually the one named Constantin. But they’d also learned some moderate shapeshifting to let that inner bird out. *:So, what do we take apart first? My scavenger talons are just itching.:*

:How about we start with the screen where they showed that insipid speech from Donahoe?: Joseph suggested. “Corporal Lang, let’s see what’s behind that viewscreen.”

“Our pleasure, sirs,” Lang said. She Fused up with her RIDE. It would be a tight fit for the raccoon through the door, but she had the tools they needed in her paks. “One home theater de-installation, coming up.”

The power was all shut down, so the interior was dark. Lang set up a couple of floodlights, then got to work. There were no obvious screws or other fasteners, so she broke out a prybar and stuck it under the edge of the screen. “Captain, I could use some Integrate lifter oomph.”

It came off fairly easily, revealing it was just a bezel around a patch of wall. Examining it showed a series of holographic projectors—the same kind in most homes. The wall itself was the problem. Joseph scanned it closely, with his Integrate eyes and a handheld sensor. “No seams. This wall was fabbed in one piece. We’ll have to cut our way through.”

“Ooooooh,” Lang’s RIDE said. She extended a cutting torch from her right hand. “May we proceed, sir?”

“Go ahead, Corporals.”

Lighting the torch, they cut a small hole through the metal wall, then stuck a probe through. “Just seeing an empty space through here, sirs. Except...”

“What, Corporals?”

“We’re going to cut a door in the wall so you can see for yourselves.” They cranked up the torch again, and started cutting. It was the work of just a couple of minutes to pull out a rectangular panel, exposing the inner workings beyond.

Joseph moved in closer to get a better look. There was a nest of cables, of course; even with near-field communications widely available, pretty much everything that didn’t *need* to be wireless still used cables given that they were cheaper and more immune to interference than radio transmissions. But at the center of the nest was something *very* interesting. “Is that a...Raspberry Pi-Q?” The Pi-Q was a simple fully integrated system, sold for a few centi-*mu* in tech shops and replicators everywhere, inspired by a similar device from 21st-century Earth. It was effectively a stand-alone version of the same system-on-a-chips embedded in practically every DE component. The qubitite-based processor could run rings around equivalent chips from Earth.

“It’s just glued to the wall, sirs,” Lang said. “There’s an A-class sarium battery here, running the whole thing.”

“Media walls don’t need much. Not surprising they’d use one of our own chips in it—or else a credible knock-off.”

“But look at what it’s hooked to.” Lang pointed to the circuit board surrounding the processor. The circuit pattern was considerably different to what Q-chips used. In fact, it looked almost like...

“Is that *celerite* circuitry? We detected it when the ship landed, but I wasn’t sure what to expect. The celerite circuit traces are *touching* the q-processor.”

“It seems to be...hermetically sealed or alloyed with something, somehow, preventing cross-contamination.”

“I’d be itching like crazy if it wasn’t,” Constantin said.

Lang frowned thoughtfully. “And look at *that*. I think that’s some kind of data storage module, but...what’s it made of? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

The Captain zoomed in as close as he could. Q-based RAM memory did exist, and like its use in sarium, the effect was multiplicative. It was also impossible to use past the 100x B-class because of various quantum uncertainty principles that made retrieving anything impossible. NeoRussian “infinium” memory crystals didn’t have that limit. Any-sized chunk could hold an infinite amount of accessible data within its fractal space.

“That’s the NeoRussian meta, Corporals. All this in a Pi-Q. The way this thing it set up I think it’d almost match my own Intie brain for computing power. In a *Pi-Q*. Possibly ran the whole complex.”

“How much do you think Earth really knows, sirs?”

“Way above my rank to make a guess at, Lang. Let’s get this to R&D Division so they can start finding out how it works. Let *them* worry about it.”

*Uplift*

*Horne Street Apartments*

*April 25, 159 AL*

“Just another manic Tuesday,” Tim sang. “Wish it was...uh...booze day? Uh... freedom-to-choose day? Just another manic Tuesday...”

Quentin shook his head. “Nice try, but I think some twencen songs just don’t adapt well to the nature of life on Zharus. Doesn’t quite scan.”

Tim shrugged. “Well, it was worth a try, anyway.”

Kim poked her head in from the next room. “And speaking of adapting, shouldn’t we be heading downtown to the clock shop? It’s the grand opening today, and Clara and Tom are already there.”

Tim checked his watch. “Yeah...just an hour or so ‘til they open up. Let’s go on and wander that way.”

They followed Quentin and Madeira out to the sidewalk, where they converted into their skimmer forms, and they headed on downtown. The neighborhood where Martin Mitchell had opened his clock shop was an older part of town, slightly downbeat with age but undergoing recent urban renewals. It was actually located in the same strip mall on Bifrost Parkway as the Stonegates’ law offices, in fact—the rent was low, but the renovations promised to bring more customers sooner or later, so they were getting in on the ground floor.

The families had been on Basic since arriving in Uplift, but the system was built to make it a starting point—seed money from small investors, fabbed materials, and education if job retraining was needed. Martin Mitchell had spent the time since arrival hand-making a few clocks as examples of his work out of public fabber materials. Those he had shown to investors, who had provided the capital to rent the shop space and get better tools and materials. There was always a market for handmade products, even in the age of micron-precision fabbed widgets. Indeed, as easy as things were to fab, handmade goods were about the only things that *had* real value.

It had surprised Martin, just a bit—back on Earth, his retirement clock repair business had focused on repairing clocks, not making new ones, because on Earth there were still enough antique clocks floating around whose owners would pay a mint to fix. (And he took the loss of his own antique clock collection in the deportation just about as hard as his wife had taken the loss of the horses and dogs.)

But here on Zharus, almost no one had brought antiques like that along—and if they had, the 12-hour clocks would have been useless on a 30-hour world. The reproduction mechanical clocks people fabbed to look nice and tell time were more or less not worth repairing—much like cheap Asian-made clocks from the 20th century. They were just so much junk, suitable only for recycling and remaking.

But a quality hand-made clock—suitably re-gearred and re-faced for a world where noon and midnight were 15 o'clock—would be worth buying, keeping, *and* repairing rather than remaking. There might not be so many handmade clocks out there just yet—antique clockmakers were a rare breed *anywhere* in the 26th century—but Martin had told them that he had the feeling that if he could stay in business for a year or two, he'd eventually have enough business in repair work to supplement the sales nicely.

By the time they arrived, a small, curious crowd had gathered outside the shop with the clocks behind the window, and the legend "GOOD TIME CLOCK SHOP" painted in gold across it. Tim tapped on the door, and Clara came up to let them in. "Hey, you guys, thanks for coming."

"You're welcome. Who's missing?" Kim said.

"Our dad, for one," Tim said.

"He won't leave our apartment," Leigh Lane said. "*Again*. Some days it's all I can do just to make him step outside."

"I wondered," Kim said, sighing. After less than a day in Uplift and reading about the Domefall incident a couple years before, Cary Lane was convinced they would pop again when he was outside, and he'd bake in the Dry Ocean heat. RIDEs bothered him—he'd never spoken to Quentin or Madeira directly. Integrates were still "those cartoon characters". "I think he's going to need some therapy, Mom."

Leigh sighed. "You're probably right. Some days, I feel like I could do with some myself. It's not easy, in our time of life, to be thrust into a strange new world like this."

"Believe me, I know just what you mean," Julie Mitchell said. "Changes are harder to cope with." She held up her newly-regrown right arm, which still had a trace of new-growth pinkness. "But *this* is a change I'm glad for."

"Plus, with rejuve, around here they call what you're in the 'first retirement'," Clara said. "Lasts maybe ten to twenty years. Then you can go back to your old career if you liked it that much, or do something new."

"This career is enough for me, right now," Martin said. "I just hope it proves as popular as my investors thought it would be."

Tim checked his comm. "My mother says he'll be here soon. He's just on the way back from the crossover clinic for a checkup."

"He decide on a name yet?" Kim asked.

"I'm sure he'll tell us when he gets here. It's only been a few days since he made the switch."

Kim shook her head. "I still can't believe she went through with it. Willingly, yet."

"Hey, *I* went through with it willingly," Tim said.

"*You* went through with it because you had a temper tantrum, dear," Kim reminded him. "*She* went through with it in the cold light of rationality. Honestly, why would anyone who had a choice *not* want to be female?"

"Says the girl who got roped into it only *because* I had a temper tantrum," Tim said.

“What can I say? Sometimes the grass really *is* greener.”

“I dare you to go off of ‘No Periods’ for a few months. *Then* we’ll see if you still think that way.”

