

# **Where Everybody Knows Your Name**

*By Jon Buck and Robotech\_Master*

*LowRIDER Bar, Uplift*  
*March 8, 132 AL*

Daniel Ferguson sat at the bar, nursing a virgin ginger ale. He'd just started working at the LowRIDER a few days ago. It was a great part-time job for a college student—it wasn't degrading manual labor, or trying to explain to someone how his new comm worked. All he had to do was mix stuff up and be reasonably nice to people. He actually had more trouble with the being nice to people part than the mixing stuff up part, because it wasn't exactly in him to suffer fools gladly.

Which wasn't to say there wasn't almost as much studying involved as there was in the college work that this job was helping pay for. Serena, the bartender who'd taken him under her wing, was helping him learn to mix up the most popular cocktails. Luckily, there were only a few dozen that were regularly ordered, and there were mixology manuals under the bar for when someone came in with something obscure, but Serena didn't believe in leaving anything to chance.

"Pop quiz, Danny. James Bond's favorite cocktail," Serena said.

That one was easy. "Vesper Martini. One part vodka, three parts gin, half measure of lillet. Add Angostura bitters or quinine powder to simulate the old Kina Lillet recipe. Shake over ice and strain into a champagne glass with a twist of lemon peel."

"Good. Next, an easy one. Beer and champagne," Serena said.

"Yeah, easy. Black Velvet."

"Layered Blue Curacao, Malibu, and spiced rum."

"Um..."

Serena smiled. "I'll let you think on that for a bit while I get this guy who just came in."

Daniel watched her saunter down to the other end of the bar. She had very self-assured body language, the long clouded leopard tail poking out the back of her dress held high and centered to avoid knocking anything off the shelves behind the bar. The feline ears that poked up through her blonde hair were already perking forward to focus on the customer, a sandy-haired young man staring glumly at a media tablet. "What's your fancy, mister?"

He glanced at the nametag on her chest, then up to her face. "Rum and coke, on the rocks, if you please, Miss Serena," the man said. "In a tumbler."

"So formal," Serena said, picking up a clean tumbler from the rack overhead. "Would you like anything else? Snacks? We have a kitchen fabber that can make some decent meals at a low price."

"I don't make good decisions on a full stomach, but thanks," the man said.

"Should I start you a tab?" Serena asked. She picked up the Malibu bottle with the pour spout on top and dispensed just the right amount of booze with one practiced motion.

"Sure," the man said. He pulled out his comm and thumbed it to send his charge information over to the bar's register.

Serena glanced at the register screen. "Glen Charleston, that you?"

The man nodded. "That's me."

Serena filled the glass the rest of the way from the soft-drink nozzle and set it on a coaster in front of him. He took a sip and nodded gratefully, then took another doleful glance at his tablet.

Daniel almost laughed out loud, it was so obvious what his problem was. Being situated next to the Dickerson's RIDE Market in the biggest mining town on the east coast, sometimes he was surprised anybody *else* ever came in. Your typical rube from the sticks, wants to go into mining but finds out the ol' *mu* won't stretch quite far enough...*unless*.

Thanks to the flood of military surplus RIDE units from Sturmhaven's 80%-female army after the war had ended nine years back, the market had been flooded with female units from *all* polities since. The RIDE manufactories had cut way back on the number of new female units they built, but it would still be a few more years before the market corrected itself.

The thing about RIDEs was that, because they bonded so closely to their operator, the onboard nanos that meshed the man with the machine would *remake* the man into the *woman* if he put on the wrong gender of RIDE suit. As a result, there were plenty of good bargains to be had for women who wanted to get into Q-mining...or for *men* who wanted to get into Q-mining *as women*.

Of course, Daniel thought sourly, it would have been a whole lot funnier if he hadn't been considering making that same tradeoff himself.

Down at the other end of the bar, Serena was discussing the issue with Glen.

"You can always find another job and wait until

tomorrow, or next week, or next month," Serena suggested. "There's always new RIDEs on the block, poor things."

"It's the timing. I imagine this place is pretty empty because everyone's going full speed down near the Old Smokey Play. If I don't haul ass down there and make my own claim *right now*, who knows when the next big strike will be?" He waved a hand at the tablet. "There's a Nextus WTD(f)-MMA-002D deer RIDE just going begging at 1,500 *mu*. Less than half the price of the only *male* RIDE that looks any good."

Serena nodded sympathetically. "I understand how hard this decision is. I know from experience."

"You're kidding? You're a crossrider and you're a *bartender*?" Glen asked. "Why?"

"Because in this business pretty girls get better tips," Serena said. "It really doesn't get simpler than that. I desperately needed the money, so I used an ex-girlfriend's RIDE to do the cross. That was, oh, two years ago. Alta came later, but my tips tripled instantly so I could eventually afford a new RIDE of my own."

And *there* was the reason Daniel had been considering that same tradeoff. His grades were okay, but not great. He hadn't been able to get a full-ride scholarship, and he was barely making ends meet right now. He still wasn't sure exactly *why* pretty girls should get better tips—after all, there were just as many gals as guys in mining these days—but he guessed it might be partly that men were heavier drinkers, and partly that a lot of those miners who crossed over had...kept their original preference, so to speak.

And, if he was honest with himself, there was also the

way that RIDEs nanos did a little bit of biosculpt in the process. He was a fairly ordinary-looking guy, nothing to write home about in the looks department, but if he crossed he'd end up a *pretty* girl. Sometimes he wondered if any women in other lines of work ever considered crossing over so they could become *handsome* guys.

There was a bodysculping salon just inside the main Uplift Dome a few clicks away where he could become an Adonais himself. Several of his male classmates had, for various reasons. But even the best-looking male bartenders and waiters at most bars still made much less than girls like Serena—crossriders or born-female 'sculpts themselves.

While he'd been thinking, Serena and Glen had been continuing their conversation. Daniel pulled his mind back to the present as Glen said, "The problem is, if I go with the bull elk, I won't have enough money left over to buy a cargo skimmer and the rest of the kit I'll need to strike out on my own. But if I go with the deer..."

"Maybe your thinking is too binary here?" Serena suggested. "Brubeck will hire anyone out of mining school with good grades and a RIDE. For that matter, so will Walton or most of the other corps. You could work for them for a year or two while you saved up a stake, then strike out. There'll be other plays besides Old Smokey. Four-fifths of the Dry hasn't even been explored yet."

"I suppose it's a Gordian knot," Glen said. "But I don't have a sword."

"Then what is the *less* undesirable choice? Sometimes there just aren't any good ones. Glen or Glenda, what's it gonna be?"

Glen looked thoughtfully at her. Daniel saw his eyes narrow, and knew in that moment the decision had been made. He picked up the tablet again and tapped the screen a few times. "Well, that's that, then. You're looking at the owner of a gently-used, certified bull elk RIDE," Glen said.

"Well, congratulations!" Serena said. "I hope you two will be happy together."

Glen picked up his rum and coke and took another drink. "This is really good, Serena. Thank you. Here's something extra for the advice." He picked up his comm to thumb a tip. Daniel leaned over the bar and glanced at the register display. A hundred *mu*. *Damn, pretty girls really do get the best tips.*

"All part of the service," Serena said brightly. "And thanks for the tip." She came back down the bar to Daniel as Glen finished the drink, pocketed his comm, and left.

"How often do you do that, again?" Daniel asked.

"At least twice a week, lately," Serena said. "They come in, pondering their choices. Or so they think. Most of the time, they've already made up their minds, they just don't know it yet. They just need a sympathetic ear so they can talk themselves into doing what they wanted to do anyway all along. Speaking of crossing, how do the RIDE listings look for you today?"

Daniel pulled his comm out of his pocket and pulled up the listings. "Female RIDEs only dropped another sixty *mu* on average from yesterday, so I think they're bottoming out," Daniel said. "That 002-series doe he mentioned looks pretty good; I've actually had my eye on her myself. It's been two days and nobody's snatched her up, and I'm thinking of putting in a down payment. Can I

take some time off and go meet her? Off the clock, of course. I *need* those tips more than I *need* to stand up to piss."

"You could just cross with my Alta, you know," Serena said. "Offer's still open."

"Thanks," Daniel said. "But I'm not really a cat sort of person. I've wanted a RIDE for a while, but I always knew it would be some kind of deer or elk. If I'm going to pay for it this way, I might as well have the right tags from the start. Besides, I've spoken to that RIDE once already, and it seems like we could get along."

Serena waved at the empty bar. "It's not like we've got enough business for two bartenders right now anyway. Don't worry about going off the clock. Take your time. This is a big decision."

"Like you said, it's one I'd actually already made, Serena. I just needed those sympathetic, furry, pointy ears to let me figure it out. But thanks," Daniel said. "When you see me next I'll be more a Diane than a Daniel." He got up, then paused. "Layered Blue Curacao, Malibu, and spiced rum. That's that drink someone made up based on Disney's *Little Mermaid*, isn't it?"

Serena grinned. "I think you're going to do just fine... Diane."

"You again, huh?" the doe mecha said. She was a solitary Nextus deer amid the Sturmhaven wolves. "Either buy me or go away."

"Relax, Faline. I'm just waiting on the financials," Daniel said.

"Seriously? You're not just getting my hopes up?"

“Job’s going well. I don’t see why they’ll deny the loan.” Daniel looked at Faline’s information sheet: *Since the War, this unit has been owned by a single family as a nanny, and comes with an “animated” style hardlight skin to make her look more like her Disney namesake.* The cartoon-style skin was *slightly* creepy in real life. With a 002-series chassis that was the only thing Daniel thought could have kept her on the block for two days.

Just then, the loan approval came through, as did the purchase order. “And it looks like you’re going to come home with me after all.”

“How exciting,” Faline deadpanned, ears drooping. “No, no that’s not the word I’m looking for.”

Daniel folded his arms. “If not that, then what?”

“Look, I’m not too hot on the idea of making a woman out of you,” Faline said. “That kind of crap is what I fought *against* in the War.” The Sturmhaven she-wolves around her looked hungrily in her direction. In return, she snorted at them and pawed a forehoof. “Anytime, ladies! You couldn’t catch me with a whole *pack* of bitches!”

The shewolf next to them muttered something in such heavily-accented Sturmhaven patois Daniel couldn’t make it out.

But Faline apparently *did*. “Your mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries! Let’s go, Danielle.”

“I decided on Diane,” Daniel said.

“Diane, then.” The doe mecha walked off the auction plinth and nosed him in the stomach. “Let’s blow this joint. As I said, I’m not happy with why you bought me, but I don’t have much choice do I? Do you want me to girl

you now or wait ‘til we get home?”

“I work at the LowRIDEr across the parking lot. I thought we’d just do it there. I still have half a workday left,” Daniel said. *Besides, having Serena there would... help.* “Think that’s the first time I’ve heard ‘girl’ used as a verb.”

“If the boobs fit,” Faline said. “Well, they will. You’ll be wearing them.”

“You can resize my work uniform, right?” Daniel said. The uniform consisted of a white button-down dress shirt, a blue tie, black slacks and dark brown leather shoes.

“All part of the service,” Faline said. She drooped her head near the ground and sighed. “Oy...hoy...after all I did for that ungrateful family, when the kids get old enough to be independent, they dump me on Dickerson’s.”

“Tough break,” Daniel said, unsure of what else to say. They walked outside of the warehouse, out into the parking lot that was full near Dickerson’s and empty nearer the strip mall. Dickerson’s and strip mall sat under a kilometer-wide private climate dome, since the city-state hadn’t expanded the main Domes out this far yet.

“Why don’t we get this over with?” Faline said, stopping in her tracks. “All you really want me for are boobs! Once you’re done you’ll just shut me down and leave me in a closet, or sell me again...”

“Faline, if I *just* wanted to cross, I would have taken Serena up on her offer to use *her* RIDE for *zero cost*, or just taken you on a ‘test drive.’” Daniel pointed out. “As it is, I’m out about 1,700 mu after the interest from the loan is factored in. I’ve been looking for a doe RIDE for weeks now, and after I talked to you last time I knew you were

the one. It may shock you, but I actually *like* you. If you want to find out for certain, then go ahead and Fuse.”

Faline glowered at him, then the cartoonish skin shut down. “I’m not going to Fuse with that toony pelt on. It bugs people when they see a busty anthro version of a Disney character, so I won’t be using it outside of Walker.”

“No problem,” Daniel said. “Once I start making better tips, getting you a real pelt again will be the first thing I do.” He stood still and spread his arms. “So, girl me already.”

Faline appeared to sigh. “You don’t have any classes today, do you? This is going to take hours. I’ll have to shave off about fifteen kilos to give you the measurements you’ll want.”

“I’ll leave that to your good taste,” Daniel said.

The ridge over Faline’s left eye raised. “Are you *absolutely* sure about that?”

“Just make me look like someone who’ll get good tips,” Daniel said. “After all, I’ll be spending part of them on you.”

Faline grumbled. “I *hate* newbie crossriders. They always turn out all whiny and needy and I end up wanting to smack them. Never thought I’d have to do one *myself*.”

“I won’t be like that,” Daniel said.

“Oh, *sure*. You *think* you won’t. You think you’ll just be the ‘you’ you are now, with boobs on,” Faline said. “It doesn’t *work* that way. But there’s no way you’ll *believe* that until it actually happens to you, so I’m probably just wasting my non-existent breath here.”

“Are you going to Fuse or not?”

“Well, there’s no time like the present,” Faline said.

She reared up, Fuse cavity opening on her torso, and engulfed him.

*:Welcome to Faline's Crossriding Salon,:* she said.

*:You might as well enjoy it, for some value of 'enjoy. It'll be like sitting in a pool of fizzy water.:*

*:Well, I'm feeling something going on down there,:* Daniel said.

“Happy birthday, you're now technically a girl,” Faline said. She looked across the parking lot at her new rider's workplace. “Now, I'd like to meet this Serena and her partner. You feeling okay?”

“I'm good,” Diane squeaked. “I'm good. I'm good. Let's...put one hoof in front of the other.”

An hour later, Diane was still Fused in the bar's break room, feeling sick with anxiety. The other bar employees, what few were needed with so many out in the Dry, wisely ignored Diane and her new friend. Serena and Alta watched over them, more like friends than a boss.

“Let me guess. You've got that queasy feeling, deep in your belly, about showing your new face the first time?” Serena asked.

“I'm trying to damp it down for her, but it's a *powerful* thing,” Faline said, actually sounding concerned.

“I'm...I'm good. I'm good,” Diane said. “Just a little lightheaded. How's my voice? Do I sound okay? Not *too girly*?”

“You're just fine,” Serena reassured. “If you can't handle it, go home.”

“Back to the *dorm*? To face my *roomies*? I'm not ready for that!” Diane exclaimed.

“But you are ready to serve drinks to strangers looking like...however you look under those metal boobs,” Serena’s RIDE Alta said. The clouded leopardess had a full pelt, swishing her tail back and forth.

“Well, why not? Serena did it!” Diane said. “Everyone said you went right back to work like nothing happened!”

“The only explanation I have for that, Diane, is that I’m me.” Serena shook her head. “Deep breaths, Diane. Actually, take several. Relax. Your body is all raging hormones right now. It’s like you’re having puberty again. You’ll get used to it, but it’ll take a little time.”

“I tried to warn her,” Faline said. “Silly girl.”

“You almost sound like you *care*, Faline,” Diane said.

“Serena, I’m going to find someone to help her,” Faline said, standing up. “I know it, you know it, she isn’t in any condition to work today. Probably not tomorrow either.”

Diane wanted to say that her new RIDE was completely wrong, but couldn’t. Facing customers like this was a bad idea.

Serena nodded. “Business is slow this week, so we should be fine. I should have seen this coming, I guess. I’ve been *told* most people don’t take to crossing as easily as I did, but you know, you just assume the way something works for you is how it’ll work for everyone.”

*:Is there a crossrider club or something at Uplift U?:*  
Faline asked. *:Or some other kind of psych support? I’m not doing this myself. I’m not human.:*

*:This is Uplift. Of course there is,:* Diane said. *:Can’t you read my mind?:*

*:Right now I don’t want to,:* Faline replied tartly.

*:Found them and the contact info of the go-to girl for boob newbs and sent them a text. Let's not waste time getting you back on your dainty little feet.:*

*:Sorry about this...:* Diane said, mortified to the bone.

*:You did warn me...:*

*:Eh. You did get me away from those damned Sturmie bitches. Putting up with you for a while will be a piece of cake by comparison. They'll meet us in the Library.:*

“Hey, you two, good luck,” Alta said.

“I can probably stretch your time off up to a week, but try not to go over it,” Serena said.

“Thanks!” Diane said. *:Well, let's get this party started, Faline. I think I'm feeling a little better now.:*

The new woman's anxiety was receding, though slowly, now that she knew there was someone else out there to lend a hand, in addition to her boss. Remaining Fused, she and Faline left the building and headed towards Uplift University's Burnside Library.

*March 14, 132 AL*

*Uplift University, Samuel Perez Dorm*

Diane felt her new roomie's finger grab for something under the back of her shirt as she finished getting dressed for her morning classes. “Hey! You're not wearing a bra!” Jessica Drew accused.

“I'm getting a welt from people snapping the strap all the time, that's why,” she replied. Bra-snapping was apparently something you had to deal with as a new crossrider around the UU campus. “So I decided to go *au*

*natural* today.”

“Suit yourself, newb,” Jessica said with a feral grin. She tilted her head and picked up a hair brush, doing her own morning preening. “But it’s Valentine’s Day, you know.”

“I’m working tonight,” Diane replied. She felt a little queasy at the thought, but days of heavy immersion therapy had taken most of the edge off of it. “Besides, it’s a little early for me to think about dating anyone.”

“Never too early to try out the new plumbing,” Jessica opined. Diane had been paired with her specifically because she was willing to help out a newb like herself. “But no pressure. Still, want to use my makeup mask today?”

Diane sighed and considered her pretty face in the mirror. Overall, Faline had given her exactly what she’d asked for: a sculpted body that was just busty enough to titillate and tantalize, and hopefully generate a *lot* of big tips. She had shoulder-length rust-colored hair that matched her cervine ears and tail.

So far her wardrobe consisted of Faline re-sizing her male clothing into something more form-fitting. She couldn’t afford—nor did she want—anything too overtly feminine just yet. No ruffles, no lace, no dresses, nothing like that. The refitted clothes were quite enough as it was. Still, the Crossrider Club kept telling her to push the boundaries of her comfort zone. There were plenty of stereotypically female attire to borrow and try.

“Aw, hell. Why not? Give it here,” Diane said. “Just keep it off the Star Circus Clown setting.”

“What about the Glam Rock Star setting? You could

be a female Gene Simmons! But seriously, the Cyndi Lauper look would suit you. Leg warmers, neon colors, oversized shirts with off-the-shoulder sleeves, poufy hairstyle. But, just a sec...” Jessica walked to Diane’s dresser drawer and took out a bra. “Really, you *need* to wear this. We have five hundred years of bra-tech here. They used to spend hours finding something that fit in the 80s. We should consider ourselves lucky girls. I do. First the bra, then the mask.”

Jessica had a point. It was self-fitting, self-adjusting smart fabric that was never too tight or too loose. Diane sighed. “Okay, okay. But the next person who snaps the strap is going to get an earful.”

*:Are you ready yet?:* Faline impatiently sent from the RIDE parking lot. *:Kicking wolves and cats in the snoot in Nature Range gets boring after a while.:*

*:Still undefeated, Faline?:* Diane replied.

*:Never been eaten, never will be,:* the doe declared.

*:You sound mighty sure about that,:* Diane said. *:I’m sure there are some pretty good hunters out there...:*

*:Not good enough. Never good enough. I guess I’ll play more Borderlands Online while you’re in class,:* Faline replied. Faline spent long hours in the parking lot. UU hadn’t really accounted for RIDEs in their campus design yet, and they weren’t allowed inside the classrooms. *:Sometimes I feel like being the hunter, and I’m a pretty good Maya.:*

It took a minute to remove her shirt, put the bra on and then her shirt back on. Only then did her roomie give over the makeup mask. She put it on, waited the requisite ten seconds while the machine did its work, then removed

it. Diane checked her reflection again.

“See? Totally 80s,” Jessica said. “You just need an outfit and big hair to go with it and you’ll be a regular Joan Jett or Cyndi Lauper.”

“I don’t know if it’s really me.”

“Take it and *make* it you,” Jessica recommended. “If that doesn’t work, then be someone else tomorrow. Try punk, try grunge, try Rosie the Riveter, be pinup girl for a day. C’mon, it’s fun.”

“I’ll just go with ‘hot bartender’ for now, thanks,” Diane said.

“You could even make it scientific,” Jessica recommended. “Track how many tips you get with each look, so you know what the best one to go with is.”

“Cramming for our Statistics final again, are we?” Diane said dryly. “I’d better go. I have history class in ten minutes.”

“You’re about to really thank me for the bra,” Jessica said. “See you later, Di.”

Diane grabbed her tablet bag, waved and rushed out the door, then took the steps down two at a time. *:On my way, Faline.:*

*:I’m waiting at the front door. You sound...chipper. Seems like you finally slept well last night,:* Faline said. *:Should I tell Alta you’ll be back today?:*

*:I think I can do this,:* Diane replied. *:Feeling more on the level today. I still wonder just how Serena managed to pull off what she did.:*

*:Alta says she—he—had been thinking about the possibility off and on ever since he was a little kid and the nano-clinics started popping up,:* Faline said. *:So she was*

*already ready in her head. You only started thinking about it after you found you were making lousy tips. I still can't believe that's why you did it, and I've been in your head.:*

*:It's not as if crossing for money's unique,:* Diane said. She reached the front doors, seeing Faline standing outside without her Disney skin on, but kept sending in private. *:I ever tell you how you almost got bought by a wanna-be miner because you cost less than half of what the cheapest male RIDE did? 'Sides, I really like bartending. I mean, I have a knack for it. But facts are in this business being a hot girl gets better tips, and that's half my income.:*

The UU campus wasn't very RIDE-friendly, despite continued agitation from the Student Union that they needed to be allowed at least on the same floor as their owners. The doors, rooms, and hallways were simply too small to handle them, so instead they were limited to a ghetto of sarium-safe charging areas, preferably in skimmer mode so the older generation didn't have to look at them.

"Mother of chrome, what *did* you do to your face?" Faline asked. "The Star Circus won't be back for years, you know."

"Hardy har har," Diane said.

"I spent a lot of time and effort on that Aphrodite face. You don't need makeup," Faline insisted.

"Maybe not, but I'm willing to give this a try. People *want* to wear makeup sometimes, whether they *need* it or not. No offense," Diane said. Faline snorted.

Diane started a fast jog towards the Social Sciences

Building, then was glad she'd worn a smartbra after all. Faline trotted alongside. They weren't allowed to use skimmers on campus grounds either, but Walker modes were. She would have Fused, but her therapist and the girls at the Crossrider Club said that getting used to how her body moved would help her new body image settle down.

Then there was the ongoing, long-term "Crossrider Longitudinal Study" being done at the Psychology Department. All she'd had to do was sign a few things, answer a battery of questions, get some body and brain scans, then get paid 250 *mu* for her trouble. She was supposed to return once per year for additional scans and questionnaires to track how her attitude changed towards men, women, and society in general. The money didn't make up for missing so much work, but it wasn't unwelcome.

Everywhere she looked there were students wearing styles from the 1980s, so it wasn't as if her makeup was out of place. Steader Entertainment had been promoting that decade into the stratosphere and beyond. One of the male students in front of Diane was on a pink hoverboard, wearing Marty McFly's puffy red vest-jacket, wearing a Sony Walkman and headphones. The Huey Lewis song was audible to Diane's cervine ears.

*The power of love is a curious thing.  
Make one man weep, make another man sing  
Change a hawk to a little white dove  
more than a feeling that's the power of love*

The lawn outside of the History Building had been taken over by RIDEs of all sizes and species. Most of them lacked a hardlight pelt of any kind, so the robotic animals looked even more out of place. But RIDEs were rapidly replacing skimmers as the mode of transportation of choice for college-age people. Male-to-female crossriders were a small-but-significant portion of them because of the price differential.

“See you after class, Diane,” Faline said.

“The money from the study is going into your pelt fund,” Diane replied. “Back in a couple hours, Fay.”

The doe mecha nodded and walked over to lay down under a tree.

Halfway up the crowded stairs she felt someone grab her shirt, groping for her bra strap. It was impossible to spin around and see who was doing it, but someone else stepped in. “Trish, the new lady’s had enough of that,” said a firm baritone.

“Like, sorry! Geez!” a woman with a Valley Girl accent replied. “Like, it’s just a little hazing. I had my bra snapped all the time when I was a Frosh. Gawd!”

Diane was short enough now she had to wait until the top of the stairs to get a good look at the bra snapper and her savior. Their voices were somewhat familiar, but she needed to see their faces to be certain. Sure enough, they were from last night’s Crossrider Club meeting. They each were tagged, the girl with white ferret and the man with brown bear.

“Thanks, uh...” Diane asked him.

“Sue Hernandez,” he said.

“Really?” Diane asked.

“It’s my name and I’m not changing it,” the man-named-Sue declared. To go along with the bear ears, he had a bushy beard and wore dark glasses and a fedora. The look reminded Diane of the band ZZ Top, part of the 80s revival going on, crossed with Grizzly Adams.

*Okay, who am I to judge?* “Well, thanks again, Sue. I’d better get my tail to class. Maybe catch you later?” Diane said.

“You have a very a pretty tail,” the Valley Girl said.

Diane wasn’t going to stay angry over something so juvenile as a strap snap. “Thanks. Maybe I’ll snap *your* bra later.”

“Turnabout’s fair play. I’m Trish Sykes.” She smiled and extended her hand. Trish was all decked out in a faux-Madonna minidress. “Love your makeup, too.”

“Uh, thanks Trish.” Diane shook her hand. “I’m Diane Ferguson. Bye!” She made a dash towards class to get inside before the professor started.

As soon as Faline lay down in the grass she looked inward and spawned a Bambi’s Forest process. She hated the name, but it’d been used since RIs were first made to be a friendly no-predation environment where they could take on a more anthro form and do certain tasks. She sent out an invitation to some of the RIDEs she had met at the Crossrider Club last night she noticed had taken spots around the tree.

The Kodiak bear, Kenai, materialized in anthro form next to Heidi, a white ferret.

“No Nature Range this time, Faline?” Kenai said. Like herself, he was named after a Disney character.

“Anxious to get a third broken jaw, Kenai?” Faline said. “Naw, I just wanted to talk. You said last night your riders have been crossed for a year now and I’m curious how you’ve dealt with the whole thing. This is new to me.”

“Your Diane is kind of a mess, isn’t she?” Heidi said. “I wish I could claim that’s not the usual, but my Trish is a prime example of trying to be too feminine to compensate. Of course, Kenai’s kept his femmy name.”

“Nothing wrong with a boy named Sue,” the bear said.

“He couldn’t get a Man Card at Cape Nord with a name like that,” Heidi said. “Not that I’m saying he’d *want* to, but...”

Faline grimaced. There were many things about Diane that had surprised her. A childhood of ballet lessons, for example, meant that Daniel would have had a hard time getting a Man Card in Cape Nord too.

“What’s Sue’s story, anyway?” Faline asked.

“If you think Sue’s going to come on to Diane, don’t worry,” Kenai said. “He and Trish are high school sweethearts who thought it’d be romantic to role-reverse.”

“I see,” Faline said.

“We were graduation presents,” Heidi said. The ferret gestured at Faline. “You, Faline, on the other paw... You know, I hear rumors, old sideband BBS claptrap. Rumors that you took out half a platoon of Sturmie wolves *by yourself* after your rider was incapacitated in the middle of a battle on the Harkonnen Plateau.”

“Guilty as charged,” Faline said, holding her hands up with the palms forward. “So I have a reputation to protect in Nature Range.”

“You’re a regular Samus Aran,” Kenai said dryly.

“Still...I think she’s getting better,” Faline mused. “I think she’s coming out of the post-cross funk. The Club’s a big help, so are the therapists, and believe it or not, Diane’s *mom*.”

Upon leaving the Library after meeting the Crossrider Club members, Diane had decided she needed to go *home* home, a small town called Longmire in the Tunnel that connected Uplift to the Coastal Ring. Two days of motherly support had ensued. Diane was that rare beast on Zharus, the only child. The woman had barely acknowledged Faline’s presence the whole time, but those sixty hours had grounded Diane more than the next four days of Club meetings, some long hours in the Crossrider Longitudinal Study, getting therapy, and the simple companionship of other crossriders like herself.

“She should count herself lucky, then. Sue and Trish’s parents...well...it’s like the Cold War,” Kenai said.

“Relations are very...cordial. But if anybody says something wrong, there’s gonna be Mutually Assured Destruction and they won’t be talking ever again,” Heidi added, shivering. “It’s a *nasty* detente.”

“I don’t envy you two, then,” Faline said. “Humans are a *mess*, you know that?”

“Well, we can’t choose our partners,” Heidi said. “It’s sort of like what humans say about not being able to choose their parents.”

“And you *certainly* can’t choose your *partner’s* parents,” Kenai added. The bear facepawed. “Mother of chrome, what a mess.”

“You know, I’m tired of bellyaching about things I can’t control,” Faline said. “Game for some Borderlands?”

Or maybe watch some of those new '80s cartoons Steader Entertainment just dumped on our sidebands? Some of them look interesting. Not as much Hanna-Barbera and Filmation crap compared to the '70s."

"Just one word for you when it comes to '80s cartoons, Faline: *Toyetic*. Get used to it. But sure, I'm game for cartoons, and game for a Borderlands game," Heidi said. "There's this one called...*Silverhawks*. Huh. Interesting premise. Humans become bird-themed cyborgs or something. That's gotta be popular with the birdies."

"Yeah, and all the Nextus kitties are going to be down with *Thundercats*," Kenai added. "Some of them will get so into it they'll practically be '*Thundercats* hos.' If you know what I mean."

With their humans in class, there was little else for the RIDEs to do but watch the tv, movies, and play the games that constantly came out of Steader Entertainment. At times it was like drinking from the firehose, and they'd barely touched on the early Internet yet. Rumors were that once they reached the late 90s the floodgates would truly open. The company had already released samples.

Faline had to admit, the Steaders were doing a great job of pumping up the interest. In interviews, they said they were following the example of a streaming media service from the early Internet era that had made whole seasons of shows available at once so people could 'binge-watch' them. It made people more willing to pay to subscribe to the service. From time to time, Faline was a little puzzled that so many people were willing to pay to subscribe to the *Steaders*' service. Old shows were cool

and all, but she wouldn't have thought they'd have mass appeal, even among the humans. But somehow they did.

After watching a few episodes of both *Silverhawks* and *Thundercats* from a couch and big wood console TV spawned in Bambi's Forest, Faline checked some facts on the wiki and meta tags. "They're the same show, with mostly the same voice actors. The hell?"

"Same villain," Kenai said. "Transforms and everything. One into a kind of cyborg, and the other into a big scary mummy."

"I suppose they do each have a certain charm, but *Thundercats* needs more ferrets," Heidi opined.

"You always say 'needs more ferrets'," Kenai said, smiling.

"Well, they always *do*," Heidi said.

And so the conversation and viewing continued until their internal alarms told them class was coming to an end. "I suppose we'll do some gaming next time," Faline said. "I've heard someone wants to start an *EverQuest* server."

"*EverCrack* you mean," Heidi said. "Blocky low-poly avatars. No thanks. Running around as Axton is hard enough on my poor widdle girly ferrety head." Heidi put her handpaws to her temples.

"You could always just use a Rule 63 'Axta' and be done with it," Faline reminded her.

"I'm going to play these games in their *original* state, Fay," Heidi insisted. "Anyway, we'd better get going. See you in the Real." The ferret derezzed.

"I'd better join her," Kenai said. "Maybe see you at the bar tonight? Trish and Sue were planning on some

barhopping for their date.”

“The LowRIDEr is a bit out of the loop for that, but I doubt you’d be unwelcome,” Faline said. “See you all then.”

The LowRIDEr wasn’t the most high-class pub in Uplift, but it still had a dress code for its bartenders and servers. For men that meant the dress shirt-tie-slacks Daniel had worn. For women, there was an emphasis on the *dress* part, in black, blue, purple, or white. Pants weren’t part of the equation, though it didn’t have to be a single-piece garment. It could be a separate skirt with a blouse, but not too tight that it limited movement. No heels for similar reasons.

Tonight Diane had borrowed her outfit from Jessica’s closet and gotten a work makeover from the Crossrider Club in the process. She *wanted* to impress Serena and Alta after a week of absence. She also *wanted* her wallet to be full of tips. *Tips for tits*, she thought. She felt a pang of anxiety and a little guilt at the way that thought had come together. Her mother had been very *pointed* in her criticism of her reasons.

:*Ready for this, slugger?*: Faline asked in Fuse.

:*You know I am,*: Diane replied. They arrived inside the Dickersons’ Dome in the early evening. The parking lot was almost full of skimmers, this time on the LowRIDEr end of the lot. There were no fewer than five *Back to the Future* DeLoreans, a half dozen KITT-style Trans-Ams, numerous Ford Tauruses, a few East German Trabants, and many more iconic ‘80s American and European cars from real life and fiction. A pair of *TRON* lightcycles sat next to

the Spinner from *Blade Runner* and the Starcar from *The Last Starfighter*.

The sound of one of the newly-released rock songs from ZZ Top spilled out of the pub's front doors.

*Clean shirt, new shoes  
and I don't know where I am goin' to.  
Silk suit, black tie,  
I don't need a reason why.  
They come runnin' just as fast as they can  
coz every girl crazy 'bout a sharp dressed man.*

“The Ladies of the Hour arrive,” Alta said, sitting outside the employee entrance. “Watch your step. We’re crowded as hell inside.”

The employee area closed off to the public was practically standing-room only, and they all gave Faline and Diane a smirk when they saw her enter still Fused. Everyone was too occupied to do more than smirk. The small kitchen was in full operation, fabbing meal after meal. The strong smell of exotic liquors filled the air.

“It got busy again!” Diane called to Serena over the music.

“Yeah!” Serena called back as she came closer. “All the good spots on Old Smokey got taken fast, so everyone who didn’t get a piece high-tailed it—literally—back to Uplift to restock! Don’t expect it to be this busy for long—half of ‘em will be heading right back out again in a day or so.”

“We’d better de-Fuse out back,” Faline said. “It’s too crowded in here.” The employee RIDEs were all ‘parked’ behind the bar, between the delivery dock and the edge of

the climate dome. There were some young trees and sod put down. Faline made their way out to join them, before peeling away from Diane and reverting to her Walker form. “There you go,” Faline said. “Go knock ‘em dead.”