“Ooooh, throwdown!” Penny said.

“I’ll take that bet, hon,” Kim declared. “Somehow, the human race survived for thousands of years before they invented the stuff. *You* got by for over ten years back on Earth without it. I can make it for a few months.”

Penny said nothing. Just smirking.

Tim rolled his eyes. “You know what? Actually, don’t. Or at least, don’t do it on my account. I retract the dare. I don’t want to risk damaging our relationship when you start feeling like *that* and blaming it on me. You’ll be blaming me enough after I get you pregnant.”

Kim bowed her head meekly. “Yes, dear.”

“Well, I see you’ve got one key to a successful marriage down,” Lubyanka said. “Always listen to your wife.” That got a general chuckle from the rest of the group.

“Honey, I’m honestly really glad you enjoy being a woman,” Tim said. “And I’m not going to harsh your mellow, as the Dude would say. Can’t say being a man isn’t a positive thing for myself, either. It’s Zharus. Trading places is a thing here.”

“Did I hear my change being taken in vain?” The former Mrs. Clifton came in. He seemed to have taken to being a man pretty well. He was fairly handsome, as crossriders tended to be, and seemed a little taller as well. He had light brown hair and a faint mustache.

“Hey mom! Decided on a name yet?” Tim said.

“Aaron,” said Aaron Clifton. “Both masculine and somewhat androgynous at the same time.”

“Huh, I was sure you were going to go with Alan.” Tim grinned. “But good choice anyway. How’s the new job going?”

“I think going with Uplift Cybertronics was a good choice over NextusNano,” Aaron said. “They’re in the Earth-Zharus cyber arbitrage business, so they need someone who’s an expert in the old homeworld’s tech. And after Old Terra threw me off, I don’t feel any urge to honor the Non Disclosure Agreements they made me sign. Already shown them a few features they didn’t know existed.”

“I sold them my old arm,” Julie Michell said. “They have a silly ‘Transformers’ theme in their offices.”

“On this planet stuff like that comes with the territory,” Aaron said. “In fact, I’m working on that arm of yours. Only natural, given that I helped put it together in the first place.”

“You’re welcome to it.”

“And it means I can live here in Uplift, with my son,” Aaron put his arm around Tim’s shoulders. “We can go out and do some manly things together. Throw the football around. Maybe play some baseball.”

“Did you hear the latest news to come from the settlement?” Leigh asked. “They’ve settled on a name for themselves.”

“I heard about that,” Tom said. “What did they pick?”

“Just calling it ‘Steady Hand’ got a lot of votes, and showing solidarity with New Endurance by calling themselves ‘New Earth’ got more,” Leigh said. “But the majority didn’t want to let the planet that threw them out define them, so they looked in the

other direction. They chose the name ‘Warm Welcome’ in honor of the one we got when we got here—and the one they say they’ll give anyone else who wants to join them there.”

“Sounds a bit like ‘Aloha’ on the other end of the continent,” Kim said.

Leigh nodded. “Yeah, there was some campaigning against it on that basis, but the supporters said that ‘aloha’ was 50% goodbye, and they were all about the hello.”

“That is awesome,” Tom said. “It’s still a poke-in-the-eye to Earth while honoring Zharus at the same time.”

“I love it,” Clara said. “Had there been any more word on stuff they found while taking the ship apart? I heard some pretty crazy rumors. ‘Dogs and cats living together’ kind of thing.”

“Nothing for public release yet, apparently,” Tom said. “But I stopped in at the Stonegates’ office on the way over here, and they say they’ve heard similar rumors from credible sources. When it all goes public, there could be some crazy repercussions.”

“Might be a good time to make some strategic investments,” Hobbes suggested. “If we could scrape any money together, at least.”

Tom grinned. “We could always pawn some of your batteries.”

“Keep your hands *off* my batteries,” Hobbes growled. “Mine.”

Martin Mitchell came out of the back room, dusting off his hands. “Well, I suppose we’re as ready as we’ll ever be. Time to open the doors and let the people in.” He shrugged. “I’m a little nervous. The clock repair business was a solitary one. I sat out in my workshop and fixed other peoples’ clocks while I listened to audiobooks. I didn’t have to deal directly with customers.”

“Aw, you’ll be okay, Dad,” Clara said. “Before you retired, you were a librarian. You know all about dealing with people.”

“I was in Cataloging,” Martin said. “I dealt more often with books.” But he went to the front doors and unlocked them and threw them wide. “Welcome, everyone, to the Good Time Clock Shop!”

The people came in and started browsing. There were shelves with hand-made clocks Martin had put together, and also less-expensive clocks based on similar designs that Martin had fabbed. Zharusified versions of all the old classic brands awaited—Seth Thomas, Regulator, and more. People started looking around, and then bringing clocks up to the counter. And Martin chatted with them, discussed matters of horology, and sold clocks.

Clara and the others gathered in a corner of the shop and watched the rest of it. “I think he’s going to do all right,” Clara said. “We should probably clear out and leave more space for the customers.”

“And we should probably get some work done, ourselves,” Lubyanka added. “New trove of art found from the DeviantArt site to chew through.”

“Oooh, artistic deviants,” Clara said. “Lead me to them.” The four humans and accompanying RIDEs waved to the others, and quietly made their way out of the shop.

## Chapter 9

*Zharustead Aerodrome One*

*May 1, 159 AL*

The bright and shiny new Camelot-made suborbital came in for a picture-perfect landing at an aerodrome where it seemed as if every single unoccupied space not marked with hazard signs was filled to overflowing with press. Enough drones were in the air to look like a freeze-frame of a mass balloon release, and there were more lenses than eyes among the crowd.

“This is Alpha Camp One,” the bald eagle Integrate on the flight deck drawled. “As they say, the eagle has landed. The eagle will now taxi to the gate...” Baldwin shut off the comm mic. “Heh...that line never gets old.”

“Do you mean by comparison to ‘so sayeth me?’” Lillibet asked from the co-pilot’s seat, where she and Guinevere were sitting Fused. “I think that’s about the only way what you just said makes sense.”

Baldwin rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Everyone’s a critic. You all ready to roll back there?”

“Paul and Fennie are ready to pull down the ramp when you drop it,” Guinevere said. “Lilli and I will be riding with him. We’ll pull around to the front to meet the limo. Alfie and the others will come out the gate, make the prepared remarks at the podium in the terminal, and head to the limo—which has commed it’s already waiting. We’re all good.”

“Works,” Baldwin said. “You want Belle an’ me to keep the bird warmed up in case we need to make a speedy getaway?”

Lilli shook her head. “We’re respectable now, remember? Speedy getaways not likely required. Feel free to park it and get a little tourism in.”

“Hmm,” Baldwin said. “Actually, I hear tell a couple old amigos of mine’ve set up shop around here. Might just drop by and say howdy. Have to stop by a fabbery and pick up some grape soda on the way, heh heh.”

Lillibet raised an eyebrow. “You’ll have to fill me in on how that goes. Right now I guess we’d better go join Paul. See ya for the return trip.” She got up and headed back to the passenger and cargo space, and Belle the pink flamingo Integrate moved over from the engineer jumpseat to the chair she’d vacated.

Given that many dignitaries were arriving in Zharustead today, it had been deemed most efficient to set up a press briefing area in one of the idle terminals to give said dignitaries a chance to appease the free press without clogging up the normal operations of the aerodrome too much. Not all the dignitaries were interested in using it, but AlphaWolf had never been one to pass up any free publicity. He’d been writing and rewriting a speech all the way from Alpha Camp...in fast time.

Not that it really meant anything, Rafe reflected. When he stepped up to that podium, he’d just say whatever the hell was in his head at the time. As usual.

The arctic wolf RIDE rolled his eyes in exasperation. He did love and respect their leader, but had to admit sometimes he did make life harder for the rest of them.

“Spin,” he muttered. “Whatever he says, it’s gonna need *so much* spin. I shoulda been a Tasmanian Devil.”

His partner Alex chuckled. “You have to admit, he does a great job at afflicting the comfortable.”

“Yeah, and *us*, too,” Rafe said. “Who’s gonna comfort *us*?”

AlphaWolf stepped up to the podium. At his size, the grey wolf RIDE didn’t have any trouble being seen behind it, even if he didn’t have any thumbs at the moment. But he didn’t need them for speaking.

“Well, here we are,” AlphaWolf began. “Coming together as a planet, uniting against a common foe, and all that. Yay, us. Rah, rah. I’m happy about the ‘uniting’ part, anyway. But why is it it takes something like Earth hitting us with a symbolic mud pie to get the rest of you to do the things you should have done years ago?”