With *mu* signs in her eyes, Diane walked into the bar. Serena promptly took her by the arm. “We need you up front. Come on.”

“How do I look?” Diane stammered.

“A little heavy on the mascara. Just take easy drinks until you get used to having all that stuff in the way, okay?” Serena said.

“I’m used to my breasts,” Diane insisted.

“Not at work you’re not. And don’t expect better tips the first night, okay? Also, you’re now ‘the new girl’ and you’re going to get ogling from *both* sexes,” Serena said. “Watch out for gropes and butt-slaps. Tell the bouncers if someone is harassing you. Otherwise, you’re only getting a three hour shift tonight. Got all that?”

“Everything,” Diane said as they went through the doors into the patron area. More loud ZZ Top music blasted her ears.

*Rumour spreadin’ a-’round in that Texas town  
‘bout that shack outside La Grange  
and you know what I’m talkin’ about.  
Just let me know if you wanna go  
to that home out on the range.  
They gotta lotta nice girls.*

With a dozen bartenders—now all female except for one determined holdout Adonis—there were just enough

to keep ahead of the drink orders. Being Valentine's Day couples were more focused on their dates than making passes at the staff. When the tips started rolling in they were *barely* more than before. But she quickly learned by watching Serena and the other girls. A smile at the right time, a specific tone of voice, made all the difference.

The first person to even make a comment on her looks was a tipsy platinum blond woman in a black minidress, apparently one of the few alone at the bar. She spent several minutes nursing her Harvey Wallbanger, long hair fallen forward and mostly hiding her face, before making a comment in a slightly slurred voice. "It's a chest butt, you know."

"Beg pardon?" Diane said.

"Chest. Butt. Humans have sex front-to-front, right? Like, every other animal does it from the rear. It's like, you know, baboons? *Big* red butts. Male babs love 'em. Our boobs are just the same, but from the front. Chest." She patted her own voluminous breasts. "Butt." She patted her behind, then giggled like a madwoman. She swallowed the remaining booze in her highball glass. "I think I've had enough tonight. *Hee.*"

"I'll call you a cab," Diane said. She signaled one of the bouncers near the front.

"No, no. My boyfriend's here, somewhere..." she trailed off, then looked around. "C'mon, Sue...where are you?"

"Trish?" Diane tilted her head a little and finally recognized her. The woman's outfit and makeup made her appear almost completely unrecognizable and she wasn't speaking in Valley Girl patois. "Why didn't you say

anything?”

“Just did,” Trish replied. She pushed her hair back, revealing the white ferretty tags that had been hidden by her hairdo. “Hee. I had Heidi grow my hair out for tonight. Sometimes a girl just wants to look different. Had her bump me up two cup sizes, too. Special night, you know.”

“So, where’s Sue?” Diane asked. The place was so crowded, and there were multiple men with beards and bear tags.

“Dunno. Think he got pulled into a few games of pool,” the tipsy woman said. “Lummox should be over here with *me*. When I was Trey, always tried to be attentive. Always. Well, *almost* always. Nobody’s perfect, you know.”

Diane flicked her ears, the clacking of pool balls against each other was just part of the cacophony, only for one of the waitresses chose that moment to drop off an order slip for four cocktails. She took one look at the list and groaned. They were all obscure names. *What the hell is a Belle of the Ball?*

“This is for the ladies at Table Eleven,” the waitress said. “If you can’t handle it I’ll give it to Lara.”

“Oh, cosplayers,” Trish said. “*Princesses*. Probably newb crossriders like *you* having a party. Girling it up, getting it out of their system.”

“I’ll get it done,” Diane said, taking the list and going back up the bar to get the mixology guide. As she passed Serena, she nodded toward Trish. “Nothing else stronger than a Shirley Temple for that one.”

“No biggie. I know when I’m lush,” Trish said. “I’ll just have another Coke. Just plain old Coke.”

The four cocktails were: Belle of the Ball, Glass

Slippers, Sleep Cycle, and Lily of the Sun. The girls were dressed like Belle, Cinderella, Aurora, and Rapunzel. Diane put two-and-two together. “Oh, it’s more of those Disney Princess Cocktails. Joy.”

“If you can’t make them, I can,” Serena said. She was in the middle of juggling several wine and liquor bottles.

Diane’s mixology reference tablet pulled up the cocktails and preparation. “No, I’ve got them. Looks pretty simple.” She pulled out her shakers and got to work.

*I did it...I did it. I went back to work and didn’t make a fool of myself.* Diane wanted to raise her arms and cheer. The tips...well, they were better, not stellar, but measurably better. *:Hey, Faline! I did it!:* she sent.

*:Congrats, you’ve faced the wolves for tonight,:* the doe mecha replied. *:What about tomorrow?:*

*:After tonight, tomorrow will be a cinch.:* Diane leaned back in a break room chair. “Oh wow. Felt like I was...*feeding* off the crowd, somehow.”

“You catch on quick,” Serena said, pulling up a chair. Diane hadn’t noticed before, but the older woman’s hair had clouded leopard rosettes in it now and she looked a little fuzzy about the face. “Almost, but not quite, as fast as me.”

“I don’t think anyone could be as fast as you,” Diane said.

“I had time to get ready,” Serena said. She looked at the front of Diane’s blouse. “Picked up a little staining on that shirt.”

“Huh? Where?” Diane lifted her elbows and tried to look around her breasts.

Serena cupped the bottom of hers. “Right where you can’t see it.”

“These things should come with a mirror on my belt,” Diane grumbled.

“Anyway, give it a little time and you’ll be pulling down tips like you wouldn’t *believe*,” Serena said. “The trick is to be friendly, but don’t come on too strong. It’s all right to flirt a little, but don’t give ‘em the wrong idea.” She snapped her fingers. “And one sorta-big thing. Some folks will pick up that you’re a crossrider, and they’ll find that *very* sexy. Especially people your age. You’re more flexible than my generation. You should probably figure out how you’re going to deal with that.”

“Yes, Grandma,” Diane said. Serena was only a decade older than she was. Still, she took the advice to heart.

“Think you can work a full shift tomorrow?”

“Sure. Go ahead and schedule it.” Diane grinned like a madwoman. *:Faline, you’ll have that realistic pelt sooner than you think.:*

*:It’s nice to hear you so confident,:* Faline admitted.  
*:I won’t hold you to it, but if you come through I’ll treat you to a simmed day in Nature Range.:*

*:I’ll look forward to that...whatever Nature Range is...:* Diane said.

*:Oh, you’ll like it. You can just go completely wild,:* Faline said.

*:So it’s like Mardi Gras, then?:*

*:Oh, sure. Parades and everything,:* Faline said dryly.  
*:I’ll bring some friends. Then we can watch movies or something. Found some real gems in the Steader sideband stream lately.:*

*:Sounds great,: Diane said. :But I'd get it for you anyway. I want us to look normal when we Fuse.:*

“Go ahead and clock out,” Serena said. She gave her employee an amiable pat on the shoulder. “I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

*April 1, 132 AL*

“Ballet? Seriously?” Serena said. “I know you’re throwing yourself into the whole ‘girly’ thing, but that seems like a little much. This isn’t an April Fool’s Day joke, is it?”

“No, it’s what I want to do!” Diane said. “I had classes when I was little, and liked them, but sort of drifted away in high school. The other kids didn’t really understand. But now ballet is perfectly legit! And there’s a local repertory company that’ll take me.”

“Hate to say it, but you don’t exactly have a ballerina’s figure,” Serena said. The older crossrider’s nose had turned markedly feline lately, and Alta was often inside the bar, trying to stay as out of the way as she could. Serena had started griping a lot about having to de-Fuse lately, and had been bugging management for permission to stay Fused for work. So far, it hadn’t come through yet.

“Faline can fix that,” Diane said. “Then restore them for work. She’s also going to help me build up my muscle memory so I can catch up on the classes I missed.”

Serena shrugged. “Well, it’s your life. If ballet helps get you through the days, who am I to judge?”

The repertory company was not exactly the Bolshoi. It

was made up mostly of locals like Diane, who'd had some training when they were younger or who were full-time students now. It turned out that, thanks to a combination of what she remembered from her early classes and the work Faline put in on getting her back into dancing shape, Diane was actually one of the better dancers in the class, so she was a shoo-in to dance the part of Odette in their production of Swan Lake.

Getting ready for it was hard work, and it took up almost all her free time outside of work and studying. But Diane absolutely loved it. With every pirouette, she swore she could *feel* her estrogen flowing. Which Faline was quick to tell her was dumb, but she didn't care. She was having the time of her life.

At last, the night of the big show came, and Diane was actually able to convince Serena to take the evening off and come with her to the show. She was easy enough to spot in the audience, using one of the few Fuser seats up on the balcony: a clouded leopardess in a fancy white dress. Diane was too involved in the show to look up at her much, but caught glimpses every now and then.

But then, after one of the later intermissions, Diane noticed she hadn't returned to her seat. It almost put her off her performance, but she took a firm grip on herself. Maybe she'd had an emergency, or work had called or something. She'd check her comm after the show. Anyway, Serena had seen *most* of her performance, and that was enough for now. She threw herself into the role, dancing Odette's doomed love with Prince Siegfried through to the very end.

It was another hour after the show before Diane could

get back together with Faline. The director had called the cast together for the post-show review, and insisted on showing them replays of parts that could have been done better. They promised to work on them at practice the next day.

Finally, Diane had changed back into her street clothes and met Faline outside to Fuse up.

“I’m not getting any return pings from Alta,” Faline said in Nature Range while she restored her rider’s normal figure. “Not even on sidebands. I haven’t heard anything from them since they left at intermission. I’m worried.”

“You think they’re hurt somewhere?” Diane asked. She dropped her head down to drink from a pond, looking at the doe reflected back. Nature Range was something else, and she still hadn’t quite forgiven Faline for not being completely truthful the first time. But after a few more gos Diane was comfortable enough on four feet and often spent nights in Fuse-sleep, divided between studying and Nature Range.

“I’m going to report this to the gendarmes,” Faline said. She whimpered a little. “This is too much like...well... humans and their RIDEs just seem to vanish without a trace.”

“Too much like what?” Diane said.

“I don’t think I should really talk about it,” Faline said, flicking her ears, as if listening for something in the undergrowth.

“Faline, they’re our *friends*,” Diane said. “What are you hiding?”

The other doe shivered. “Look, don’t push me on this one. It’s just...I hear things and I don’t want to follow up.”

If even Fearless Faline was nervous about this, maybe it was a good idea to back off a little. “That bad?”

“Yes, that bad. I just hope it’s something like a failed transponder. It happens,” Faline said.

The next day, the gendarmes came and asked questions of everyone at the bar, including Diane, and also questioned the theater staff where they had last been seen. But as time went by, Serena and Alta never turned up.

With Serena gone, the management at LowRIDEr asked Diane if she could take on extra hours. It would mean having to give up the ballet, but on the other hand it was extra money for college, and for upgrades to Faline. Diane hadn’t stopped with the new hardlight pelt; she wanted to get better batteries and lifters, too. She was earning enough from the job already that she could almost afford both as it was. But Diane found that she wasn’t really happy working at LowRIDEr anymore. It reminded her too much of her vanished friend.

One day close to the end of term, Diane was scrolling through job listings when she came across an opening for an experienced bartender—preferably with their own RIDE—at a pub in one of the Brubeck mining camps. On impulse, Diane quickly filled out the application.

A few days later, she was startled to get out of class and find a call from a Brubeck recruiter waiting on her comm. When she followed up, it turned out that the hiring manager actually came to LowRIDEr when he was in Uplift, and knew who she was. In fact, he was ready to hire her right away. “Hey, this is a lucky break! What do you think, Faline?”

“As long as it’s not on Harkonnen, I’m good. Too

many bad memories,” the doe said. “There’s a lot of very beautiful parts of the Dry I only saw in passing during ops. Wouldn’t mind seeing them again.”

“I’ll pack my things,” Diane said.

*June 23, 132 AL*

Brubeck Mining Village #7 was a cluster of small buildings under a 500-meter diameter hardlight dome in the deepest part of the Dry Ocean. The tallest building was in the center, with a lookout tower that reached several stories above the dome. It also held the elevator machinery for the central mine shaft located directly underneath. On the northeast quadrant outside the dome were two loading docks for ore carriers. There was one in the dock, large enough to loom over the village.

Diane and Faline got their first good look at it from the shielded mining flier that carried them to their new posting. “Looks like one of the old NextusMil base camps,” Faline said. “Probably uses a Nextus military surplus bivouac dome generator.”

“I read that there are plans on the drawing board for some kind of huge shielded platform, like an oceanic oil rig,” Diane said. “But it’ll be a few years before they can get them off the ground. The skills you’d need to build something that big in the middle of the dry...” She shook her head. “Glad I’m just a bartender.”

The flier passed through the dome, touching down on a landing pad out near the edge. Faline and Diane Fused up and carried their luggage down the ramp onto the dusty concrete. The sky overhead was a severe deep blue, the

temperature inside the dome itself a little hotter than shirtsleeve, and the air felt thicker than sea level. The vast majority of miners and support staff were Fused.

*:I have a feeling we won't be spending much time unfused, either,:* Faline said. *:Helps keep dome costs down.:*

Diane nodded. *:We'll see. It looks like at least some of the buildings have seals on the doors, so maybe we do that inside.:*

She followed the directions through the streets of the camp. Most of the buildings were prefab modules, of the kind that still saw a lot of use in the new construction that ringed Uplift's central dome. The modules were built to be airtight for use outside domes or as emergency shelters in case the domes fell. Some of them had green lights above the door showing active seals; others—storage huts, it looked like—had the doors left ajar.

There was a sign over one: New Staff Orientation. "Well, time to get started."

Inside, the module was set up like a classroom, with about a dozen RIDE-sized seats and another seat up at the front. Three of the student seats were occupied by Fusers—a cougar, a coyote, and a donkey. The seat at the front was occupied by a large chestnut horse Fuser.

"C'mon in, have a seat," the horse said. "You're the last one we were waitin' fer."

Diane and Faline slipped into a seat near the donkey, away from the cougar and coyote. "Uh, thanks."

"I'm Camp Foreman Ken Masterson, an' my pard here's Glenn. Usually we have trainers for this, but it's a light duty day an' I was bored, so I gave 'em a day off." He got up and paced back and forth, tail swishing. "Yer here

fer yer orientation, so.” He pointed. “That way’s north. Consider yerselves oriented now.”

There was a momentary pause as the four orientees glanced at each other, uncertain whether or not to laugh. At last they assayed a tentative chuckle.

“Camp safety procedures are pretty simple. You’ll get a doc beamed to yer RIDEs with the fiddly little details; read it an’ sign it. Short of it is, keep yer RIDE nearby at all times, an’ if anythin’ bad happens an’ yer not in him already, get in him. Any building with a green light’ll work as an emergency shelter in a pinch. Read an’ heed warning signs, an’ don’t be morons, an’ you’ll get on just fine. Lessee, what else...”

He turned and paced to the other side of the room again. “You should’ve registered a wallet account with HR already, so you’ll get paid through that. R&R...we don’t have much in the way of that. Pretty good little gin joint we keep stocked up much’s we can. Think that little lady’s going to be the new bartender there.” He pointed to Diane. “Daily shuttle service ‘tween here an’ Aloha, which is how our mail comes. Limited seating, so if you wanna go in-town, sign up aheadways. An’ remember to sign up for a trip there *an’* a trip back. You can’t get both, don’t go.” He sat down again. “Now I guess we should at least pay lip service to all the fiddly little documents HR wants signed off on, so bring up the package I just sent yer RIDEs an’ let’s get to it...”

*:Mostly standard stuff,: Faline reported. :Just more safety emphasis than the bar. I mean, the worst you could get at the LowRIDEr was slip on a spilled drink and bring down all that glass on you. Out here, the dome goes*

*down and you're not Fused, you fry. They also have weekly safety drills, so we'll get practice.:*

Diane made sure to read everything Faline marked as important, then sign it with her public key. They were finished before the other three new arrivals, so had to wait a bit.

“All right! Now that ever’thing’s signed, time for the tour,” Ken said. “First stop is the mine shaft itself. follow me.” Ken switched to a lecture mode as they left the building, heading towards the elevator. “What we’ve got here is a mix of AA-to-B grade qubitite ore, piped into them big ore carriers...” he pointed towards the looming carrier at the loading dock.

The Village was kept absolutely spotless since every speck, every tiny grain of Q was worth enough on the market that keeping the waste down was so efficient.

“This here’s the Admin building, which’s where my office is. Clint’s got an office here, too, like he does at every one of our major minin’ ops. You’ll prob’ly see him ‘round, time to time. He takes a very hands-on approach to management, so you never quite know when he’s gonna pop up and stay a spell. But he’s such a great guy, we really don’t mind him breathing down our necks that much.”

*:Wow...think of actually meeting Clint Brubeck!:*  
Faline swooned.

*:If the pulps are anything to go by, the man likes his scotch,:* Diane said. *:So we probably will.:*

*:What kind of fabber rotgut do think they have all the way out here?:*

Diane snorted. *:Seriously? With daily flights to Aloha, I expect they even have pina coladas. Probably no*

*“getting caught in the rain,” though.:*

The third stop on the tour was the Cantina itself, though it had a big “Closed” sign on the door. It was one of the larger structures she’d seen in the Village. From the size of the door it was designed with Fusers in mind—but could only hold couple dozen of them inside at a time. Ken nodded at the doe. “And our new bartenders here should get this place open again as soon as they’re able. Our thanks, Miss Ferguson, Miss Faline.”