“I will say that seeing first-hand how some of you humans treat *other humans* shows that maybe we RIDEs already had more equality with you than we knew about. And I guess I’d rather be living with people who’ve come *partway* to fully respecting us than those bums back on Earth who treat even other *humans* like you-all used to treat RIDEs. So you don’t have to worry about me trying to throw a wrench in things out of spite. This is our planet, too, so we free RIDEs will be with you all the way.

“We just wish you lot were with *us* a little more. So sayeth me.”

“Well, I guess that could have been worse,” Rafe sighed, as he, Alex, and the rest of their small entourage followed AlphaWolf to the exit to the street.

“I think he actually has gotten more diplomatic over the last couple of years,” Alex said. “Just a smidge.”

On the sidewalk near Fenris and their limo, a life-sized bobcat waited, sitting on her haunches. She stood up as they approached and sent an encrypted comm hail. “AlphaWolf and all, I am Abi, the Prime Councilor’s assistant. If you would accompany me to her office, she wishes to meet with you and a few others privately before the Congress is convened.”

“Oh? About what?” AlphaWolf asked.

“A subject dear to all of us RIDEs. Even we LRIDEs here in Laurasia. There is some legislation she wishes to inform you of in person that will be voted on before the independence declaration.”

Rafe stepped up and sniffed at her, exchanging handshakes and personal ident keys. “She’s who she says she is, boss.”

“Okay, Abi. You’ve certainly piqued our interest,” AlphaWolf said. “Give the limo driver the address and come along.”

“I will take you there myself.” The bobcat walked to the front of the limo. The hood opened and out came the engine block...which turned into a horse. Abi’s own hardlight then switched off, then *she* turned into a more compact form while leaping into the open hood, which then closed. Then all the doors opened. “Please, step inside. Larger RIDEs may convert to skimmer mode and follow.”

“Huh,” AlphaWolf said. “Well, that’s interesting.”

“Let’s not keep the Prime Councilor waiting,” Fenris said gently.

A short trip later, the limo pulled up outside one of the oldest government buildings on Zharus. The marble facade and dome resembled the Pantheon on Earth, but far larger. There were still a few constructors in place, for it had been enlarged in

just the past month. The whole structure was built for the kind of expansion needed for a swiftly growing population and the equally growing number of representatives that needed.

But today's session was a special one. For the first time they were including representatives from the entire Pharos system, for the decisions they would make today affected everyone from the Oort Cloud inwards, not just the Laurasian supercontinent. The new Congress would not supercede any polity government otherwise.

The Prime Councilor's office was in the northwest corner of the building. There was a private parking area not far away, and spaces had been cleared for the limo and for Fenris. Paul patted the dashboard. "You ready, buddy? Time for the first real field test."

"I have been looking forward to it," Fenris rumbled. "After all this time being stuck outside, having to rely on relayed imagery from others, I will finally get to see the interior of a building with my own optics." Paul's seat slid back into Fenris's interior, then slid forward a moment later with a small white wolf Fuser in it. Paul and Fenris jumped out of the cockpit, landing on their feet next to it.

"So, what do you think?" Paul asked.

Fenris reached up and patted the side of the tank. "I am literally beside myself."

"No body dysphoria?" Paul asked. "Like Bertha had?"

"Hmm...no, nothing so terrible," Fenris said. "It simply feels as though I have shrunk. Perhaps it would be different if I did not know that I can easily switch back to my original body when I wish to. But as that is the case, this is simply an interesting, temporary change."

"Nice look, you two!" Lilibet said. "I can't wait to see how it works for you inside...certain *other* buildings." She winked.

Paul coughed. "Uh...yes."

"I can assure you, I *am* fully...functional," Fenris said.

Abi unfolded herself from the limo's engine compartment. "So that's the way it is with Gondwanan RIDEs, is it?"

"It's the way it's going to become sooner or later," Paul said. "One of my old boss-ladies invented it. It's still in the testing stages, not *quite* ready for retail yet. But you know, I could see this becoming an alternate mode for you L-RIDEs, or maybe some sort of GL hybrid."

"Honestly I've never seen the appeal of Fusing. But I wasn't built for it in the first place. I don't have the 'urge'. At any rate, onwards and upwards."

"Just a sec," Lilibet said. "Hey, Guinny, pop the saddlebag, will ya?"

"Sure thing!" The hardlight on one of the ocelot's hips winked out and a panel flipped open. She reached in and took out her VINO tiara, and the jeweled (but functional) ceremonial dagger she was entitled, as a Valkyrie, to wear in diplomatic functions.

Lilibet strapped on the dagger, and settled the crown on her head. "There. I am now diplomatically accoutered. Let's go."

The bobcat flicked her ears. "Curious. We already have a Sturmhaven contingent. Well, follow me."

"We New Valkyries get that a lot," Lilibet said.

Behind and in front of them a small flock of the ubiquitous recorder songbirds flew. The Laurasian government used them for all official functions. AlphaWolf growled

at one of them as they passed. They weren't the sentient kind of LRIDE used for more important functions like the Totalia expedition, and were certainly easier on the eyes than the media floaters used planet-wide.

When the group arrived at the office they found there were already others inside. Some were faces every single one of them recognized. Rattigan, Dr. Avilia Patil, Rohit, and Dr. Roderick Clemens. Rattigan was back in the shell that had inspired LRIDEs even before the end of the Nextus-Sturmhaven War.

"Oh, *wow*," Lilibet said.

There were a few others. A pair of Integrate lemurs, a female red-ruffed and a male ringtail. A humanoid-mode EIDE armor, and a woman who looked like an avatar of an EI Locust.

"Wonderful," Prime Councilor Michelle Yu said. "Now that you're here, we can get started."

Abi jumped up to the Councilor's desk, then lay down like a big housecat making themselves at home. "This room is so crowded lately."

"AlphaWolf, we meet at last," Dr. Patil said with a serene expression.

AlphaWolf stared at her, then approached her slowly and bowed on his forelegs. "I'm...I don't feel like I'm even worthy to be in your presence. This is an unexpected honor."

"Of course you're worthy." Dr. Patil smiled gently. "In fact...I'm proud of you. I have not always agreed with your methods, but you have nonetheless done more than many others to keep the issue of RIDE rights in the public eye. That we have come as far as we have is in part—and not a small part—thanks to your efforts."

"I...can't say I ever expected to hear that from *you*," AlphaWolf said.

"In fact...I should apologize to you," Dr. Patil said. "That you were forced to the extremities you were...is because I was hasty with my work. I rushed to publish without thinking of the repercussions. And I allowed myself to be coerced into helping Nextus militarize the technology." She sighed. "Your plight was only a small part of it, of course. I am also to thank for Fritz becoming what he did...or at least, I didn't do enough to stop it."

AlphaWolf nuzzled her hand. "Hey...don't beat yourself up over it. With the one exception I'm looking at, and a *very* few others, humans generally just suck. Not your fault you got outnumbered." He gave his head a shake. "So sayeth me, okay?"

"I keep telling ya the same thing, Doc," Rattigan said. He nodded at AlphaWolf. "Nicely said, young pup. Grampy Ratty approves."

"Thanks...gramps?" AlphaWolf said. He laughed. "Now, who're the rest of the folks here?"

"Doctors Argon and Luke Skye, creators of the Enhanced Intelligence," Councilor Yu said, gesturing at the lemur Integrates. "Sparky, the second EI. Their first, Clementine, is on the Totalia expedition."

"She's going to be upset she wasn't here for this," Luke said.

"We based our work off of a research thread Dr. Patil had abandoned," Argon explained. "Stood on the shoulders of giants and all that. We were both RI specialists to begin with, so we had a firm grasp of the theory."

"And I'm proud of you, too," Dr. Patil said. "And honored to be the *grandmother* of your creations."

Sparky beeped happily. The silver woman next to him blushed.

“Ah, yes. One last introduction,” Luke said. “This is Rescue. She is so far the only EI-based Integrate in existence. We didn’t even think it was possible. We were proven wrong.”

“It gives me cause to wonder whether Integration is simply a function of qubitite itself,” Dr. Patil mused. “And that *any* Q-based intelligence that Fuses with humanity might be susceptible.”

“Unfortunately I was created in rather...*adverse* circumstances that no other human-EI pair should ever experience. But I exist,” Rescue said.

“That’s really pretty remarkable,” Lilibet said. “But I’ll bet you won’t be alone for long.”

“So why are we all up here, meeting with you, Prime Councilor?” Dr. Clemens said.