“Wait, there isn’t any other staff?” Diane said. “What happened to the last bartender? Or bartenders?”

*:He actually thanked me?:* Faline said.

“They made their bank and skedaddled when their contract was up,” the Foreman said. “Don’t worry, though. I’m sure we can lasso someone else to fill out the day. You’re not expected to be open 30-6 right away.”

“Well. I’ll have to get right on that,” Diane said evenly. *:Oh wow! The only bartender for a whole mining camp? Where they don’t have anywhere else to spend the money they’re making? This could be better than I thought!:*

“You should have the key code now, and the latest inventory reports,” Ken said. “If you need any supplies from Aloha, just order ‘em and you should get ‘em next day.”

*:Wow, it’s surprisingly well-stocked,:* Faline said. *:Sheesh, look at these ingredients. I wouldn’t have expected to see a rough, tough miner bar with creme de menthe, grenadine, kahlua...:*

*:Girly crossriders, remember?:* Diane smirked. *:I’ll bet they order a lot of frou-frou drinks. No wonder they needed an actual bartender rather than just someone who*

*knows which end the scotch pours out.:*

“Do you mind if we skip the rest of the tour, Mr. Masterson? We’d like to get our hooves on our new job,” Diane said.

“Well, Miss, there’s nothing you can’t do with the next group of new hires, I suppose,” Ken said. “And I been feeling mighty dry lately. Sure, go on ahead.”

*:You’re not planning on de-Fusing,:* Faline stated, picking up on her rider’s thoughts.

*:Why should I? They probably won’t de-Fuse to drink it.:* She unlocked the door and stepped inside. “Hey, it’s cozy in here.”

“Hey, are you opening?” someone behind her said. He sounded familiar, but Diane couldn’t quite place it.

Diane grinned. “Sure, why not? If you don’t mind maybe it taking me a few minutes to figure out where everything is...”

Through her cervine RIDE’s wide field of vision she didn’t have to turn her head far to see the man addressing her. An elk’s massive antler spread that probably wouldn’t fit through the door and a thirsty expression greeted her. “The guys in my barracks built a still to sort of make up for not having the real stuff. I wouldn’t use that crap to degrease Bobby, here.”

“Sure.” Diane grinned. Then she remembered where she’d heard that voice. “Glen, wasn’t it?”

The elk blinked. “Wow, it’s true what they say. Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name.”

“Huh?” Diane said.

“Oh...new TV show that the Steaders just released,”

Glen said. “Called *Cheers*. It’s about a bar. We...have a lot of time on our hands to watch stuff while we mine. Bobby does most of the hard work and he multitasks.”

“Sounds interesting,” Diane said. “Well, c’mon in, if you’ll fit.”

“Not a problem...the antlers are mostly hardlight anyway.” They winked out, the bases retracting, and Glen followed her in. Inside, the room had counters along three walls, in a U-shape around the front door. The one at the end had a space behind it with shelves and cabinets for drinks and a small fabber, and a pantry-sized storeroom with a back entrance. Everything was as space-efficient as possible without losing too much ambiance. The dozen RIDE-grade stools fit neatly under the counters when not in use.

“So what’ll it be?” Diane asked, peering at the bottles. “You drink rum and coke, right?” The polycarbonate RIDE-safe glasses and muzzle cups that took up most of the room in the cabinet confirmed her earlier guess about most patrons not de-Fusing to drink. There were just a handful of human-style glassware items.

*:Guess I’ll be doing all the bookkeeping,: Faline said, sounding a little eager despite herself. :Though we’re technically employees of Brubeck anyway...:*

“I’ll take a Black and Tan. Not feeling like anything heavy,” Glen said.

“All right. Give me just a minute to see if I can find where they keep the bent spoon.” Diane rummaged under the bar and found it well-stocked with preparation implements of all types. Dram, pony, shaker, and the bent-tablespoon for layering.

“How did you know my name, anyway?” Glen asked.

“Funny story about that,” Diane said. She put a pint glass with a muzzle lip on the rim on the countertop and set the notch-handled tablespoon on the edge. “I used to work at LowRIDEr. Overheard Serena helping you make up your mind to get Bobby.”

“So I guess I almost ended up crossriding *you* instead of this pretty young thing now named Diane,” Faline added. “Nice to meet you Glen, Bobby.”

Diane filled the glass halfway with a double IPA, then carefully layered the less dense stout on top of it with the downturned spoon. “There you go.”

“You know, Serena set me right,” Glen said. “Bobby here is like a brother to me.”

“Don’t get all mushy on me now,” the bull elk added. They picked up the pint glass and took a careful swallow. “Ahhhh! That’s the stuff. How’s Serena doing these days, anyway? She seemed a little distracted last time I dropped by.”

“When was that? Must have been when I wasn’t there,” Diane asked.

“End of April, maybe. Was in Uplift visiting friends,” Glen said. “Thanked her for for suggesting Brubeck. You know, he doesn’t take more than the average’s miner’s salary. Real modest guy. Great family, too—sometimes he brings them by the mine.”

*Swan Lake* hadn’t opened until mid-May, so it still would’ve been weeks before her disappearance. “She’s... gone.” She wasn’t sure what else to say, but Faline was.

“Candlejacks,” Faline said. “Nobody knows.”

“Oh,” Bobby said. “Damn shame.” He quickly took

another gulp of beer before Glen could add anything.

*:Candle-whatsis?:* Diane asked.

*:Don't ask, okay? Just don't,:* Faline insisted.

*:Then why did you even say the word if you weren't going to explain it?:* Diane retorted. *:Answer that later. We've got more customers.:*

Word had spread fast that the Cantina was reopened. It was soon standing-room only and a line quickly formed outside. Fused up, Diane didn't fatigue nearly as fast and could take a mental break of sorts while Faline continued to serve drinks and make small talk with the patrons.

Their RIDEs were as talkative as they were.

And then the tips started rolling in. In an hour, she made as much as she had in a whole *day* at LowRIDER.

*:Wow, really?:*

*:It's at least partly gratitude we're open again,:* Diane said. *:But still...:*

*:This keeps up, I could get you those new batteries by next week,:* Diane said as she slid an R&C down the bar to a grateful patron.

*:You know, I had an idea,:* Faline said. *:If you wanted to Fuse sleep, we could keep this place open 30/6. I could make most simple drinks and wake you up if I needed your frou-frou touch.:*

*:Am I really that bad?:* Diane asked.

*:After the way you've pranced and danced, do you really have to ask?:* Faline said dryly. *:You're a doe on stage, not a swan. We have a natural en pointe talent.:*

*:Okay, fine. Guilty as charged,:* Diane said. Then she switched her focus back to the Real. This next customer was a white shewolf. "What'll you have, ma'am?"

“You, for dinner,” she huffed. “Nature Range, tonight, newb.”

“Only if you can catch me,” Faline taunted.

“Hmph!” the shewolf growled before another voice took over.

“Sorry about that. Henrietta’s a little excitable when it comes to new prey on the Range,” the wolf’s rider said in a much friendlier tone. “I’ll have a strawberry margarita.”

“On ice or frozen?”

“Frozen, mushy, and sweet,” the rider said.

*:Crossrider, : Faline said. :Eighty percent certainty.:*

“Coming up,” Diane said, pouring ice into the blender.

Once she was finished, Glen and Bobby did a head-tilt that might have been very impressive had his antlers been turned on. “Thanks for the mixed beer, Diane. Next time I might give you a bigger challenge. I’m kind of a cocktail connoisseur.”

“If I have the ingredients in stock, I can make it,” Diane said.

“Thanks again. And here’s your tip.” Tips had already been rolling in, but this one was easily five times larger than the rest. “Back to the ol’ grindstone.”

“Thanks, guy! Come back any time. Gonna try to keep the place open continuously for as long as we can.” A general cheer went up from the crowd at that.

*:We’re in the money, we’re in the money...:* Faline hummed.

*:Why don’t you pull up that Cheers show Glen mentioned?:* Diane suggested.

*:Let’s see. How about a break for you?:* Faline said. She pulled her rider into the Bambi’s Forest sim where she

could be anthro. “Don’t worry. I can handle everything right now. It’s mostly beer requests.”

Diane sat down on the couch and picked up a printed *TV Guide*, dated the last week of September, 1982. One thing caught her eye immediately. “Shelley Long as *Diane Chambers*.”

“I saw that, too,” Faline said, sitting down next to her. “Well, let’s start at the beginning.” She pressed play on the corded remote, the huge top-loading VCR on top of the console TV made an audible whirring sound. Then the theme song started playing.

*Making your way in the world today  
Takes everything you’ve got  
Taking a break from all your worries  
Sure would help a lot  
Wouldn’t you like to get away...*

*Nature Range*

“Can’t hide from *us*, ‘Fearless’ Faline!” Henrietta’s goddess-like voice reverberated through the simulated old growth forest. There was so much undergrowth, and so thick, running any distance was impossible.

Thorns jabbed Faline from every direction, leaving torturous, painfully bloody streaks along her flanks. The only thing keeping her going were the changes the God Mode wolves had made to her avatar’s healing. Her legs were kept just functional enough to keep her moving.

“Fear *us*, Faline!” a second she-wolf howled in a voice like winter winds.

Step by agonizing step, she forged onwards. There were hard-coded ways to get out of Nature Range. The first passage to the Green Room had been iced shut. Maybe, just maybe...it wasn't futile, that the other exits wouldn't be icewalled.

“For every one of our sisters you killed, we will repay ten times over!” a third goddess-voice rumbled like thunder. “For the honor of Sturmhaven!”

When they finally cornered her, Henrietta taking her down by the neck, they wouldn't allow her to respawn as they devoured her. They ate every goblet of flesh, every centimeter of intestine, gouged out her eyes, smashed her skull, and even then she wasn't allowed to respawn. Every simulated cell screamed for hours, days, as they stretched out the time compression as much as possible.

Then they allowed her to finally respawn and did it again...and again...

*When you're going through Hell, keep going.* That had been the mantra Faline had burned into her mind during the horror on Harkonnen. Her rider ended up not surviving the experience after being removed from the doe's Fuse cavity with a pulped chest.

Faline looked inward. Not even God Mode would allow the vindictive Sturmhaven wolves to get inside her own processes. The injured, torn body they allowed her was no longer material. And when they finally had their fun and thrust her back into the Real, she isolated and swept away the virtual months of torture out of conscious thought.

Diane wouldn't be the wiser. She didn't *need* to be. But maybe, just maybe, there'd be a chance to repay the

five she-wolves back for their cruelty.

Life proceeded apace at the mining cantina. Faline was on call 30/6, and Diane alternated between standing the shifts with her and watching movies and TV in the Bambi's Forest living room. She found she quite liked *Cheers*. In her conversations with them over drinks, she learned a lot of miners were watching it, too. Eventually, she went ahead and fabbed a sign in the style of the bar's logo from the TV show and replaced the "Cantina" sign outside with it. Calling it a "cantina" was just too...*Star Wars*. *Cheers* was new and happening *now*. (Well, all right, actually more like five hundred years ago, but it *felt* new.)

The days seemed to run together, the long hours passing like qubitite sand through an hourglass. They soon knew every single miner and RIDE by name—though Faline's inerrant memory took some of the challenge out of it.

Then one day a stranger came in—one of the very few un-Fused patrons, this fellow wore khakis and a weatherbeaten Stetson hat that made him easy to recognize.

*:You know who that is?:* Faline sputtered. *:Oh maker, did we stock the right scotch?:*

*:We still have most of a bottle left from the previous bartender,:* Diane said. *:He's the only one who drinks the stuff that costs fifty mu a shot.:*

One of their most frequent patrons, a green parrot Fuser, grooved to the Jimmy Buffett tunes he sometimes played on the bar's media walls. He also sometimes sang

them aloud to entertain other patrons, getting tips of his own. “Wasting away again in margaritaville,” he sang. “Looking for my lost—” Then he looked up, saw who was coming, and squawked. “Hey, Diane. Diane! Shape up a little! He’s coming!”

“I noticed, Perry,” Diane said dryly as Clint took a seat at the bar. “Hello, Mr. Brubeck.”

“I see my reputation precedes me,” Brubeck said, doffing his hat before sticking it back on. There really wasn’t room to put it down anywhere.

“You’re going to want your usual, right? The single-malt?” Diane said.

“I will, but I’m gonna work up to it. Whatever your favorite beer is right now, missy,” Clint said.

“Got a nice double IPA in from Cascadia,” Diane said. “Or we have an imperial stout from Cape Nord that I’m told will put hair on your chest. I’ve never tried it...I don’t really need any hair down there.”

Clint laughed. “The IPA sounds fine by me.”

“Coming up.” Diane filled a pint glass and slid it down to him.

“You’re pretty new here, aren’t you?” Clint said.

“Just got the job a few weeks ago. We’ve been having the time of our lives.”

Clint nodded, sipping his beer. “Well, don’t you work too hard. Scuttlebutt ‘round here is that you haven’t left the bar since you walked in the door, an’ that’s a shame. Thing about you’uns with RIDEs is you think you can just go on workin’ all the time, lettin’ your RIDE do the work when you sleep. Not sayin’ that’s a bad idea in general, but you need a break sometime. Take a couple days off an’

shuttle down to Aloha. Camp won't fall apart without you for a while. Most a' these bums got their own flasks an' stills back in their quarters anyhow."

*:You know how many bars, taverns, pubs, speakeasies, and gin joints are in Aloha?:* Faline said.

*:Suggesting a working vacation?:* Diane said.

*:Well, we have some money to spend, don't we? New batteries for me...have you even looked at your wallet lately? You can pay off the loan.:* Faline said. *:Didn't you buy me to fix your money problems?:*

"You know, that's not a bad idea," Diane said.

"More'n just an idea. Iffen I don't hear you've done it by end of the week, I'll make it an order," Clint said.

"Yessir, Mr. Brubeck, sir," Diane said.

"Good to hear! I spent over thirty years never being off the clock, out in the black," Clint said. "Scout is never really off duty. But this ain't an alien world in the back of beyond. Not sayin' sometimes I don't wish it were, though I never let *Allie* hear me say it."

"Now that you mention it, I kind of have always wanted to see Aloha," Diane admitted.

"Good." Clint took another pull at the glass, finishing his beer. "I think I will go ahead and have that scotch now."

*:I'll make the shuttle reservations and post the closure on the Village BBS,:* Faline said. *:And done. Response is...huh.:*

Within minutes the announcement was followed by a flood of well-wishes, telling them to have a good vacation, that everyone was concerned they were overworking. There were miners who lived in Fuse, far down in the

shaft, for weeks on end. Diane and Faline had equaled them for endurance, a first for a non-miner at Village 7.

“Wow...I didn’t even realize I *had* that many customers,” Diane said.

“Mining camp like this is a pretty small place,” Clint said. “And you’re just about the one person almost everyone’s guaranteed to cross paths with, one time ‘r another.”

“Right...” Diane said. She raised her voice. “Okay, everyone, you’re not gonna hear me say this very often, so listen up! *One last call for alcohol!*”

Perry sang and strummed a guitar with be-taloned fingers.

*Closing time*

*Open all the doors and let you out into the world*

*Closing time*

*Turn all of the lights on over every boy and every girl*

*Closing time*

*One last call for alcohol so finish your whiskey or  
beer*

*Closing time*

*You don’t have to go home but you can’t stay  
heeeeere*

Diane and Faline actually had to comm the base’s human resources department to find out where their assigned quarters were. It turned out to be little more than a nook about the size of Diane’s dormitory bathroom back in Uplift with a fold-down bed and dresser for clothes.

“Doesn’t seem like I’ve been missing very much,” Diane

said, peering through the door. “Not even really room to de-Fuse in there.”

“We can do that in the hall,” Faline said. “Ready?”

“Sure thing, go.”

There was a pause. “Er...just a second. I need to sort something out,” Faline said.

“What’s going on?” Diane said nervously.

“Needed to account for all the nannies is all,” Faline said. “Okay, take two.”

The process seemed to take three times longer than it should have, each segment reluctantly peeling away, leaving Diane quite naked in the hallway. Naked but for a layer of short *fur* from head to toe.

“Uh,” Faline stammered, ears folded back. “I’ll just... sorry about the...”

Diane quickly jumped inside her tiny quarters and shut the door behind her. She knew there were consequences to long-term Fuse, but they weren’t supposed to show up this quickly, were they? *Maybe I didn’t need to worry about that imperial stout after all.* Then she caught a look at herself in the mirror.

The “Aphrodite face” Faline had spent so much time and effort on, and so many complaints when she used makeup, was essentially gone. In its place was something very like a Halloween mask—a snub deer-like muzzle and a peach-fuzz fur-covered face. The effect was really rather striking and exotic in its own way. She probed her new wide, black nose with her fingernails, now thicker and black themselves. “Wow.”

*:You okay in there, doll?:* Faline asked.

Diane’s suitcases, still unpacked after several weeks,

sat on the bed. *:Just fine, Faline. Why don't you head over to RIDE Maint and get yourself a once-over before we hit the sub?:*

*:Good idea. After all that I think I need a Fuser flush and refill anyway.:*

*And I need a loooooong shower,* Diane thought. There were a few hours before the sub left to relax. She opened her suitcase and removed a fluffy towel and toiletries. She pondered the reproduction 1980s “Lady Remington” electric razor she’d bought before leaving Uplift, then shook her head. Poor little thing would be *way* outmatched. She combed her fingers through her russet hair. There was a fashion term for this look. RIDE-based body modification fashion came and went, like any other trend. Even people who didn’t have RIDEs could easily and cheaply get tags added. *Oh, yes. Petting zoo people are in right now.* Ears, tails and sometimes noses.