“The independence legislation before this Congress isn’t the only one we will vote on today,” Yu explained. “Before we can get around to our independence and Earth’s injustice on us, we need to address an *internal* injustice that’s gone uncorrected for far too long. In this room are represented all sophont lifeforms in the Pharos System. Including our newest, Rescue, here.

“To be perfectly blunt about it, we done *fucked up*. We allowed ourselves to fall into a pattern that the fiction released by Steader Entertainment warned us *not to do*. We created true AI sophonts. We made them—you—slaves instead of equals. Today, we fix that error. The first legislation up for vote today will be one that grants *all* sophonts full and equal rights to those of humans. And after having discussed it through back channels with the other delegates, I am confident the vote itself will be just a formality; I’d be surprised if there was a single dissenter.”

“Hmm.” AlphaWolf considered. “I really can’t say I’m happy that we’re getting showered with all this love and affection just because you humans have gotten your panties in a bunch over a bunch of *other* humans suddenly deciding they want what you got. You caused this mess; you should’ve fixed it on your own without having to realize you need our *help* ‘cuz the school bully is shaking you down for your lunch money.” He sighed. “But, ya know, half loaves, gift horses, and all that. Finally *getting* those rights is the important thing. If it helps my brothers and sisters, I’ll happily swallow my righteous indignation. So sayeth me.”

“We should be begging your forgiveness,” Yu said, looking around at the RIDEs. “But I have to say that the one positive thing Earth’s former Ambassador did in this office was expose me to my own rank hypocrisy. Can you show them the recording, Abi?”

“Gladly,” Abi said. She played it in its entirety, but highlighted a specific portion.

“*Ambassador, as long as we’re making unrealistic demands of one another, how about this? You return every one of our citizens you have kidnapped, unharmed and intact.*”

“*May I remind the esteemed Councillor that you didn’t even consider them ‘citizens’ until recently,*” Blomqvist said in a voice dripping with condescension. “*Now that they are no longer considered ‘equipment’ we will gladly return any of your RIDEs still in our possession. Although some, regrettably, may not be as intact as you would wish. After all, we were simply reverse-engineering ‘equipment’ at the time, and you know what they say about omelets and eggs.*”

“Your own hypocrisy?” AlphaWolf said. “As opposed to, y’know, all you

humans's?"

"If I may," Dr. Patil said. "The incident that started us on this road was the escape and return of the four kidnapped RIDEs."

"Between those four and the torture they did to Harriet Steader I realized that, as a leader, I wasn't looking out for *all* of my citizens," Michelle said. "And if we were going to claim full independence from Earth, I had to correct this rank hypocrisy."

"Now, I did like that little speech you gave that Blomqvist guy at the end," AlphaWolf admitted. "A few years too late, maybe, but better late than never I guess."

Dr. Clemens nodded. "*Decades* too late. But today, we finally fix it."

AlphaWolf sighed. "All right, great. I'm glad for that. I really am. And I'm no stranger to *realpolitik*. So as much as I'll grumble about the delay in private, I recognize that the appearance of solidarity is important, and you won't hear me complaining in public. Any more than I have been already, anyway. And short of a time machine, there's nothing more you *can* do than giving us those rights right frickin' now. But I still feel like you're gonna owe us some *big* favor somewhere down the line, just for it taking *this damn long* and you needing a kick in the ass from Earth to get around to it. So sayeth me."

Rafe rolled his eyes. "Our AlphaWolf, diplomatic as ever."

Alex chuckled. "And we wouldn't have him any other way."

"So entered into the record," Abi said. "Say hello to the birdies, everyone. Everything done in this office is history people are going to pick over for centuries."

"This conversation isn't classified," Yu said. "And will be released after the Congressional session."

"Well, good," AlphaWolf said. "I never say anything I'd be ashamed if people knew about. That's what being a good leader is all about." He tossed his head again. "If *you* want to release my private griping, then fine, on your head be it. I meant every damn word."

"If this is all for the record, then I would like to make a statement," Rescue said quietly, drawing attention to herself. "Sometimes the obvious needs to be stated to make it clear to everyone, and this feels like one of those moments. Among everyone here, I feel I have some unique experiences with all of Zharus's sophants. At Shahrazad's encampment, I saw and experienced the worst of *all* of Zharus's sophants; human, RIDE and Intie alike. That she hadn't recruited an EI was more due to the rarity of my siblings as much as anything; if any showed the appropriate inclination, I'm sure the tigress would have recruited them."

"At the same time, with my rescue and the aftermath, I also experienced the *best* of all of Zharus's sophants. I saw everyone come together to work for a common cause to save all the victims, no matter what they were."

"With those experiences, I can conclude one obvious thing that we are all dancing around. No matter how fast we think, or what we can do, we have similar desires and goals. In the future, these divisions between humans and RIs and EIs and Inties and whatever else will seem quaint and outdated. We are all *people* trying to make sense of a universe full of strange and unknown things. And *this moment, this meeting*, will likely be seen as the turning point where humanity grows into... damn, I don't know what you'd call us. *This* is the moment when we grow up."

AlphaWolf looked at her. "And I thought *I* talked a lot. Anyone *else* wanna make a speech? Maybe thank the Academy, and their parents for believing in them?"

“We’re right here,” Luke said. “And our daughter is damned right.”

“She coulda been right in fewer words,” AlphaWolf said. “Sheesh.”

“Fifteen minutes before the session, Michelle,” Abi said.

Dr. Patil sighed. “I’m only sad that I’m not actually part of any polity’s delegation here. After having been responsible for the problem, I would have liked to take an official part in the solution, for the record.”

AlphaWolf peered at her. “Hey, how’d you like to join Alpha Camp’s delegation? Can’t think of any human more entitled. It seems right that you should get to cast a vote.” He snorted. “Really, any *RIDE* casting a vote for it would feel like someone giving *themselves* a Christmas present or a pay raise. Like you say, let the human who helped mess it up help fix it.”

Dr. Patil smiled. “If you would have me, I would be honored.”

“I think we ought to pay AlphaCamp a visit afterwards,” Dr. Clemens said. “We can make plans after today’s big events are over.”

“We’d be happy to have you,” Lilibet said.

“Indeed,” Fenris added. “I’m sure that Nora and Rose would be delighted at the chance to host you in their rooming house.”

Paul chuckled. “Might even give you two the honeymoon suite.”

“Well then,” AlphaWolf said, standing up from his haunches. “Let’s go make some history.”

## Chapter 10

### *First Pharos System Congress Planetary Assembly Chamber*

From Gondwana's polities there were Nextus, Uplift, Sturmhaven, Cape Nord, Aloha, Burnside, Califia, Punta Sur, Alpha Camp, Nuevo San Antonio, Nautica, Baltica, Angkor, Cascadia, and their newest polity, Warm Welcome. The Spacers had sent representatives from Rhodes Station, Xolotlan, Ashoka, and Seaford's Folly. From the Integrate Enclaves there were Towers, Wonderland, Olympos, Jurassic Park, Camelot, Cave of Wonders, Shangri-La, Chakona, Hellir, Celestial Weyr, Halley, Terrania, and Aurelie of Bartertown had sent along a couple of her assimilated fox Integrate selves. All twelve Laurasian provinces were also represented.

From deep under the Tethys Ocean, to the farthest reaches of the Pharos system, they had sent their representatives. They sat in a newly-expanded chamber so they all could have a seat: Humans, RIDEs, EIs, and Integrates, all together—something that would have been unthinkable just two years ago. But times being what they were, the governments of Zharus had to keep pace with the changes. And so they had.

Prime Councilor Michelle Yu banged the gavel to open the session, then considered her opening words carefully.

"The first act of this Congress will be the rectification of a grave injustice. For nearly forty years we have treated our quibitite-based citizens as slaves—mere equipment. Although we have already gone a long way towards correcting this error in judgement, this body will make it planetwide law. The Sophont Rights Act will secure, in perpetuity, the civil rights of RIs, of Integrates, of EIs, or any other sophont we may create or encounter out in the galaxy.

"We on Laurasia can hardly claim moral superiority to Gondwana in this regard. It was easier to simply see our Laurasian versions as tools or pets. We did not have the benefit of 'Fusing' and meeting them mind-to-mind.

"All along we should have treated them as what they are. Humanity's children, as much as any produced in a womb. Children grow up and must be accorded the rights due to them.

"In fact, the line between us no longer really exists. New life is born in Q-based mainframes. Thanks to a chance discovery by a young woman, minds are now easily transferred between RI cores and flesh brains, no matter if that mind originated in a human or a RIDE. We have entered a new era.