Diane certainly fit *that* description now. Though the extra fuzzy look was a little out of the ordinary.

Like the rest of the barracks, the showers were tiny booths she could barely turn around in and there was a time limit of five minutes. It was just enough time to wet herself down, wash the Fuser gunk out of her hair, and return to her room.

*:Shutting down for maint, Diane,:* Faline said.

*:Sleep well,:* Diane replied.

After having Faline a constant presence in her mind for weeks now, with Faline shut down Diane felt an empty space where there hadn’t been one before. It made her lightheaded, even a little dizzy. She sat down on the bed and waited for Faline to reconnect.

Finally a tingle and a chime announced Faline had reconnected to the network. *:What took so long?:* Diane said.

*:It's only been fifteen minutes,:* the doe mecha replied. *:Finished getting dressed yet?:*

Diane realized she'd just been sitting on the bed with only panties on, still holding her smartbra. She quickly threw on something. *:I'll be right out...:*

A couple of minutes later, Diane opened the door to the hall. "Ta-dah!"

Faline peered at her. "Um...crap. I think my tags got carried away. That happens sometimes, with long Fuses. You can probably get that reset at a nano-clinic in Aloha."

"Why would I want to do that?" Diane said lightly. Her facial markings, in compressed form, were identical to Faline's. "I actually kind of like it. It's unique." She considered. "Kind of like what was happening to Serena, before she disappeared."

The doe swallowed. "Well, if you're set on keeping them, I'll keep a closer watch on my Fusers from now on. I have a fresh batch in my tank, just in case."

"Great!" Diane said. "So...since we've still got a few hours to kill...wanna go for a ride? Watch the sun rise over the desert?"

"Not a lot to see in this part of the Dry other than sunrises and sunsets, but I could stand to stretch my lifters," Faline said. "And when we get to Aloha, I have my eye on a new set..."

"Anything, just ask," Diane said. "Have you seen how fat my wallet is? Wow. And it's not like *I* have anything else to spend it on out here either..." She followed Faline

back out of the cramped dormitory pod, then mounted up as Faline converted back to her skimmer mode. The miners all stared at her face, but she ignored them. “Tally-ho!”

“You’ve been impossible to get ahold of for weeks, Diane. What have you been doing?” Sue said over the comm.

“Solving all my financial problems for the near future,” Diane replied cheerfully. “Anyway, decided to follow up on your texts and chat requests. I told you where I’m working now, at least?”

*:Yes, you did,: Faline informed. :Or I did. Kenai, Heidi, and me all play Borderlands Online together.:*

“Yeah, I know. So, what’s up?” the man-named-Sue said.

“Well, we’re going to be in Aloha for a few days—starting today—and wondered if you, Trish, and your RIDEs would like to join us.”

“Today? I don’t think we can be there today,” Sue said. “But we sure can hop a sub tomorrow. Never been to Aloha. Ticket prices are pretty reasonable, too.”

“Great! See you when we see you!” Diane said cheerfully, and disconnected. The shuttle was just about ready to board, and she hadn’t realized just how much she was looking forward to seeing somewhere new until just now. She went up the ramp and latched into the Fuser-style seats.

One last passenger—two, really—a familiar elk Fuser flew up the boarding ramp as it started to retract. “We made it!” Glen said. “Hell yeah!” There happened to be one

empty seat left next to Diane, which he took. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Safe at home plate,” Diane said.

Glen laughed. “Not yet.”

Diane looked at him. “Well, that’s certainly...forward.”

“Hey, you gave me the opening,” Glen said, smirking.

After a while Diane had become very adept at reading Fuser facial expression. “Our shoulders have been at the grindstone almost as long as yours, so we needed a getaway ourselves. *Just* made it in the door.”

“That you did,” Diane said. The suborbital craft’s lifters started to hum as they spun up. “So what’re you planning on doing in Aloha?”

“I have a thing for roller coasters. There’s a full klick of carnival rides on the new Boardwalk. All the old Coney Island stuff they had in twencen. Skee ball, bumper cars, funhouses, arcade games, pinball, that sort of thing. There’s a kind of 1900s thing going there. Pre-World War One, I mean.”

“Except for the bathing suits,” Bobby added, twitching his ears.

“I hear Aloha’s not big on bathing suits in general,” Diane said.

:*Humans*,: Faline added dryly. :*To be honest, though, I wouldn’t change you one bit.*:

:*Good to know*,: Diane replied.

“That, too. The place is going a *little* crazy,” Glen said.

“When it’s not going a *lot* crazy,” Bobby said. “They’re starting to make Uplift look like a bunch of stuffy prudes.”

“Seriously? You’re talking about the place where it’s a good day if the Consuls come to work with pants on,”

Diane said.

“I gather in Aloha, it’s a good day if their head honchos come to work with *anything* on,” Glen said.

“Ever since one of their founders *proposed* to his *female golden eagle RIDE* at the Arch,” Bobby added. “You can look it up yourselves. Public avian crossride. Most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Don’t get all sentimental on *me*, now,” Glen said.

Anyone not used to being around Fused RIDEs—still the vast majority of Zharus—usually found what appeared to be one person having a conversation with himself a little off-putting. Having been constantly Fused for weeks, and been around miners who rarely de-Fused in the Dry despite the dome over the mining village, it was just humdrum normalcy.

The fact that Fusers *also* looked like giant anthropomorphic animals was something of a separate issue, but the tags their riders had had crept into the supercontinent’s cultural consciousness. Tags were in. Tags were *cool*. Normally it didn’t go beyond ears and tail, but there was always someone wanting to make a splash.

They were pressed back in their seats as the suborbital streaked skyward. “Here we go, then,” Faline said. “Next stop, Aloha!”

Humans lived in the now, unlike RIDEs, who had perfect recall. Faline often wondered that it was like, not being able to remember anything—everything—at a millisecond notice. RIDEs could share experiences as simply as sending a compressed packet of the event between one another.

“I don’t know where humans get it,” Faline told Bobby privately. “Is it the hormones? It can’t be *just* the hormones.”

“Get what?” Bobby said. “I’m not riding the same train of thought here.”

“Would you have thought that Diane was as manly as your Glen just a few months ago?” Faline said. “What she was then doesn’t really enter her mind. She’s one of the girls now. Just look at her on that dance floor with him. The ballet really shows.”

Diane had gone with the prevalent 1980s styles popularized by the latest Steader Entertainment flood, wearing a neon blue minidress to show off the peach-fuzz fur Diane’s Fusers had given her. She wasn’t the only one with a furry face on the floor either, though those were mostly cats and canines, with a few horses. Diane was the only doe, grooving to the Bangles.

*All the old paintings on the tomb  
They do the same dance, don’cha know?  
If they move too quick (Oh-Way-Oh)  
They’re falling down like a domino*

*And the bazaar man by the Nile  
He got the money on a bet  
GOLD crocodiles (Oh-Way-Oh)  
They snap their teeth on a cigarette*

*Foreign types with their hookah pipes sing:  
Way-oh-way-oh-way-ooo-aaa-ooo...  
Walk like an Egyptian.*

“Well...I *think* I see where you’re going with this,” Bobby said. “Wait, no I don’t.”

“Okay, then nevermind. Just tell me, how long have you been Fused with Glen at a stretch?” Faline said.

“We were down four weeks the first stretch,” Bobby said.

“And I was Fused *longer* a couple times on deployment,” Faline said. “But none of my three wartime pilots ever came out looking like *that*.” There was a kind of...separation anxiety here. It wasn’t something she could explain to herself, and it bothered her, just like Serena and Alta’s disappearance bothered her. She *yearned* to be Fused with her rider. And there were the Candleja—no, she broke that train of thought before it completed, flicking her tail nervously.

“Whatever happened to Fearless Faline?” Bobby asked.

“She got et,” Faline said. “By a pack of stinking *cheaters*.”

“Henrietta and her crew,” Bobby said. “They took it really hard, getting sold into the labor market after losing the war. Sorry they got to you before the rest of us could warn you. Bum rap for someone with your reputation. Did you really...I mean, back on Harkonnen...”

“I’ll get them back somehow,” Faline said. “I haven’t come up with something sufficiently nasty yet, but I will.”

Faline allowed a few seconds of silence pass between them, just long enough for Bobby to let his guard down, before changing the subject. “So, what are the betting odds on Glen getting Diane into bed on the first day?”

“How did you hear about that?” Bobby said, ears folding back.

“Found a note in my mailbox when we were on the sub. No idea who from.” Indeed, that was a funny thing. It was an untraceable text message. Who was going to get the new bartender into bed first? Apparently Glen and Bobby had won the draw to get the morning Aloha shuttle and a return in two days. Now the betting pool was how fast he could do the deed.

“So, which way does she swing, anyway?” Bobby asked.

Faline rolled her hardlight eyes. “Don’t *you* start. But truthfully, I don’t know. She’s never...well, you know. Some crossriders go out and bang the first thing they see. *She* took ballet lessons instead.”

Bobby clopped his forehoof on the ground and laughed. “Wow! That’s a new one to me. I thought they *all* went cunt crazy.”

“Oh, trust me, junior, there’s *all* sorts of reactions. I saw ‘em all in my Army days.”

The bull elk lowered his head. The channel was private, but some things still came out in the Real. “Anyway, now that you know about the betting pool, do you plan on *letting* her get seduced?”

Faline smirked. “She’s a smart gal and your Glen’s a canny dude. The real question is who will seduce who. And how awkwardly. She’s never done it from the fem-side.”

Bobby laughed. “Yeah, I hear you. Seduction isn’t gonna be one of Glen’s strong points, either. He’s from Nuevo San. Never tried it on a crossrider.”

“So it’s way outside his comfort zone. Well, kudos to

him for that much. He'd just better be careful, though," Faline said darkly. "If he hurts her...well, he'd better hope those stills are still running, because he damn sure won't be welcome in Cheers again."

Glen's RIDE had sculpted his hair into a mullet's mullet. It made Captain Planet's look subtle. "So, have you made any hotel reservations yet?" Glen asked. "After Fuse-sleeping for a few weeks, just think of a soft bed, warm covers..."

"And a warm body next to mine, no doubt," Diane said.

"Well...if you're offering..."

"Offering? Maybe, maybe not. But a bed does have an appeal," Diane said. She shimmied and shook, jiggled and bobbed to the music. This was the anti-ballet, every move unplanned, and it was making her breasts amazingly sore. No smartbra in this minidress. *Shoulda had Faline cut me back down closer to ballet-size...*

The music wasn't strictly 80s, as the DJs liked to mix things up with songs in the same style done in later decades. It all was danceable, though Diane was starting to feel a little danced out by the second hour. At last, she left the dance floor, Glen following only a moment later. "So what now?" Glen asked.

Diane pulled out her comm and thumbed through the local yelp. "Hmm. This place looks like it has promise."

Glen raised an eyebrow. "The Love Shack?"

"The ad says it's a little old place where we can get together," Diane said. "Love Shack bay-bee?"

"I hear that's where it's at," Glen said.

“Great! Let’s go.” Diane took Glen’s hand and led him out to where the RIDEs were parked.

*:You sure about this?:* Faline asked when Diane told her where they were going.

*:Hey, nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?:* Diane said.

*:True, but nothing lost, either,:* Faline pointed out. *:But hey, it’s your funeral.:* The deer-cycle pulled out into traffic, followed a moment later by Glen on Bobby’s larger elk-bike form.

*:That’s what I like about you,:* Diane said. *:Your constant optimism.:*

Faline snorted. *:Trust me, you have no idea.:*

*:You know, I don’t think Trish was entirely honest with me,:* Diane sent to Faline from the hotel room shower a few hours later. The hotel had unabashedly gone for the 70s Love Nest theme. Even the bathroom had deep shag carpeting the color of an avocado skin. The shower was easily large enough for two large Fusers. There were dispensers in the burnt orange tile for all sorts of interesting liquids.

*:About what?:* Faline asked.

*:Well, the whole thing was just blah and a little gross,:* Diane admitted. *:She said her first time was a ‘supernova of bliss’. I don’t think I even managed a modest solar flare.:*

The question of which gender had better sex was something of a forbidden topic in the Crossrider Club. It’d been the instigator of too many flame wars, online and during meetings. But that didn’t stop members talking

about it or passing around magazines like *Tiresian*, *Star Crossed Lovers Daily*, and, of course, *Cosmopolitan*. Discussion of sex and romance advice columns took up a third of the content, if not more. There was relationship advice for every conceivable combination of crossrider and non. Born-men and crossed women, born-women and crossed men, the popular “turnabout romance” in the form of crossed-men and crossed-women, and more complex combinations like women-who-had-been-men-but-are-women-again, on and on.

Diane turned on the hot water—via knobs—and let it wash away the *stuff* on her belly. *:It’s not that difficult. How can any guy mess that up? Did I do something wrong:* she fumed. But she was also angry at herself. The Love Shack had been her suggestion. Then there was what she’d whispered in his ear at dinner. *:I can’t believe I said that.:*

*:You mean “I want you inside me”? Don’t worry so much, Diane. I’d say neither of you were at the top of your game,:* the doe said, suppressing a giggle.

So her first sexual experience as a woman wasn’t horrible, or incredible. Mediocre? Yes. Adequate? Also yes. Embarrassing for all parties involved? Full of awkward “romantic” one-liners that would embarrass George Lucas? *Very* yes.

“It could’ve been worse,” she said aloud.

“I was really that bad, huh?” Glen said from the other side of the translucent shower door. He was still mortified. “I know, I know. You stick Tab A into Slot B. I’ve done it before. I’m sure *you* have, too. But...*that’s* never happened to me before. I’m so sorry, Diane. A friend of mine sent me

a copy of *Tiresian* that had a howto—”

“On making a new girl’s first sexual experience perfect. I know the issue you’re talking about, Glen. It’s the thought that counts.”

“I’ll just let myself out,” Glen said. “Bobby, let’s Fuse up...”

*:Are you just going to let them leave?:* Faline asked.

*:I’m not going to beg him to stay, Fal. He’s not persona non grata or anything, but we need some time apart,:* Diane replied. Feeling sufficiently clean she shut the water off. Her fuzzy skin retained water a little better than before, so it took extra swipes with a few towels. Faline waited for her outside the bathroom. “When’s the sub with the fearsome foursome getting here?”

“A couple hours yet,” Faline said. “Here, let me...” she Fused up with her partner.

Diane instantly felt *much* better. She hadn’t realized just how much she missed being Fused, and Faline knew her better than anyone ever could anyway. A gap in her mind was full now.

“So what do you think?” Faline asked. “Kick him out of the bar for a while?”

Diane snorted. “I just said he’s *not* persona non grata. I guess this is kind of like...being a teenager again, for both of us. No real experience to go on, so you end up reading those stupid magazines and second-guessing yourself all the time.”

“Crossriding is a thing in this city,” Faline said.

“Crossriding, living in the nude, a metal drinking straw that goes all the way up to high orbit...what *isn’t* a thing in this city?” Diane said.

“No, I mean...one of the city’s founders...”

“I know about the Astra-Nikki thing. I’ve already seen the vid three times,” Diane said. “It’s cute. Kind of reminded me of us.”

“I can see that,” Faline said. “It’s just a short hop from ‘Girl me so I can get bigger tips’ to ‘will you marry me?’”

“That’s not what...” Diane sighed and put her hand on their shared forehead. “You feel it, I feel it...I’m not sure I can be any more specific than that. We feel better when we’re Fused up. What if this happened to Serena and Alta before...well, before. You know how they were getting about having to de-Fuse to work the bar...”

“Mm,” Faline said.

“You might as well tell me what you know,” Diane said. “I’ve already googled ‘Candlejacks’ and found some... very interesting rumors.”

“He’s just a character from a mid-90s cartoon named *Freakazoid*. Just a silly thing.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think they had Integrates in the mid ‘90s,” Diane said.

“Where did you read...oh, I see,” Faline said. Looking into the relevant memories was getting easier for both of them. “Look, I really don’t even like thinking about this. I don’t want to draw their attention—”

“Uh huh,” Diane said. “So you admit they exist.”

“Augh! Don’t follow that train of thought, okay? Just don’t. Whatever happened to our friends, there’s nothing we can do for them. And if it happens to *us*, then we’ll find out firsthand. I just don’t want it to happen before its time. Okay? Okay?” Faline’s tail twitched nervously.

“I knew showing you *Candyman* was a mistake,”

Diane said, rolling her eyes. “Look, they’re not going to crash through the wall like the Kool-Aid Man. I’m pretty sure that would have been mentioned. But...whatever.” She sighed. “I wonder where they all *go*.”

“I don’t know, but *we* should go to the aerodrome and meet our friends. Do you plan on telling them what you did last night?” Faline raised a virtual eyebrow.

“Probably not,” Diane said. “But yeah, let’s check out. Love Shack, huh?” She looked around the hotel room, shag carpeting and all. How did people in the twentieth even keep a place like this clean? It was like the floors and even the walls were carpeted with muppet skins. “You know, this place looked better in the dark.”

“I think Glen looks better in the dark, too,” Faline deadpanned.

“Oh, don’t you start,” Diane said. “Let’s go meet our friends.”

“Badasses!” Maya warned. She reached out with her left hand, claspng it into a fist, and one of the attacking Psychos floated up into the burning energy ball of phase-lock. She blasted him with a rocket launcher, splattering cel-shaded guts everywhere.

The *Borderlands* series was one of Faline’s favorites to play with her friends, with five incarnations, including the MMO version released in the late 2010s. But it was much more convenient just to play the two originals.

“What the *hell* are you doing, Gage?”

“I’ve got it! No, wait...” the girl shouted. Kenai-as-Gage had struggled with the female avatar ever since starting a new game. They were all barely level 20 yet in

this playthrough. The Gage avatar flickered and frotzed as the male bear RI rebelled against the imposed female physique, voice fluctuating between Gage's chipper girlishness and Kenai's bear-like rumble. "Damn it! Come on, come on...load already..."

Heidi-as-Salvador was doing even worse. She kept crashing out every few minutes, just like playing Axton.

"Stop being such purists and download the Rule 63 mods already. Jeez! We can't play this right if you're fighting your own avatars half the time," Faline-as-Maya said. She had even modified her own avatar with deer tags to make that point.

Milliseconds later a male...ish version of Gage rezzed in, followed by a feminized Salvador. Gage didn't actually look too different, while the version of Salvadora Heidi had chosen was as far from just having the beard removed and the bits swapped on the original avatar as possible. Salvadora was a curvaceous, busty Latina vamp holding a pair of assault rifles.

"I figured if I was going to break the game rules I'd do it good and hard," Heidi said.

"That's more Rule 34 than Rule 63," barely-male Gage said. "He" also had bear ears and had retained female-Gage's girly voice. "Can we get going now? We haven't even rescued Roland yet."

Before they could move on Faline felt a pulse from outside the Gaming Range. She was still Fused with Diane, basically in a semi-passive mode that left her rider in more conscious control. The game environment flared and pulsed.

"What's going on? Is your emulator crashing, Faline?"

Heidi asked.

“No, it’s just...” Faline started.

Then a second Maya rezzed in the middle of the group. “What...uh...” she sputtered.

“*Diane?*” Faline said.

“I was just trying to ping you that we’re ready to leave Aloha,” Diane said. “What...where am I? Who am I?” She looked at her cel-shaded self and the Torgue shotgun she held. “And why do I have this really big gun?”

“How did you get in here?” Heidi asked. “Faline, she’s not supposed to—”

“I know, I know,” Faline said. “Let’s quit out. Looks like it’s time to go anyway.”

“Sorry...I didn’t mean to interrupt something private,” Diane said. “All I did was try to ping you, and pfft, I was here.”

“If you’re in here, what’s going on out there?” Diane asked in half a panic. “Quitting!”

She shoved herself and Diane back into the Real to find herself splayed out on her back, surrounded by concerned onlookers and her friends.

“You fell right over,” Trish said. She extended her hand. “Are you two okay? Do we need to comm some medical help?”

“We’re fine,” Faline said. “Just a little, uh, software glitch.”

“That was some ‘glitch’,” Kenai said. “Maybe you should de-Fuse.”

“We’re okay. Really.” Diane shook their head, as they got back their feet with Trish’s help. *:But maybe we should get a checkup, just in case?:*

*:Plenty of time for that back at camp,:* Faline sent. She didn't sound entirely convincing.

*:Faline...:*

*:Well, whatever's happening to us, what do you think they can do about it? It'd just make us miss our flight.:*

*:Let's...just go one step at a time,:* Diane suggested. "We're okay, really," she said aloud. "Thanks for a good time the past couple days. We really needed it."

"I never thought you were such a workaholic," Trish said.

"Well, you know how it is," Diane said. "You get started doing something, and you forget to look at your watch."

"You don't wear a watch," Kenai said.

"Yeah, and you know how long it took us to notice that?" Faline said.

"There's enjoying your job, and then there's *enjoying* it," Sue said. "Obsession isn't healthy, ladies. Kenai's helped me sleep-study, but that's different."

"Is it now?" Diane said. As a test, she had Faline convert to skimmer mode. When Faline changed without a hitch she managed to relax a little more.

"You know, I love that look, especially that nose," Trish said. "You have such a *cuuuute* face!" She stroked Diane's fuzzy cheek then put a finger on her wide black nose and giggled. "Boop!"

Diane rolled her eyes, but that was Trish. She didn't know if Trish's behavior was genuine or she was simply acting how she *thought* women were supposed to. Presumably Sue would have said something...or maybe not.

“Well, Trish, I *can't* do that,” Heidi said. “So don’t ask. Besides, you’d look silly with a ferret face.”

“Aww.”

“Well, I had a good time, too,” Sue said. “I had to break a few pool cues over the heads of a few stubborn Cape Nord types, but it was mighty satisfying.”

“One might accuse you of trolling the Nordies, Sue,” Kenai said.

“One might,” Sue replied. “And one would be dead-on. I must’ve cost them like fifty Man Points, each.”

“Well, don’t get too rowdy,” Diane said. “Or they might...take legal action.”

“Ha ha,” Sue deadpanned.

“There’s a *lot* of Nordy miners in the Village,” Diane said. “I know ‘em all, even the newbies. They like their liquor hard and raw. It’s a good thing they also like company, or they’d probably just stick with the stills and never come in.”

“They have out-of-Fuse drinking contests on Friday nights, regular,” Faline said. “Our designated bouncers usually get a workout after the first dozen jello shots.”

“Are you two even coming back to university in the fall?” Trish asked.

“Dunno,” Diane said. “We’re picking up an awful lot of tips. If we stay another year, we might be able to pay for the rest of college without having to work at all. Maybe I could take some virtual classes.”

“They’re starting to build a RIDE-based VR curriculum, I’ve heard,” Sue said. “Of course, not everyone has one.”

“Give it a few more years,” Kenai said. “There’ll be a

RIDE in every garage.”

“Most people keep their RIDEs in their living room,” Diane said. “They won’t even give us dorm rooms big enough to hold our friends.”

“The University admin is a bunch of nonagenarian second or third-gen fuddy duddies,” Trish scoffed. “That’s a major drawback of living so long, you know. Change grinds to a halt sometimes. It’s not that expensive to remodel and enlarge buildings. Took *years* in twencen, they could do it now in a month.”

“Maybe by the time we go back, they’ll have gotten around to it,” Faline said.

“*If we go back*,” Diane said. “You never know, maybe we’ll disappear like Serena and Alta.” She grinned at Trish and Sue. “So this might be the last time you ever see us, if the snark turns out to be a boojum.”

“Don’t *even* joke about that,” Heidi said. The she-ferret fixed them both with a glare. “I’ve known a few who have gone missing. I don’t want to add you two to the list.”

“Just thought you’d appreciate the advance warning,” Diane said. “Serena went all furry first, too.”

“Huh. Here I *totally* thought you were trying to be fashionable for a change,” Trish said, lapsing into Valley Girl-speak. She had a sideways ponytail and red eyeshadow to go with it. “*Pshah!*”

“I don’t shop, Trish,” Diane said, shrugging. “My sub leaves in an hour, so I need to check in.”

The other two RIDEs changed to skimmer mode and their riders mounted up. “Then let’s get you to the aerodrome,” Sue said. “Thanks for a good time. Aloha’s quite a city.”

“Next time you take some time off, give us a buzz. We’ll grab a flight,” Trish said.

“Thanks, guys. That means a lot,” Diane said.

*:Assuming it happens before we disappear.:*

*:Now who’s being fatalistic?:* Faline asked.

They reached the Aloha West Aerodrome in less than half an hour and Fused up again outside the Brubeck Mining gate.

“See you on Pandora, you two,” Faline said. She hugged the ferret and the bear, a little more tightly than she would have before taking the job with the company. “And I’m telling you to stick with those Rule 63 mods in the future. I’ve got one for Axton and even Krieg.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kenai said. “It just doesn’t feel right, though. Guess I’m just used to the ones you play with a controller. It’s different when you’re behind a monitor.”

“There’s more to retro-gaming than SNES and Neo Geo,” Faline said.

“Well, Glen’s waiting on board. We’ll see you later,” Diane said.

The fearsome foursome waved goodbye, then left for their own sub in the commercial section of the aerodrome.

*:This’ll be fun,:* Faline deadpanned.

The miners were glad to see them when they got back. It wasn’t quite as bad as it had been when they first opened—the miners hadn’t used up the stock of back-up booze they’d imported via the Aloha flights in the time they’d been gone—but business was still quite good for the first day or so. Then the miners started coming up with some very odd requests.

*:Bacon vodka?:* Faline said after the third time they'd been asked about it. *:When was that popular?:*

*:I don't know, but we can get some from Cape Nord,:* Diane replied. Bacon was a manly food, after all. After nearly two days on the job they realized they were falling into the same pattern again. Though it was fulfilling in its own way, after having personal time again the idea of spending the next solid month behind the bar no longer held the same appeal—and who knew what Clint Brubeck would do if word got back to him.

“I hear they're going to hire another bartender,” Perry said. The green parrot had planted himself next to her door again, playing Beach Boys, Jimmy Buffett, a number of bawdy drinking songs, or other requests. He was the next best thing to the jukebox they didn't have space for. “You two work too hard.”

“I never thought I'd see a bird RIDE as a miner,” Faline said. “One who's not a canary, anyway.”

“You mightn't have noticed, but I'm not underground as much as I used to be,” Perry said. “I'm making almost as much playing the bar as I used to in the seam. But, you know, same reason as Diane and yourself. Da boid was cheep. Cheep cheep.” Perry wiggled his red eyebrow-feathers.

Diane laughed. “I've gone all fuzzy, myself. Never even considered a bird, though. No offense.”

Perry shrugged. “It's not for everybody, same as crossriding. Anyway, I heard you went for an excursion in the Dry before you left the other day. You should do that some more, take a break from the bar. I know a few pretty spots.”

“Yeah? Send ‘em over. A desert ride sounds like a good idea. Maybe we’ll go when it gets quiet ‘round the early morning.”

“You haven’t seen the aurora centralis until you’ve seen it in the middle of the Dry on a moonless night a thousand kilometers from anywhere,” Perry said with feeling. “You know, like *tonight*.”

“Well, start playing ‘Closing Time’ about two in the morning, then,” Diane said. “Thanks, Perry. Oh, by the way...is that the name of your RIDE or yourself?”

“Yes,” the parrot said cryptically. He tipped his hat and started playing another Jimmy Buffett song. Diane didn’t start listening until a few verses in.

*Ground she’s movin’ under me  
Got ya tidal waves out on the sea  
Sulphur smoke up in the sky  
Pretty soon we learn to fly*

Early that morning, after the last of the patrons had left the bar, Diane locked the doors and they walked out into the night. The streets of the mining camp were fairly empty. The fourth shift was the lightest; most of the people on the other three were either sleeping or doing other things in their quarters.

“So, what you say, head out to check out some of Perry’s special places then come back and crash in our quarters for once?” Diane said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Faline said, converting over to her skimmer bike form.

“You know, we don’t do this nearly enough,” Diane

said. “You’ve got a great bike mode. We should use it more often.”

“Yeah? Well, we smaller deer were based off a design called the Scirocco. It was originally an Ad-I bike that never saw full deployment for obvious reasons. Just a bit of history.”

“They had a thing for naming military vehicles after storms in Nextus,” Diane observed.

“Mainly to yank the Sturmites’ chains,” Faline said. They lifted off and headed for the Desert Gate. “I understand the Sturmites named theirs things like ‘Bureaucrat’ and ‘Tax Evader.’ All right, all right, I’m kidding.”

They passed through the gate, out into the desert, and headed for the coordinates Perry had sent for a scenic overlook that had a great view of the camp. Blue and green curtains shimmered in the sky.

“Earth is...that way, I think,” Faline said. She Fused up and pointed, highlighting Sol in their HUD. “I wouldn’t mind seeing it someday.”

“Just what I was thinking,” Diane said. In fact, there seemed to be a sort of *echo* in her mind. The auroras blazed across the sky, curtains and sheets chasing one another across the sporadic, weak magnetic field of the Dry Ocean.

“Beautiful,” Diane and Faline said in unison. Their thoughts marched together side by side. “Those miners don’t know what they’re missing, down there underground.”

“I should snap some photos to send Sue and Trish and the others...”

The rock they sat upon started feeling damp, rivulets of silver flowing down, pooling around the base. In the future she never could trace that exact moment when Diane and Faline ceased being separate. There was no loss of continuity—no dominance of one over the other, no fighting for control. Just a seamless merging of two-made-one under the Zharus night sky. Two sets of memories, co-equal but not conflicting. Fearless war hero, college student, RIDE, crossrider, bartender, mixologist, hottie, Diane Faline Ferguson.

Diane bemusedly dusted the silver flakes off her fur. “What was *that* all about?” she mused aloud, noting an odd resonance in her voice. She looked down at herself and rubbed her eyes. She was suddenly a lot smaller and slimmer than she’d been a few moments ago—as if she’d just de-Fused without noticing. And that wasn’t all.

Down on each hip, a light shimmered. It seemed to be a swirling hardlight lens, bigger than any she’d actually had installed, each the size of her palm. There was one, and only one, thing that made sense. She pulled together every rumor they’d heard—every rumor *she’d* heard over the years into her database. She just had to laugh. “Okay... *now* I’ve Integrated. I *told* me so.” She looked up at the auroras, still swirling as if nothing had happened. It seemed like a complete anticlimax to the dramatic accounts on the sidebands. “Guess I’ll just sit here and wait to disappear now.”

“That’s the most...*incidental* Integration I’ve ever seen.” It was Perry, holding his guitar, looking much smaller and more fleshy, like herself. The shafts of his tailfeathers shimmered like the patches on her thighs.

“Hello, I’ll be your Candlejack for today.”

“Back off, Perry. I’ve got this,” came *another* voice, a welcome one, from midair ten meters overhead. “Hello, you two. I’ve been watching.”

“That figures,” Diane said, looking up at the clouded leopardess. She had a similar appearance to her old Fuser form, though smaller and slimmer. And, for some reason, she was wearing a white toga. “You know, I’m not even mad. I’m glad you’re okay, Serena...and Alta, I presume.”

“There’s no qualitative difference between us,” Serena said. “I’m what they call a ‘True Gestalt’. More on that later. We have a mess to clean up first.”

Diane chuckled. “Mess, huh? Well, I’ve just...got this yuck all over me.”

“You’d better get her to Shangri-La,” Perry said. The parrot Fuser projection formed over him again. “I’ll take care of things here, Serena.”

Diane got to her feet as Serena landed in front of her. The two embraced like long lost sisters. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for your whole performance,” the cat said. “We had a very *odd* evening that day. I caught the recording. You were *incredible*.”

“I was swimming in estrogen up to my neck, that’s what,” Diane said. “But I sure looked great on stage doing it.”

“How are your lifters and batteries?” Serena asked. “We have about two thousand clicks to cover tonight. Shangri-La is in the mountains north of the new Alohavator, nearer Califia, but we can stop at a couple friendly Enclaves along the way to rest and recharge. You need a shower, too. Integrating is a lot of yuck.”

“So, that’s that,” Diane said.

“An old life ends, a new one begins,” Perry said.

“That’s what being an Intie is all about.”

Diane shut her eyes and did a self-check. Her body was perfect blend of the biological and the technological. She had lifters in her thighs and shoulders, and a few smaller hardlight emitters under her skin that weren’t visible like the big ones on her thighs. She realized that she was standing in the middle of the Dry, naked, in sixty-degree air and higher pressure, yet it felt like another warm summer day under the Domes in the University Quad.

“Get outta here, you two,” Perry said. “Candlejack has stuff to do.” He strummed a jazzy melody on his guitar and surprisingly started to sing in a *female* voice, accompanied by a piano.

*Don’t care for me, don’t cry*

*Let’s say goodbye, Adieu.*

*It’s time to say goodbye, I know that in time*

*It will just fade away, it’s time to say goodbye.*

Diane felt a tingle as she spun up her lifters. She carefully rose off the ground, hand-in-hand with Serena.

“Take it slow at first,” the clouded leopardess said.

“We have a long flight ahead of us. First stop is Chakona, where I’ve been staying the past few weeks since you took that job.”

“So what the hell is this all about?” Diane asked. She allowed her former boss to lead her onwards, moving further away from the camp. “Why couldn’t you at least

send me an email or something letting me know you were okay?”

“Things are...complicated for Integrates,” Serena said. “The people in charge think it’s best to make a clean break with the old life. They take a dim view of us trying to let people know how we are. By the time I had a chance, enough time had passed it was better just to let you be.

“Then I heard from an old friend—Perry—that you were here and you’d spent weeks working and not defusing. Then he said you were fuzzy when you *did* just a few days ago. So here I am. And here you two are. Or there still two of you?”

“I think I can definitively answer no on that one, Serena. Diane Faline, that’s me. Or just Diane.”

“So, a True Gestalt like me and...well, *me*, Alta. I thought of calling myself ‘Serenalta’ but it just doesn’t sound right.” Once they were far enough away from the camp, they rose skywards and accelerated. “I’ll aeroshell both of us so you can conserve your energy. It’s still a few hundred kilometers to Chakona.”

“Well, lead on, MacDuff,” Diane said.

“That’s ‘lay on, MacDuff,’” Serena said. “And damned be he who first cries, ‘hold, enough.’” Haven’t you ever read the classics?”