"Let's make it a good one. You may begin the vote."

It was a foregone conclusion that the vote was unanimous, but making it gave everyone a certain satisfaction. By prior arrangement Dr. Avilia Patil, Fused with her RIDE partner Rohit, cast the yes vote for Alpha Camp. Next to her was AlphaWolf, practically *glowing* with anticipation. Dr. Clemens and Rattigan were on her other side, and Lillibet, Guinevere, Paul, and Fenris in his new *minima* shell were on Alpha Wolf's other side.

"Let the record show that the vote was a unanimous *yes*," Michelle said. "The Act is effective immediately. So entered." She banged the gavel and a cheer went up from

every direction, with AlphaWolf's triumphant howl audible above it all.

*Uplift*  
*Way Too Early Morning*

The celebration in the Brubeck RIDE museum was absolutely off the charts. All the unFused humans in attendance cheered with their hands firmly over their ears, as the uproar from dozens of RIDE vocoders cheering at maximum volume was literally deafening.

Among the humans present were Clara and friends, having gotten word via the Stonegates that something important was going down at this hour in Laurasia, and this might be a good place to be when it happened. So they stayed up past their bedtimes, and came down here with their RIDE friends.

"Holy shit," Quentin gasped. "Holy *shit*."

"Freedom at last," Hobbes mused. "Well, *good*."

"As far as I've been concerned, you've always been free ever since I've known you, big guy," Tom said. "And I'm grateful beyond words you've chosen to stay with me."

"But it is nice to have it as a matter of law," Arlene Gates said. She stroked Valda's shoulders. "Right, dear?"

"I hope we can get word soon to Cira and the rest of the Totalia people," the white vixen said.

"For something like this, they'll send a torpedo," Roy Stone said. "They've undoubtedly sent several already since the arrival of the *Steady Hand*."

"*Holy shit*," Quentin repeated. "Dios mio."

"I'm...bewildered, really," Madeira said, swishing her bushy tail. "I was created to *serve* humans...even more explicitly than most RIDes, in more than one sense of the word. Nearly all of my programming was about pleasing men...and most of the rest of it was about pleasing women. Now I'm 'free'? What is free?"

"Free-as-in-speech, or free-as-in-beer?" Tim said. He unslung his guitar and strummed it. "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose...nothing ain't worth nothing, but it's real..."

"Now I'm even more confused," Madeira said.

Tim switched songs. "Welcome to your life, there's no turning back...even while you sleep, we will find you acting on your best behavior, turn your back on mother nature...everybody wants to rule the world."

Madeira snorted. "Now you're just being silly."

"In any case, this isn't going to magically change things overnight," Kim said. "It was hundreds of years after the Emancipation Proclamation before skin color truly didn't matter anymore. It was decades after civil rights came in that most people acted as if they had."

"Yes, but slavery had centuries to become so ingrained in the culture that it took centuries more to root the racism it caused out again," Tim pointed out. "Here it's had less than forty years."

"Did you *hear* that wonderful howl?" Lubyanka said. There were practically hearts in her eyes. "The *true* Howl of AlphaWolf!"

"I'm still not forgiving you for making me watch that so-called movie," Clara grumbled.

The commotion in Congress was starting to die down again. The Prime Councilor banged the gavel a few times to call it to order. It took less than a minute for the gathered representatives to quiet down and take their seats again.

“And now for the other important purpose of our Congress,” Yu began. “What shall we do about Earth?”

### *Zharustead*

“More specifically, our *relationship* to Earth,” Yu continued. “So many of our new citizens the past fifty years have been deviants, dissidents, and fewer and fewer who actually wanted to emigrate to Zharus. Indeed, Earth’s government made emigration for people they *wanted* to keep more and more expensive, while ‘recolonizing’ the rest—often at their own expense. Our new citizens in Warm Welcome can attest to this.

“The history of Earth’s colonization begins long before FTL travel, with the invention of the Inertia Displacement Drive about 2150 AD. Humanity could send probes at higher and higher speeds, seeking out habitable planets. Even after the recovery from the Oil Crash, Old Terra strained to support her billions as the climate continued to warm and the seas rose. We had to move. Thanks to the new drive, we could eventually send kilometers-long colony ships to half the speed of light for the same energy cost of pushing a tiny fraction of their actual mass.

“But we were still limited by the speed of light. We tried to cheat it, but even the IDD couldn’t pass that ultimate limit in Einsteinian space.

“And so the Colonies founded during that era—Centauri, Proxima, Eridani, Kepler, Zheng He, and Zharus—contained in their Charters political independence from humanity’s motherworld. Communication times were simply too long. These stipulations were even retained in the Charters of Wednesday, Ibn Rushd, and NeoRus, founded after the FTL era began. Speeds were once again too slow.

“But now, everything is changing. Not just in how quickly we travel from system to system. But in how Earth treats her Colonies.

“Since the great instability of the 24th Century Old Terra has been in-and-out of oppressive government. Our sister colony Wednesday can attest to the worst of it. Two thirds of their first wave of colonists died on a planet and system *not* suited for human life. All dissidents, exiled on vessels that weren’t spaceworthy. Our reaction at the time, to save our sister Colony no matter the cost to us. Old Terra was *still* not under a unified government back then, and a war ensued that destroyed the nation responsible for the Wednesday Catastrophe. So Zharus’s own reaction required no sanction of Earth herself.

“But now Earth is descending into a totalitarian state with greater and greater speed under a unified government.

“We are at a crossroads. An inflection point. Earth sent us the *Steady Hand*, a ship full of over six hundred thousand dissidents, without prior warning, at a landing site of their choosing, using technology stolen from Zharus, Eridani, and NeoRus. We would have welcomed the passengers of the *Steady Hand* regardless. But the fact is, they *didn’t ask*. They used our own Charter against us. To threaten us. The technology aboard was there to rub their so-called superiority in our faces.

“They have made an ultimatum that we open our qubitite export restrictions to them *alone*, while offering nothing in return. Similar demands have been made of

Eridani and NeoRus for their metas. Though not in so many words, they have threatened to revoke our Charters if we don't pass the 'Earth-Alignment Acts' that have turned Centauri and Proxima into puppet states.

"Fellow citizens of the Pharos System, the Affirmation of Independence and Sovereignty before you now will put a stop to that. In order to pass, a seventy-five percent vote in-favor is necessary. But I cannot emphasize more, we must be united in this. To give Old Terra *no toeholds* in our system. So please, make your vote *now* with that in mind.

"Thank you all."

### *Uplift*

After the jubilation of the first vote, the mood in the Museum turned quiet and somber. "Shit," Blitzzen the caribou said. "Looks like it's gonna be another war. Wars suck." A good number of the RIDEs around him, also veterans themselves, nodded agreement.

"Still, at least in this one we won't have to worry about getting treated like mere equipment," Keiko said. "If a war there is, and we *choose* to re-enlist, this time we'll fight as *equals*."

The votes were starting to come in rapidly now, with not a single *nay* so far. After ten minutes only three holdouts remained to vote: the Laurasian province of Florencia, the Gondwanan polity Punta Sur, and the space station out at the ice giant Ixion unofficially called Seaford's Folly. Then the first two changed to *yea* at the same time.

"So what's the hold up with those guys?" Quentin said. "What are they waiting for? It's going to pass anyway."

"I think they want to *make a statement*," Tim said. "Really, it seems to be going around these days."

As they waited, the camera panned around the room, eventually coming to focus on the Prime Councilor. It was an oddly tender scene for the events happening around her. A bobcat sitting on the desk in front of her, head bunting Yu's chest. There was an audible purr. Yu gently stroked the affectionate cat's shoulders as they waited.

"Cat being cat," Blitzzen quipped.

"Oh my, yes," Keiko agreed. "That shell is so cute. Being small does have some advantages. If I bunted anyone they'd get pressed against the wall. Perhaps I should ask *Signor* Donizetti for one of those new *minima* shells."

Finally, Seaford Folly's vote flipped to *yea*. Then a cheer went up on the floor of Congress.

"Given the way Earth is going, I don't see how we could do any different," Arlene said.

The Prime Councilor stood up, then waited for the bobcat to move clear of the gavel. "The vote is complete. Let the record show that it was unanimous. So entered. This Congress is dismissed." She banged the gavel twice.

"And the die is cast," Roy said. "Technically we're in violation of our Charter now."

"After Earth used our Charter to violate *us*, it seems like turnabout is fair play," Arlene observed. "They might have adhered to the letter, but they *murdered* the spirit."