“Never been one for reading much. Playing and doing, but not reading.” Diane shrugged, looking at the darkened landscape beneath her. She had Faline’s enhanced sensors, so even a moonless night hardly mattered. The auroras and starlight were more than enough. “Feels like I’m Wendy in *Peter Pan*, though.”

“Second star to the left, and straight on ‘til morning,”

Serena said. “Except we don’t need any fairy dust to fly.”

Diane reached out to check her mail...or tried to. “Hey...why can’t I get on the net? There should be satellite coverage...”

“We can get that fixed at Chakona. All in good time,” Serena said. “Believe me, we’ll have *plenty* of time.”

For all of Diane’s expectations, Chakona turned out to be a rather ordinary place aside from its residents. Carved out of a failed qubitite mine a few dozen Integrates had made it their home, along with a half dozen ‘taurs.

Diane blinked. “Did that cat-taur have...both sets of parts?”

“That’s a chakat...well, sort of, anyway. Close as they can get in the ‘real’ world,” Serena said. “It’s not polite to stare.”

Diane blinked. “What’s a chakat?”

“Look it—oh, right, you don’t have your DIN yet. We should get that taken care of. Let’s go see the wizard. Well, ‘technomage’, but wizard sounds better.” She led the way down one of the passages. “To answer your question, it’s one of the odds and ends that came out of that big Steader Internet infodump a couple years back. One of the big furry shared-universe writing circles from the early twenty-first. Like anything the Steaders pop out these days, seems like it inspired its own subculture. Given that it was about ‘taurs, and it hit right when they finally got the bugs out of the ‘taur RIDE conversion, the timing was perfect.”

“But why did he...she have...”

“That’s...sort of what chakats are,” Serena said.

“Hermaphrodite feline centaurs. The people who really went nuts over them—and could afford it—actually got hermaphrodite RI cores and shells commissioned. I think the RIDEworks just went along with it to see if it was even possible, and it turned out it was. Since chakats are herms, and the core’s sex has to match the shell’s...”

“I think that’s all I really need to know...” Diane puzzled over that. “And it’s going to take me a while to wrap this new Intie brain around.”

“You’ll see weirder,” Serena said. “Mythicals are all the rage right now, and they tend to Integrate easier than we mere animals. I hear there’s a *dragon* Intie flying around the Dry. A dragon! Supposed to be a really nice gal, too. Quotes Monty Python all the time.”

Serena abruptly lost some enthusiasm. “Annnd...the bosscat will probably come say hello. He always tries to meet every newbie within a couple weeks.”

“The who?”

“One reveal at a time, sister.” Serena put her handpaw on Diane’s shoulder. “Let’s get you clean, DIN’d, fed, and charged. You’re going to have enough culture shock the next few weeks to last your combined lifetimes.”

“Oh, joy,” Diane said. “This is going to be like college all over again. Isn’t it.”

“Well, if there’s one thing Inties like it’s partying. And where there’s a party, there’s alcohol. And where there’s alcohol...” Serena grinned.

“There’s demand for a skilled mixologist,” Diane said.

“Ding! Give the doe a prize,” the leopardess said.

“Let’s get you your DIN and then hit the showers. You’ll feel like a new woman with clean fur. It’s a lot like the first

time after you crossride. Your body is all new. Enjoy it.”

“What’s this DIN thing?” Diane asked.

“It’s a little gizmo that lets you connect to the ‘net again,” Serena said. “Nobody’s really sure quite why, but we lose that when we Integrate...but we get a little socket somewhere on our body where we can plug it in.” Serena pulled her hair aside to reveal a small amber gem plugged into a socket on the back of her neck. “Well, most of us anyway. Hopefully you’re one of the lucky ones.”

Diane started to feel around herself for something similar, then just did another internal systems check before looking down to find it on her stomach, like a second bellybutton, just beneath her breasts. It was hidden by dried, silvery gunk. “Oh. Here it is.”

Serena leaned in for a closer look. “That’s a lot of dead Fuser yuck. Maybe we’d better get you cleaned up first. The facilities here are really nice. You realize you’re still naked, right? Once you get your DIN we can work on some basic hardlight techniques before we go.”

“You lead, I’ll follow. I’m just a stranger in a strange land,” Diane said. The hardlight lenses on her hips swirled colorfully.

Serena led the way down another passage, ending up in a set of communal showers that wouldn’t have been out of place at an upscale swimming pool facility in Uplift or Nextus. There were several different kinds of soap in trays marked out for different types of fur. Diane took the “hooper” bar and lathered up, while Serena took the shower next to her. Serena’s toga winked out as the water came on.

The hot water, heated to near boiling, felt *good*, and

quickly washed away the afterbirth of Integration with just a little soap. She took extra care around the DIN slot, doing the best she could to get every last speck out.

“Want some help with that?” Serena asked. The wet cat’s rosetted fur clung to her body.

“Please. After today I’m not feeling body shy right now.”

Serena nodded, then came around the privacy partition. Between going out of view and coming around the corner she was now completely dry. “Ta daaa! I’ll teach you this trick first thing. Now, this is going to tickle. Just a little trick with lifter fields...”

Diane looked in in amazement as the last of the gunk in the socket lifted itself out. “I couldn’t ever do anything like that as a RIDE. It was hard enough just to stay off the ground.”

“One of the things about being Integrated is we get better precision and finesse with our lifters,” Serena said. “I suppose it makes up for the drawbacks of not being able to de-Fuse or use our old skimmer modes. It’s basically telekinesis. Between the flight, the hardlight illusions, incredible durability—a number of things—we’re furry superheros. Sort of thing.”

Diane whistled. “So what now? We fight crime?”

“I’ve heard rumors of a bat Intie in Zharustead, but no. We stay *out* of human society.” Serena shrugged. “But with all I can do I try not to get too full of myself, you know. Don’t let it go to your pretty deery head.” She tapped the doe on her muzzle.

“You *try*, huh?” Diane said. She picked up a fluffy white bath sheet off a rack. “Let me know when you start

succeeding, so I can be sure to be all impressed.”

“C’mon, let’s go get your socket filled so I can show you how to dry off more efficiently, and generate some clothes,” Serena said. “You’ll feel better that way.”

“Lead the way. I’m just along for the ride tonight.”

Back down more tunnels they went, passing a few more of Chakona’s denizens. Many of them were felines of one species or another, and there were more centaurs than one would expect. Finally, they went up a passage that ended in a chamber with a hole in the ceiling through which the auroras could be seen.

“Mr. Wizard, sir? We have a noob who needs your services,” Serena said to thin air. The room had an air of mysticism about it, with actual bookshelves along all the walls. The shelves themselves had not only books, but a number of the popular toys and collectables the Steaders periodically released. The toys didn’t have any rhyme or reason to them except for the era they came from, the 1980s: Barbie dolls, Transformers, MASK vehicles, GI Joe, My Little Pony, Rainbow Brite, LEGO sets.

In fact, there was rather a lot more LEGO than had first appeared.

Faline zoomed in closer to one of the MASK toys. It was LEGO. *Tiny* LEGO, but LEGO. Even the LEGO was made of tiny LEGO.

“The mind does funny things when you’re bored,” the Wizard said. “A bored Intie with a Bosscat-licensed micro-fabber for making DINs. That Starscream toy is about a hundred thousand bricks. Except the hair on the dolls, of course.”

“Impressive,” Diane said.

The raccoon in the robe and wizard hat gestured for her to come have a seat in an ornately-carved wooden chair. “This won’t take more than a few minutes. I’ll give you a couple dozen to take with you, plus the schema so you can make more, than you ladies can be on your way.”

“A couple of *dozen*?” Diane asked.

“They burn out if you look at them funny,” Serena said. “Don’t put too much bandwidth through it. Or much of anything. Still, better than nothing.”

“Well, I imagine so,” Diane said, sitting down on the low-backed chair.

“This is going to tingle a little,” the Wizard said, taking a wand out of a desk drawer. He looked at where her socket was located. “Oh, I see where the socket is. Still, I’m a professional. Hocus pocus. Abracadabra. Newport News.” He inserted it in with all the ceremony of a doctor doing a regular checkup.

“You sound so chipper about your job, sir,” Diane said, wincing at the cold sensation, then an all-over tingle, before the wand went beep.

“Meh. Keeps me from getting too bored. I’ll have your DINs fabbed in a few minutes, Miss Doe. It’ll be something pretty. Ladies like pretty things. Or so I’m told. I’ve never been a lady,” the raccoon wizard muttered. “Could’ve been, could’ve been. That’s just the kind of world we live in, eh? Could’ve been.”

Diane looked askance at Serena, who shrugged. A couple minutes later the dresser drawer slid open and revealed a multi-colored selection of jewels. The Wizard chose one the color of a fine red wine, then unceremoniously scooped the rest into a small leather

sack. “For you, my lady. Go ahead and plug it in, but go easy on it. It *will* burn out sooner or later; might sting a bit but no real harm done.”

It plugged in with a very soft click...then the world—or at least the local network—opened up to her again.

“*Whoa.*”

Then, with a sad little *piff*, the DIN burned out. Diane’s ears drooped. “Awww.”

“I’d better fab another dozen,” the Wizard said. “Then, if you don’t mind, I have more models to build. I hear Chuck Norris’s Karate Kommandos calling my name. Oh, Eighties toys, how I love thee.”

“Thank you very much,” Diane said. “We’ll just leave you to your passion. Me, I make cocktails.”

“We Integrates don’t get drunk unless we want to,” the Wizard said laconically. “But good luck. You’ll find you have a few new ingredients to work with, if you’re serving the Integrate palate.”

“Speaking of food, we need to fill up and recharge before flying on. Thanks again, sir,” Serena said. “Come on, Diane.”

The Wizard wasn’t the only resident Diane thought looked bored. There was a general atmosphere of it in the entire Enclave. Lifeless facial expressions. The little fabber cafeteria in the center of the biggest cave was mostly empty, but those few inside were eating very slowly. One lion had stabbed his steak so much it had fallen apart into a pulp. His knife made a rhythmic plink against the plate.

*:This is just sad,:* Diane sent to Serena, taking advantage of her new DIN. *:These guys can walk nekkid*

*in the deep Dry...why are they just sitting around here staring at the walls?:*

*:If they're not staring at the walls they're going deep into all that twencen pop culture crap like the Wizard,: Serena said. :Bosscat prefers Inties stay in their Enclaves and not kick up a fuss. There's some leeway if you're just hanging out in the desert, but going where people are is a no-no if you're not a Candlejack or Snatcher. You probably wouldn't be surprised how popular those jobs are.:*

*:I'll bet. This "bosscat" sounds like a real prize.:*

*:He meets everyone sooner or later. Let's get some chow and move on.:*

Diane wrinkled her nose. *:The sooner the better, far as I'm concerned.:* She peered at the fabber menu. "What the fudge? 'Sarium salt caesar salad'? And what the heck is 'Qubitite surprise?'"

"Seems to be aptly named," Serena said. "You sure sound surprised to me."

"Sereeeena..."

"Inties have some new RDAs," Serena said. "You can't just go down to the corner shop and upgrade your batteries anymore, and your biological processes will flush the old stuff out over time. So you gotta eat right to replenish."

"So that's what that Wizard guy meant by new ingredients to work with?" Diane said. "Okay, guess I'll give this stuff a try."

Serena got her tray after Diane and followed her to an empty corner table. "Bon appetit."

Between Chakona and their next stop, Diane learned how to fly again under her own power. It felt different than in skimmer or Fuser form, but she quickly got the hang of it. “It’s like riding a bike! Or being one! My parents took off my training wheels when I was five.”

“I bet it was one of those 1970s banana-seat bikes,” Serena said. “Just wait ‘til you get more practice. When you learn how to create the right shape of aeroshell, if you’ve got plenty of battery juice you might even be able to break the sound barrier.”

“If I had wings I’d be an anthro peryton,” Diane said. “Wait...” She concentrated, the hardlight emitters on her hips flaring, and a pair of hawk’s wings materialized. “There!”

“Great! Now see if you can project at least a bra and panties,” Serena said, giggling. “Chakona’s not big on clothing, but our next stop is a bit more prudish.”

Diane snorted. “It’s weird. I’m both a little embarrassed not to have anything on *and* annoyed by having to have something on...at the same time.”

“Just part of being what we are,” Serena said. “Fortunately we don’t need to stop for longer than it takes to recharge, then we should reach Shangri-La by sunrise. It’s waaaay up on the eastern side of the Western Wall. *Spectacular* mountain views and no oxygen tanks required for us.”

“So instead of being in the hot, dense atmosphere of the Dry we’re up among the glaciers and the mountain tundra?” Diane said.

“And it’s *just* outside the rain shadow, so we get snow and glaciers. They make this *great* ice sarium vodka. It’s

great in mixers and highballs, on the rocks with crackling glacier ice. Not to mention we can drink as much as we want, whenever we want.”

Diane licked her lips. “Now that would hit the spot about now. How about a little more speed?” She flapped hardlight wings.

“If you think you’re up to it,” Serena said. “I’ll accelerate slowly to three-fifty. Go easy on those lifters. They’re...improved, but need breaking in.”

Diane nodded, and fed more power to her lifters. It was an entirely new feeling flying on her own like this. It wasn’t like being a RIDE, where you had feedback from your sensors but didn’t *feel* it. This was more like the ache in muscles from running full tilt, yet not actually physically *moving* a thing. The cavorite in her hips and shoulder hummed, twisting gravity around her into a propulsive envelope. She knew how it worked, but now she really felt it, too.

The hardlight lenses on her hips shimmered, projecting an aeroshell around her so she didn’t even feel a breeze, just like in skimmer mode. Yet there was also a first-time thrill, a literally electric sensation zinging through her. She felt the energy flow through power conduits from her batteries, from the tip of her nose to the bottom of her hooves.

“I can get used to this,” Diane said.

“Well, not to be a wet blanket, but there’s some bad news coming, too. So, enjoy the flight, Superdoe,” the clouded leopardess said. “It’s going to feel mundane all too quickly.”

“I can’t believe this could *ever* get mundane,” Diane

said happily. “Catch me if you can!”

Serena rolled her eyes and zoomed after her friend. “Hey, wait up! You’ve got better lifters than I do!” They were gone in moments, faint contrails in the sky the only trace of their passage.

Shangri-La was nestled in a small U-shaped glacial valley almost four thousand meters above sea level, in the lee of an unnamed peak that went up another three thousand meters. A small river went down the center, collecting into a tarn lake before flowing onwards towards the mouth.

The mouth itself hung right over a sheer drop straight into the Dry, the waterfall turning to mist after less than a thousand meters before evaporating entirely in the dawn light of Pharos.

“That is absolutely gorgeous,” Diane said.

“Wait until you see the entrance,” Serena said. “Oh, by the way, dress like this.” Hardlight shimmered over her skin, resolving into saffron Buddhist monk robes. She transmitted the pattern via DIN.

“You have *got* to be kidding me,” Diane said. “Really?”

“The thing you have to understand about these Enclaves is that they’re...well, *themed*,” Serena said. “You have to abide by the theme while you’re there, or at least pay it lip service in public. It may be this one’s not best suited to you, but there are plenty of others. We can visit some later once you’re settled in.”

“Shangri-La, right,” Diane said. She rezzed up the same robes. “*Lost Horizon* and all that. Got it. I think I need some of that ice vodka. Maybe a highball, maybe a

pint.”

“Well, it’s been a big few days for you,” Serena said. “Finally peeled yourself away from work, had sex the first time as a woman, partied hard with your friends, then went back to work and Integrated.”

“Wait, you know about me and Glen?” Diane asked.

“I’m the one who warned you about the pool of who’d screw you first,” Serena said.

“Oh, well, thanks for that,” Diane said. “Did you place any bets?”

“I honestly didn’t think Glen was your type,” Serena said. “So I bet on...oh...what’s his name? Bighorn sheep RIDE, on the tip of my tongue.” She managed to snap her fingers despite being tipped with pads.

“Well, you were right, he kind of *wasn’t* my type,” Diane said. “Live and learn.”

“And here we are!” Serena announced. “Welcome home, if you like it. If not...there are other places, or you can get a group together and found an Enclave yourself, once you have all the founding kit gathered up.”

“To tell the truth, I’d rather just go back to the Village and start serving drinks again...” Diane trailed off on seeing the entrance. Embedded into the side of the granite cliff was a Tibetan-style Buddhist monastery, made of stone. Stark white walls and deep red tile roof with golden friezes full of Eastern dragons and griffins. “Okay, that *is* impressive.”

“It’s a little less so once you realize how *easy* it is for us to make stuff like that, but it got me that way the first time, too,” Serena said.

“Is the inside that impressive?” Diane wondered.

“We don’t have much else to do with our time than make ourselves more comfortable,” Serena said. “I’ve been making a proper pub inside. Why don’t I get you that drink? Then I’ll introduce you to everyone. There’s less than a hundred of us as it is.”

“Please!” Diane said with feeling. “Um...by the way, how do you square the whole Buddhist thing with booze? I’m pretty sure *real* Buddhist monks don’t drink...”

“We’re not...really that big on the Buddhist thing. It’s just something to do,” Serena explained. “Lord do we *need* things to do, and everyone needs a drink every once in a while. Besides, if they decide I’m not toeing the line enough, I’ll take my Glenfiddich and go elsewhere.”

“Fair enough,” Diane said. “You know, I don’t think I ever saw your place even back when we were still with LowRIDEr.”

“Home was always the bar. The apartment was just a place to sleep.” Serena shrugged. “Sometimes not even then. But then, it’s not like I need to explain that to *you*, is it?”