"I really hope we aren't alone on this," Darrik said. "What about the other

Colonies? What are *they* doing about this?”

Clara couldn't help but wonder. *:Luby, did we cause all this? I mean, they wouldn't have sent the Steady Hand if we hadn't escaped Earth, would they?:*

*:Nyet, not really,:* Lubyanka said. *:We were only a straw. They had been loading the camel for decades. If it had not been us, it would have been someone else. And perhaps the fate of the passengers on that ship would not have been quite so pleasant.:*

*:I...see,:* Clara said.

*:Wars often start for stupid reasons. Do you know how the Nextus/Sturmhaven War began? Mikel Steader—the father of our friend Quinoa, brother of our benefactor Crazy Joe—filed a complaint over a Sturmhaven customs inspector making a big deal over a sarium battery he'd forgotten he had along when he was leaving the planet.:*

Clara blinked. *:Really? Just that?:*

*:That was all that was needed. From there, events snowballed. Nine years of war. Tens of thousands of dead even before we RIDEs were created. There are some very good qubitite mining plays in the Dry that will never be mined because they're battlefield gravesites.:*

*:Huh. Okay. Well, I guess I feel a little better about this, then.:*

“As Ma would say, Lordy Lord Lordy,” Keiko said.

“I do wonder how many of us they've actually kidnapped over the years,” Hobbes said.

“Other than the four of us we know for certain, who knows?” Lubyanka said.

“*Dios mio,*” Quentin swore.

Hobbes peered at the smaller cat. “Hey, Quentin. I know it's heavy, but snap out of it.”

The serval flicked his large ears. “Sorry. I'm just having some trouble grasping these two things happening *together*. Freedom for us, independence for Zharus. Possibly war with Earth sooner than *anyone* expected. Make that *three* things. *Mierda*, what a day.”

“Still, I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be—even if we're about to get invaded by Earth,” Clara said. “At least here it's okay to be *us*.”

“First, they send all of us here,” Kim said. “Then they insist we're *still* under their control. What. The. Hell?”

“They want to have their cake and eat it too,” Tim said. “Really, they should just make two damn cakes.”

“The cake is a lie,” Quentin suggested. “I read that somewhere...”

## Chapter 11

### *NeoRus Duma Offices*

“Hi, Dad. You know how they say the Grand Tour is something not everyone comes back from? Well, it looks like that’s going to be the case for both of us.”

Gerasim Romanov watched the video letter again for at least the dozenth time. When the word had come of a diplomatic torpedo from Zharus marked “extremely urgent,” the last thing he had expected to find aboard was a missive from his son and daughter. *My daughter and daughter now*. That had been *another* surprise, of course, but by comparison to the other news that came along with it, such family business seemed minor by comparison.

His daughter, Kisa Romanov, continued, “You see me by myself right now, because *I* actually still look more or less like I did when I left home, so you’ll know I am who I say I am. Well, that and the digital signature on this letter with my own personal key, of course.

“But I wanted to prepare you for the matter of Pietro. Because he had a couple of those stereotypical Zharus tourist accidents befall him—you know the kind; I know you read as many stories about Zharus as I did. He doesn’t look anything like he used to, but trust me when I say I’ve verified that this *is* the person he became.” She glanced off-screen. “Okay, come on in.”

The woman who stepped in had the familiar Romanov facial features, there was no doubt about that. If he hadn’t known who this person was, Gerasim would have assumed she was some distant cousin from a forgotten branch of the family. But the truth was considerably more...*interesting*.

“Hi, Dad,” she said. “I go by ‘Jade’ now, or ‘Jadecat’ as a stage name. You probably won’t recognize me like this. First I got turned into a woman, and then I got... involuntarily merged with a RIDE. I had a *very* bad week.”

“She’s what they call an ‘Integrate,’” Kisa explained. “Zharus’s own native sophont life form. There are thousands like her, and they only just got out from under the thumb of a petty tyrant...but you can read about that in the news and background reports I’m sure you’ve already gotten about that matter from last year.”

“Integrates are the reason why there were so many missing persons on Zharus,” the cat-woman went on. “Before they sent this torpedo the Zharusian authorities tried to find as many of us NeoRussian Grand Tourer Integrates as they could. So you’re not the only one getting this kind of message today.”

Kisa nodded. “At the moment, some political matters keep us from coming back for a visit. We don’t expect them to take long to clear up, but any return would have to be just that—a visit. This is her new home now...and as her sister, I’m staying with her.”

“We Integrates have some very specific nutritional needs that make leaving Zharus permanently somewhat...impractical,” Jade said. “Maybe sometime in the future that’ll change. But for now that’s where we are.”

“We’ve included personal journal entries, photos, videos, TV episodes, and other stuff that will tell you more about what happened to us and what we’re doing now,” Kisa said. “It’s more than we really have time to go into in this video message. But at the

moment, we need to talk about the big political issue that got them to send this torp at you. By now you've probably already heard the *precis*: Earth dropped over half a million new colonists on us, along with a snarky message about how we need to play nice or papa will spank. We've finally had just about enough of that."

Gerasim had rather more than just a *precis*. Their Ambassador to Zharus had been quite *precise* in his assessment of Earth's evil intentions for her colonies. That the message had been only three weeks old, sent by a super-fast Eridanite torpedo, was a helpful novelty and showed a willingness on the part of that government to show trust in the other colonial governments.

The proposed AIS Act was the same that would be voted on today by Zharus System Congress, the NeoRus Duma, and the Eridanite Senate *simultaneously* across settled space. And Gerasim had to admit it seemed as airtight and straightforward as any such document he had ever seen.

"Now, we aren't going to ask you to go along with Zharus in rejecting Earth's demands now and forever just because your kids happen to live here now," Jade said. "You're the one who taught *us* about what it means to have integrity, so it would be stupid to ask you to put your personal desires above the needs of NeoRus."

Kisa picked it up. "What we are going to point out is that Zharus isn't alone in having a valuable local metamaterial which they don't allow off the planet. And it's not alone in having had that meta stolen and incorporated into their 'technology demonstration' that they hit us with along with the colonists. So if you haven't already gotten your *own* paternalistic 'play nice or papa spank' message, it's probably already in the mail."

"And you already know what's happened at Proxima," Jade added. "Earth suborned their legislature into passing a law that threw the doors wide open for Earth to move in and take over. If they don't get you-all to roll over and play nice with their nastygram, they'll be trying something like that next."

"So, please, don't do it," Kisa said. "Get your fellow Duma representatives on your side and resist. Do what's best for our old homeland, and keep it out of Earth's greedy hands."

Earth already had landed one of those technology demonstrators on NeoRus—a new-model NeumonFormer that was doing such an incredible job the Duma refused to shut it down to see what made it tick. As fast as it was going, it could very well put their terraforming efforts years or even *decades* ahead of schedule if they just let it work for a while, so there was more than a little reluctance to kill the goose that laid the golden egg. Not that Earth had been willing to share the blueprints. "It's right there, please feel free to reverse-engineer it," Adjutant Donahoe's recording had said.

Zharus's message had included the technology integration evidence they'd gathered from the *Steady Hand*, showing how Earth had somehow made Q, C, and I work together without bursting into flames or shorting out. Gerasim knew the Zharusians had no need to lie, and Ambassador Tolstov wasn't known for being co-opted by foreign powers. It seemed reasonable that the same sort of integration could be the reason the new Neumonformer was working so fast.

He looked at the text of the AIS Act again. NeoRus had a population of a hundred million, clustered in the equatorial zone. Easily contained. Easily conquered. Four billion on Earth. Four billion on Zharus. He—again—wondered why NeoRus should make a target of itself. Even putting this legislation up for a vote was dangerous.

*And yet...*

“Hi, Dad. You know how they say the Grand Tour is something not everyone comes back from? Well...”

*Martinez Memorial University Museum  
ZEN Alliance Treaty Signing  
July 4, 159 AL*

Not only had the NeoRus Duma approved the AIS, their response had said it didn't go far *enough*. The ZEN Alliance Treaty had already been ratified by the Duma, who had then sent it on to the (fairly close to them) Eridani Senate. They had quickly ratified it, then sent it on to Zharus. The proposed treaty had only required one final meeting of the Zharus System Congress two days ago for ratification. Now the only step left was the signature of Zharus's Prime Councilor.

“I can't think of a more proper place to sign this treaty than the research station that first studied qubitite,” Eridani Ambassador Elena Marino said.

“This is the room where we first organized into a polity,” Uplift's First Consul Vogel said. “Are you comfortable, Ambassador? Your skin...”

“I can endure a qubitite rash to get this done,” Marino said. Patches on her cheeks and hands had turned purple. “The symbolism is simply appropriate. Our own signing was done in the Silvergreen Farm where we first harvested celerite.”

“And likewise ours in the Equatorial Crystal Range where we mine raw neoquartzite,” NeoRus Ambassador Ivan Tolstov said. “Shall we get started?”

“Yes, indeed,” Michelle Yu said. “And I can't imagine a more proper *date* to finalize this treaty. On this same...well, this *equivalent* day in another calendar, a fledgling colony declared its own independence from its tyrannical parent...and over the centuries that followed, became one of the world's premier superpowers, and was eventually a driving force behind the unified government. Now we follow in its footsteps...and remind the government it became where it came from. We are no longer colonies of Earth. We are our own nations.”

“And nations within nations,” Vogel said. “We will of course abide by the decisions of the System Congress when one is called. But otherwise...”

“Of course, First Consul,” Michelle said.

Compared to the huge room where the planet's independence was voted on and Treaty ratified, the Academic Council Room in the former research base was downright cozy and informal. The e-parchment being rolled out on the table already bore the signatures from the Duma, Senate, and Congress. The biggest signature was from one Gerasim Romanov, who had proposed it in the first place. The document's own John Hancock.

“The Zharus-Eridani-Neorus Alliance,” Michelle read. “We're honored you put us first, Ivan.”

“‘NEZ’ doesn't *quite* roll off the tongue, Councilor,” Ivan said. “And it's also French for ‘nose’. We also felt using ‘Colonial’ anywhere in the title implied we weren't serious about our independence.”

“No arguments here, Ivan,” Michelle said. She picked up the crypto e-pen, provided by Nextus, then added her signature next to the NeoRussian President's and Eridanite Tribune's, to the applause of the small audience in the room, and the audible

cheering from outside, where everyone else on the planet watched it live.

Near the edge of the room, Gina Martinez and Jinkies the raccoon RIDE stood and looked on, present as the duly appointed representatives of the museum itself. *:Can you believe it, Jinkies? This is history being made! And we're right here to watch!:*

*:I wish you'd let me do more cleaning,:* Jinkies grumbled. *:If I'd known a little sooner we were going to have such distinguished guests...:*

Gina smiled. *:Jinkies, you cleaned it for three straight days.:*

*:I know! I barely even had time to get started!:*

"There's an irony here," Michelle said. "Earth wanted us to remove all our metamaterial trade barriers to them and only them. Instead, here we sit, removing them between one another but not Earth."

"Among removing other barriers and planning for mutual defense. My aides are already on their way to Colossus-Rhodes and Camelot for a shipbuilding technology exchange, and we'll be sending proper shipwrights soon," Elena said. "You should know that the technology demonstrator Old Terra sent us was a Scout-class ship that, if Terra didn't fake its logs, only took *two Zharus months* to get from Earth to Eridani. Experimental shorter jumps we took with it seem to bear that speed out. And they had the audacity to name it the *Clint Brubeck*."

"Considering how important that man has been to both our worlds, it's just another poke in our eyes," Michelle said.

"Clint Brubeck made an impression on us as well," Ivan said. "He made an unexpected visit just ten years after we'd established ourselves. It was also about the time of the first visit of the Star Circus. That was an amazing year."

"Well, Ivan, we live in interesting times," Michelle said.

"In the old Chinese sense, I think," Elena said.

"Agreed. At some point soon they're going to try and enforce their *diktats* with military force. We must be ready."

### *Warm Welcome Westcornerofthe Park*

"Oh, I see. It's a FurryMUCK thing," Tom said, looking at the sign across from them as they strolled down Baloo Street. "Thought the name sounded familiar."

Naturally there were all sorts of nods and references to furry culture in place and street names in the new polity. A number were named after famous artists and writers. There were also Furcadia Parkway, Weasyl Street, Zootopia Botanical Garden, Judy Hopps Way, a "Fur le Dance" dance club, and more.

Nextus engineers and architects had resumed construction since demand for housing remained high. While there were a few structures that used Nextus's own brutalist architectural style, once they started taking input from the residents themselves there was more variety in homes, the booming commercial areas, shop space, and public buildings.

"I remember places like that from FVL," Clara said, pointing out a boutique selling...well, the shop was empty yet, with construction drones finishing out the interior. From the sign (Zoot Suit Riot!) it was going to sell hardlight zoots—a Zharusian-tech version of the holographic fursuits some furies had worn back on Earth. Not everyone wanted to Fuse to get furry, after all. And some furies had had very

*highly* customized avatars in FVL that mixed features from several animals that weren't likely to exist as RIDEs.

:*Like Ferris's ex-wife and her dragoncat?*: Lubyanka said, picking up on her partner's thoughts. :*I would like to see what she looks like.*:

"Looks like you don't have to wait, Luby," Clara said. Now visible on the inside, directing the drones, was an Integrate-sized white lioness with draconic horns, wings, and tail, with white scales on her belly, the bridge of her nose, and shoulders. She wore a midriff-baring red top with a red skirt. With her was a certain cheetah Integrate, who waved at them to come inside.

"Hey, kiddies!" Harriet called cheerily. "What can we do you for?"

Clara raised an eyebrow. "We?"

"Well, I was talking with a certain pair of lawyers about the chances of suing Earth for my pain and suffering and stuff, and they put me onto a great investment opportunity. So I took it."

"Hello again, Clara," Marjorie said. "What do you think of my new look?"

"It suits you," Clara said. "And, from the name of the shop, I'm guessing that's true literally, too?"

"I built custom homes in the Real and custom avatars in FVL. So naturally I decided to turn my FVL talents to the Real, because otherwise, what's the point of being on Zharus?" She turned around, showing off her tail and wings.

"See, I told you." Clara grinned. "Bringing the virtual into the real is what Zharus is for."

"Still, it's just a costume. I can't actually feel these wings," Marjorie said. "I have to be careful if I have the full hardlight on instead of just holo. Plus, it gets pretty heavy."

"You might want to talk to your ex-brother-ex-in-law's partner," Lubyanka suggested. "Rochelle Seaford has been doing some interesting work with hardlight-equipped human-size RIDE suits. Perhaps she could adapt some of that tech to zoots."

"There's some *vast* potential here," Harriet said. "I understand Donizetti is working on something similar. But I don't think it's wise if I show my face in there, even now."

"Rochelle's working *with* Donizetti on it," Lubyanka said. "So talk to her instead."

"But Rochelle is off in space, so I might have to see *Signor* Donizetti after all. Hmm," Harriet said, rubbing her chin. "Might as well bite the bullet. Can't be worse than that meeting with Cylon."

"Cylon...I saw that name in the news. One of Fritz's bunch..." Hobbes blinked, ears perking. "Is that...who I think it is?"

The cheetah nodded emphatically at the tiger. "Yeah, Hobbes. *Whooolle* lotta not-fun. Tell you about it later, maybe. If anyone has the right to know about how that went, you do. *Anyway.*" Harriet took a breath. "So, you eight here to see the sights on our new Independence Day?"

"We sort of felt obligated, given the part we played in events leading up to all this," Tom said. "But, really, it's great seeing furry fandom finally have the chance to blossom freely in real life again."

"I'm also going to be designing homes for zooters, RIDEs and Integrates," Marjorie said. "So I get to combine all my passions. The one thing missing is a dragoncat RIDE, which I understand it would be...tacky to have custom-made."

"Well, only *really* tacky if you don't plan to take responsibility for the new life

you're having brought into the world," Harriet said. "Y'know, like *I* used to. But if you really *do* plan to stay partners for the long haul, assuming you two get along, that's still permissible in general; a number of Mechanist RIDEworks are still in that business. My cousin Quinoa had her sphinx custom-made back in the day."

"Hmmm," Marjorie said. "Well, it'll be awhile before I could even afford something like that, in any case. The shop will be ready tomorrow, thanks to Harriet's investment."

"Warm Welcome's economy is really getting going now. Lots of people are off of Basic already and have real jobs," Harriet said. "Money to spend."

"Yeah, and lots of other businesses opening, too," Kim said. "It's becoming a real city in its own right."

"Nextus even graciously gave up a big chunk of land so they could be their own polity," Harriet said. "I have no idea what the First Executive did to pull *that* miracle off with the First Tier Committee. I was never very good at the Game. Requires patience I never had—and still don't."

"It's not as if they could have just kicked them out if they wanted to keep the land," Madeira observed. "So 'giving' it to them lets them look generous and save face."

"And it's not as if this planet is exactly going to *run out* of land any time soon anyway," Tom said. "Does Nextus seriously have their polity expansion scheduled out *two hundred years in advance*? I mean, *why*?"

"Afraid so. That's just the way they are," Harriet said, shrugging. "I rather like their optimism."

Lubyanka sniffed. "Optimism? That's *one* word for it."

"So, what do your children think of all this, Marjorie?" Kim asked.

"Kim, right? Well, right now they're spending some quality time with their father," Marjorie said. "They're adapting, like children do. I hope your families are doing the same."

"For the *most* part," Kim said. "There are a couple of...little hiccups."

Tom rolled his eyes. "Yeah, our Dad found out about Domefall and got paranoid. He doesn't understand the tech, so naturally he's suspicious. Like anti-vaxxers back in the twentyfirst. Thinks it could pop again if someone looks at it funny."

"There isn't much in the way of hardlight use on Earth," Kim explained. "Or even on Mars. It's too expensive. Government keeps it that way."

"So Mom, Dad, and Penny have moved back here for the time being," Tom said. "They tried to convince us to come, too, but we've got lives in Uplift, and we're past the age of majority here, so they can't make us."

"At least sub flights are cheap enough we can visit easily," Kim said.

"As for the rest of us, my Dad's clock shop is doing well," Clara said. "And he and Mom are settling in."

"And my Mom is getting along well in his new job at a cyber company," Tim said. "No complaints here."

Marjorie shut down her zoot, revealing a rather more conservative red pantsuit outfit underneath, studded with hardlight emitters and a battery pack on her waist. She took a deep breath. "Still need to tweak the wing emitters. Anyway, we should clear out of the store and let the drones finish up the flooring. The place should be ready for a final check by the time we get back, then we'll officially open the doors tomorrow. I can't thank you enough, Harriet."

“My pleasure, Marjorie. The first batch of emitters for sale will be delivered tonight, after the fireworks.”

“I guess we should go say hi to Tom’s and my folks,” Kim said. “Since they’re here and all.”

“We’ll come along,” Tim said. “Then maybe we can all go out for breakfast. There’s a place that just opened called the ‘Monster Party Cafe’ that looks interesting.”

“I think I read about that in the Steader archives,” Clara said. “The original place by that name, I mean.”

“We should thank you for those bundles you curated, by the way,” Marjorie said. “And I mean, *all* of us. When everyone here got their net access, furry keywords were the first thing all the furries searched on, and your stuff popped right up. I think that’s where a lot of the new businesses and things around here come from.”

“Not really *our* stuff, but the stuff of furries centuries gone,” Clara said. “But I know what you mean. Glad to hear they’re finding a receptive audience.”

“When they find out who you are, I’d be surprised if we didn’t vote you the Paws to the City or something.” Marjorie chuckled. “Well, see you guys around.”

“Best of luck with the new business!” Lubyanka said.

As they stepped back out onto the street, and paused to look around at the rows of shiny new shops and houses that had sprung up like mushrooms overnight, Clara grinned. “You know, I think these people are going to be all right.”

## Epilogue

*Old Terra*

*Geneva, Terran Colonial Administration (est. 2200 AD)*

“You gave them too much carrot and not enough stick,” Admiral Marko Boyle sneered at Priscilla Donahoe. “Your tech demos to show just how superior we are *backfired spectacularly*. Now, not only do they know we’ve been smuggling large amounts of their metas, they know we know how to make them work together.”

Donahoe glared at the Admiral coldly. “Admiral, one year ago you assured me that the Great White Fleet would be ready to deploy by the time the *Steady Hand* arrived at Zharus. Now you’re telling me that the ‘stick’ won’t be ready for a *minimum* of six months before we can even *begin* systems integration tests, which itself is expected to take *another* six months. If *anyone* has screwed up our timetable, it’s *your* research division.”

“The EI cores have proven much harder to grow than we anticipated,” the Admiral said. “The bulk of the Fleet won’t function without them and we can’t trust any EI grown on Zharus.

“Then there’s this ‘ZEN Alliance’,” The Admiral glared back. “Their independence declarations were expected. But this? You *failed* to anticipate this, Adjutant!”

The argument only got worse from there, eventually descending into a cloud of angry monosyllables. All staff had wisely stayed clear of Donahoe’s office as long as they could afterwards.

But shit rolls downhill.

Janitor Divya Darrow wondered why her supervisor was suddenly upset with the way the main corridor floors shined. The cleaning robots were always kept at 100% and never missed a spot. It made what had been a okay day into a dismal one.

Janitorial Supervisor Thera Schroeder had been given a dressing down by *her* supervisor, Facilities Manager Evander Wauters, who had gotten one from *his* boss, Adjutant Prescilla Donahoe.

Before Divya left for the day to head to a local beer hall, she wondered just what could have happened to make everyone’s nice day into such a horrible one. But she wasn’t in the know. It was probably something classified. Better to just have a beer and forget the day ever happened.

## Authors' Notes

**JonBuck:** Just a couple notes about this particular story. First, it shows that you don't need to have your main cast present when important things are happening on Zharus. This story ended up being quite significant for the setting in general. We've had plans for a war with Earth for quite some time now, and this story moves that forward. The funny thing is that particular thread is effectively the "B-Plot". So we get to see what the Zharus leadership and legislature is like.

And we also, finally, free the RIDEs. Something a long time coming.

The [Great White Fleet](#) mentioned in the epilogue is based off of the historical one from a bit over a century ago. A little old-fashioned Terran gunboat diplomacy. And a major miscalculation on the part of the Terrans. They had no stick to back up their carrot. Plus there's the whole ZEN Alliance thing. Best-laid plans, you know?

So the former colonies are united against Old Terra, and are aware that their metas can all work together without blowing up. They have time for a military buildup of their own. And considering how fast construction goes in this setting, a year's delay in the Fleet's launch will really mess things up for Terra.

Now, we get to focus on Totalia and resolving things there.

**Robotech\_Master:** Well, it's certainly a nice day for a war, isn't it?

We'd been planning some kind of war with Earth for after the Totalia stuff for some time, though—like much of FreeRIDErs when you get right down to it—it's probably not going to look a whole lot like we first imagined it when it gets here.

This oak tree grew from the unlikeliest of acorns. This particular story has its roots in what I originally intended to be a fun, amusing little side story—a look at a future version of my old hometown, Springfield, Missouri, and the F3 furry convention that is held there in real life. I based Clark Mitchell *very* loosely on myself—gave him my old job, and a few of my other interests, but not all the stuff there is taken from the real-life me by a long shot. (He's one of three characters in the setting following the old *Paradise* method of giving an author avatar your own initials. Can you guess the other two? Hint: one of the others *also* shows up in this story.)

But after I wrote it, I did get to thinking about what the consequences might be of members of furry fandom being involved in giving Earth's government a bit of a black eye. This came together with a few other elements from elsewhere to suggest a follow-up in which Earth pulled out the ban(ish)-hammer in a major way. Originally it was just going to be in the form of cargo ships landing at Zharus's spaceports, but then I hit upon the idea that they might use a colony ship for its old original intended purpose—and then it evolved into a *fully automated* ship, so they couldn't argue with the crew or interfere with the programming that would land it where they wanted it.

I think it was Jon's idea for Earth to use it as a demonstrator of advances it had made in reverse-engineering metamaterial tech, and to blow it up into a *casus belli*. But given how well this story has turned out, I can hardly object.

I wrote the "Durian Crew" stories to introduce the characters to Zharus and give them a little more background and characterization so they could play a part in the events here. And I revisited my other Earth expatriates, the Skylers and Charlene from

the “Foxed” stories. It was fun tying together so many elements from other stories. Aleka Petrovna, Artemis...and of course Traffic Controller Second Class Chelsea Swinburne, who serves as a sort of everyman character to comment on this and that new weird thing appearing from outer space.

One thing that’s clear about this: it’s going to be a lot more even fight than I’d anticipated. I’d expected Zharus could use its qubitite superiority to curb-stomp Earth’s invaders in a hurry—but it looks like that won’t be happening quite the way I’d thought now that Earth’s been shown to have a few tricks up its sleeve that Zharus never expected. Perhaps showing their hand might have been a tactical error—but Earth undoubtedly expected it could intimidate the colonies without having to fire a shot.

Now that we’ve gotten this out of the way (and Jetfire’s got another awesome story waiting in the offing), and now that I’ve finished up one of my stories that was in the way of things, we can finally move on with the Totalia stuff. That promises to be *loads* of fun.