They went through the steel doors, past saffron-clad residents busy working on other stone carvings—dragons, lions, and the like—through labyrinthine passageways only lit by their own hardlight and not losing their way because of their perfect Intie memories.

At last, they reached a cozy little room with a bar running along one wall. The bar top was onyx, or something reasonably similar. The room had a vague Oriental decor that provided atmosphere without being cheesy. A few other Integrates in saffron robes were seated at the various tables with drinks, even though there was no

one behind the bar.

“So, two Integrates walk into a bar...” Diane said.

“I’ve heard this one before,” Serena deadpanned.

“Hey, guys!” She waved to the other Inties.

“Oh, thank *God* you’re back!” an antelope said. “Can you make me a grasshopper? *Please?* Self-service is really annoying.”

The doe put her hands on her hips and looked around. “I feel right at home already.”

“Why don’t I just let you get to it, then,” Serena said, smirking.

Diane found bartending for Integrates an interesting challenge...for about a week. There were plenty of new drinks to learn—mainly variations on old ones with ingredients like sarium, raw qubitite, or other formerly-toxic minerals added or substituted—and new sarium-laced boozes to sample. Diane even invented a couple of new cocktails herself, including a variation on the Vesper that used a particularly bitter sarium salt instead of quinine to fill in for the Kina Lillet that hadn’t been made since 1986.

But after that, it began to pall. There were hardly ever any new customers, and she’d soon learned the stories—and preferred tipples—of every bar regular by heart. Bartending went from an interesting new experience to worse than routine.

Then one day a new visitor arrived. A five-foot-tall lynx wearing a black beret sauntered in like he owned the place—and Serena blinked at the way everyone else in the bar promptly relocated to the farthest-away tables possible

and spent most of their time looking at the floor. *The hell?*

“Why, hello, hello, my pretty doe,” he said. “Have we met before?”

“I...don’t think so,” Diane said. Yet, there were shadows in her memories. Ancient sideband rumors passed from RIDE to RIDE during wartime that seemed to match the lynx’s description. And then there was that *voice*. It purred, it wheedled, it was like Jack Kerouac with tufted kitty ears.

“No, no. We’ve worked together before,” the mysterious lynx said. “Not that you would’ve known *then*, but I know you. I *never* forget a sideband address, Fearless Faline.”

“So who *are* you then?” Diane said. Her cervine danger-sense tingled a little...which made her all the more determined to ignore it.

“Why, I’m Integrate *numero uno*. Name’s Fritz, pretty doe. Welcome to our galaxy.”

“So you’re this ‘boss-cat’ I’ve been hearing so much about,” Diane said. “The reason so many of us sit around staring at the walls rather than going out and *doing* stuff. Hey, go you.”

Fritz’s expression darkened just a little. “Gonna let that one pass, since you’re a noob. I’ll have an Irish Coffee, if you don’t mind.”

“Coming right up,” Serena said.

“I want the new chick to make it,” Fritz said. “Please, make with the juice.”

“Sure thing,” Diane said. She deftly handled each step, trying to guess exactly what proportions he’d like in it. Fritz seemed like the kind of drinker who’d go heavy on

the liquor and light on the coffee and sugar. She did add a spoonful of A-grade sarium salt for an extra electric zing. They didn't use money, so there wasn't any tip to worry about. "Here you go."

He swallowed half of the hot liquid in one gulp. "Whoa...that really hits the spot! You're the ginchiest, chick."

Diane nodded. "That's what I do."

He swallowed the rest. "How about a double and I'll leave you a nice tip."

Diane nodded, making a double Irish Coffee. "You're the bosscat."

"That's a right. That's a me," he said with a Cheshire Cat grin. He finished the second one faster than the first. "You noob cubes need to learn some *respect* for the bosscat."

"Respect? Or is it just *fear* you want?" Diane said. "If you're really serious about wanting to make life better for all of us Inties, and you put your money where that big mouth is, I'd respect *that*. I honestly would. If you're just wanting to throw a scare into me about how rough and tough you are...I saw plenty of people like *that* back when I was human and RIDE. Not impressed."

"You're the gasser doe who took down the 42nd Wolfsrudel all by herself," Fritz said. "I admire your work."

"Buttering me up won't work either," Diane said. "Now, do you want another drink?"

"You know, I can tell you and I are gonna have a *gas* together," Fritz said. "I'm done with you for now, out of deep respect for these mellowed-out monks. Gimme a stout foam top for the road and I'll be on my merry way."

“Sure thing,” Diane said, without a trace of irony.  
“Enjoy it.”

Once Fritz had gone, Serena and the others came out of hiding. “What were you thinking? Do you know what he could *do* to you?”

“Attempting to give a damn. Hmm...nope...nope... sorry, I am *fresh* out of damns. Remind me to pick some more up next week.” Diane shook her head. “I *hate* bullies. Especially since Henrietta...eh, never mind that. Fortunately, most of the time if you stand up to them but don’t push it *too* far, they figure it’s not worth it to cause a fuss.”

“I’m telling you, don’t provoke him,” Serena insisted. She curled her tail around and held it, ears splayed in fear. “The stories I’ve heard would turn you whiter than the glaciers.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Diane said. “I wouldn’t take it that far. But I’m pretty sure almost nobody ever stands up to him at all. Which makes those of us who do too *interesting* to do anything to, as long as we don’t take it too far. We’re a rarity.”

“Keep on like that and you’ll be even rarer,” Serena said, pouring herself a gin and tonic into a highball muzzle glass. “And extremely well-done, at the same time.” She swallowed the cocktail, then hugged herself and shivered. “How’d you like to go on a supply run with me? We’re running out of the good stuff.”

“I thought we had to stay in the Enclave all the time.”

“We’re not totally self-sufficient, especially when it comes to good booze,” Serena said. “As long as we don’t rock the boat, we can *occasionally* rub shoulders with the

mundanes. I have a contact with a gal at a pub supply company in Califia. C'mon, we'll take a van."

"We have skimmers?" Diane asked.

"Sure. You don't think we can carry a few months worth of good liquor with lifter fields, do you?" Serena said. "Just put on a human or Fuser disguise—make sure it's not anything like your old self—and we're good."

"Righto." Diane thought for a moment, then shimmered into a female moose Fuser form. "How's this?"

"Love the schnoz," Serena said. "It'll do. Let's go."

The founders of Califia were nothing if not ambitious. Their long-term goal was to recreate the California coastline in condensed form along a few hundred kilometers on the western edge of Gondwana in the right climate zone. They had even condensed the names of the major cities to Sanego, Longeles, and Sanfrisco. The polis was barely five years old, so most everything was still in the planning stages.

"We have time to see a few sights and catch up on the news," Serena-as-squirrel said. "I hear there's a bar where there's a band of shark-tagged musicians. Shark RIDEs? How is *that* a good idea? I thought birds and reptiles needed some pretty big changes to work, but a cartilaginous *fish*? What's the cooldown on that? Do they have gills?"

"I'll bet there are some very happy dentists in that part of town," Diane said. She looked out the window at the mundane world passing by. There weren't a lot of RIDEs in sight, but there were skimmers galore, with ads on the local yelp for drive-in theaters, drive-in restaurants,

drive-in shopping centers. Wheel-less skimmers based on classic American makes of the mid-twentieth century were everywhere. The founders knew that the character of the place was established very early on, and they didn't seem to like RIDEs very much.

“Ah, here is it. Sanego Bartending Supplies, 422 Balboa Street,” Serena said. “You're about to meet a rare type of Intie, too.”

Their contact was, to Diane's surprise, a human woman at first glance. But she had a glow to her cheeks and under her rockabilly clothes. Tania Barros was an Integrate, but could pass for human with a few funny implants. “Well, are we going for a Rule 63 *Rocky and Bullwinkle* or something?” she said.

“Tania, meet Diane Faline,” Serena said. She winked at the “moose”. “My partner in crime.”

“We have money to pay for this, don't we?” Diane said. There was something about the local networks. She was trying to keep her DIN at low power. Burnouts were irritating and she hadn't brought a lot of replacements for this short trip. But now she was curious and connected, intending on seeing what had happened to her personal accounts.

*Diane Ferguson, missing. Not dead yet, just missing.* It had only been a couple of weeks. Still, she wondered how her mother was taking it...only to get a Candlejack Warning logo with Perry's signature on it. “Damn it...”

“Just found the CJ's watchdogs, eh?” Serena said. “Don't push too hard. They'll push back. As for money... well, trust me. We have it.”

“Here's the manifest,” Tania said, transmitting it.

“And the price.”

Diane took a look. “Whoa...this is some pretty high-end stuff. Thirty-year-old single-malt scotch and Kentucky bourbon imported all the way from Earth? So much for the ascetic monastery life.”

“Hey, if we have to be outcasts, at least we can be outcasts in *style*,” Serena said.

“Where does the money to pay for all this come from?” Diane asked.

“Oh, various places,” Serena said. “Lately I’ve been letting Sturmhaven embassy slush funds subsidize it. I might switch to Nextus next time around, just to be an equal opportunity embezzler.”

“You’re what?” Diane said. “How is that even possible?”

“Ain’t no thang. You just waltz right into the banking system, collect the *mu*, then waltz right out again. Though in your case it’ll be more a pirouette. Didn’t I tell ya? Whatever the Intie process did to us, it also made us the world’s greatest quantum supercomputers. We’re like in that Robert Redford movie, tennis shoes or something.”

“*Sneakers*,” Tania supplied.

“Yeah, whatever. They can’t keep us out, and won’t even know we’ve been there unless we tell them.” She waved a hand expansively. “The digital world, it is our oyster!”

“This is *wrong*, Serena,” Diane said. Actually, come to think of it, she wasn’t quite sure *how* she felt about it. Now that she knew about it, she was halfway tempted to go rooting through any computers she could find just to see what it was like. Come to think of it, she wondered if

Nextus Admin's databanks might have any additional information on her Faline half. She did seem to be missing an awful lot of early memories compared to other RIDEs she'd talked to on the sidebands.

Other RIDEs... There was the germ of an idea there, but she couldn't quite tease it out yet.

The "flying squirrel" shrugged. "I look at it as 'child support' for the children they don't know exist. We can't exactly get real jobs like this."

"Well, *you* can't anyway," Tania said.

"And it's not like they're going to run out of money. Stupid Sturmies..." Serena shook her head and muttered. After nine years the War was still an open wound for many.

*Sturmies...* Diane thought back to her time at the camp, and those cheating bitches Henrietta and her cohorts. The thoughts that came from her Faline side still stung, and her Diane side added overtones of shock and horror...she'd never shared those memories while they were separate. It seemed she was entirely in agreement on the matter. *Hmmm. Just how good are my new Intie powers?*

"Anyway, let's get this stuff packed up and head back to Shangri-La," Serena said. "Thanks for the help, Tania."

"No problem," the woman said. "One of these weeks I should come out there and see how you guys are using the stuff."

"You'll be welcome any time," Serena said. They pulled the skimmer van around back and loaded the crates in. Since they were concealed from public view, they were able to use their lifter fields, and between the three of

them got everything loaded in record time. They waved to Tania and set out for home.

“You know, after we get back, I was thinking,” Diane mused. “I think I want to go out and spend some time in the desert. Just, y’know, learning to use these new powers, thinking about stuff...”

Serena favored her with a suspicious glance. “That’s *usually* okay, but you’re not planning to go near any settlements, are you? The ‘jacks get a little antsy about that.”

“Oh, no, don’t worry. I won’t be going near any ‘mundanes,” Diane said. “And I’ll keep under cover when the birds make a pass. I just want to...well, try things out. Test my limits.”

“Well...all right,” Serena said. “But don’t do anything stupid, okay? You’ve already pushed your luck a lot farther than I would with that thing with Fritz.”

“Don’t worry,” Diane said. “I won’t.” *And if I do, I’ll try not to get caught.*

Henrietta crouched with the rest of her white wolf pack in the undergrowth, eyeing the plump and juicy doe in the next clearing as it grazed over in their direction. Just another minute or so, and it would be the right time to strike.

Quite without warning, there was a loud gunshot—an old-style propellant shotgun blast. A moment later, the trunk of the tree right next to Henrietta shredded in a cloud of explosions. She yelped in pain and surprise as splinters ripped across her muzzle and side, narrowly missing her eye.

The deer spooked and was gone in a flash of white tail. Her AI bot packmates were gone a moment later. Henrietta was still too shocked to move. She looked around. What...?

Through the trees, a humanoid figure was approaching.

This wasn't right. This was *her* Nature Range, on solo. There shouldn't be anything unexpected here, and certainly not any other *people*. She tried to reject this interloper from her system, but nothing happened.

Whoever it was, it was coming closer. *Screw this*. She disengaged from Nature Range—

—or tried to. For some reason, it wasn't working. She couldn't punch out, and she couldn't open a network connection to the outside world. *What the fuck?*

The figure stepped into the clearing. She was cel-shaded, wearing a form-hugging black and yellow jumpsuit, carrying an immense, bulky shotgun with a diamond-shaped TORGUE logo on the side, and had blue hair in a pageboy cut. She was also...an anthropomorphic whitetail doe. *Oh you have got to be kidding me*.

The deer-woman turned to look unerringly where Henrietta was crouching, and smiled. Then she raised her gun.

Henrietta suddenly found the power to move, and was off and running as the ground exploded behind her. *Who are you?* she snarled. Or tried to. She couldn't comm, couldn't even *speak*. All she could do was run.

She noticed then that running right alongside her were several other wolves. She recognized all of them by sight—they were her packmates at the mining camp, the

four remaining members of the 22nd Wolfpack, Sturmhaven RIDE Infantry. They didn't seem to be able to speak, either—and the naked fear in their eyes made Henrietta's own panic worse.

Explosions ripped up the ground just ahead and to the right, and Henrietta stumbled. Before she could hit the ground, something caught her. She floated up within a glowing sphere of energy—and there was the deer-woman standing right there. The barrel of the shotgun looked like the mouth of the Uplift Tunnel. Then she spoke, and Henrietta recognized her instantly.

“Turnabout is a *bitch*, isn't it, bitch?” Faline said pleasantly. Then she pulled the trigger. A moment later, what was left of Henrietta lay on the ground, blood leaking out of her pulped body. Faline knelt next to her and whispered into one ruined ear, “You just couldn't leave it on the battlefield, could you? Had to carry a grudge. When I'm done with you, you're going to think the ones I killed were the lucky ones.”

Then she stood and walked away. Henrietta could only lie on the ground in agony as the deer cheerfully went on to chase down the rest of the pack.

An unknowable period later, Henrietta was on her feet and whole again, standing in a clearing with the other wolves, with only the fading echoes of the full-body agony of the explosive shotgun blast to remind her what had just happened.

Then Faline's voice drifted on the breeze from somewhere close by. “Olly olly oxen free!”

The wolves exchanged frightened glances, and then they ran again.

It was no good, no matter what they did. They tried to gang up on the deer-woman, take her down as pack. Occasionally they were able to get close enough to mark her, to draw blood a few times—but that just made her grin in a way no deer ever should and be even more savage in response. In the end, she was just too fast with her phase-lock and her shotgun. They tried to run and hide, but she hunted them down unerringly and left them bleeding and broken on the ground, again and again. Only after several fast-time *days* did she tire of the game. “See ya ‘round, kiddies!” she said cheerfully as she faded out, leaving Henrietta alone and whimpering in her own Nature Range again.

It wasn't the last she heard of Faline, either. Over the next few real-time weeks, it happened several more times. She tried staying out of Nature Range, but it didn't help. The deer would simply drag her in, like some kind of cervine Freddy Krueger. When she heard the deer's cheerful voice, she fled desperately through the forest. Sometimes she got away, but more often she didn't. Regardless, she was blocked from punching out, comming, adjusting the time flow, or doing *anything* until Faline decided she'd had enough fun for a while. She desperately thought apologies and cries for forgiveness at her, but there was no sign she ever heard.

Henrietta tried to look Faline up in the directories, see where she was, try to get in touch with her somehow...but she'd outright disappeared. Which could only mean she'd joined the ranks of the Integrated, the super-computing bogeymen made up of RIDEs and their people who had vanished. The one thing the RIDEs in sideband chat

agreed on was that there was simply no defending against one of those. If Faline was out to get her, there was nothing she could do about it.

Henrietta got progressively more and more neurotic, and her human owner didn't understand. Whenever she tried to discuss it with her human, she found she couldn't talk about it. Faline had put some kind of fetter on her, blocking any discussion of her virtual reality visits. She couldn't talk about the fetter, either. Finally her human got fed up and put her on the block. She was immediately snatched up for a bid of five times what her asking price *should* have been.

As she was wheeled under heavy fetter into a darkened Uplift warehouse, placed in a storage cube, and shut down, the last thing she heard was Faline's voice.  
*:Who's the master hunter now, bitch?:*

Diane leaned back under a rock overhang a hundred clicks from Brubeck Mining Village #7, watching through remote cameras as the last of the RIDEs was wheeled into the warehouse space and locked away. She'd paid in advance for the next fifty years of storage—with Sturmhaven money. It felt entirely satisfying. *Yeah, you're not gonna cheat anyone at Nature Range now, are you bitches?*

She didn't even have to feel guilty about having separated the RIDEs from their riders. None of them had anything approaching the bond she and Faline had, or Serena and Alta. If they had, they wouldn't have been so quick to sell their RIDEs when they started acting "defective"—and Diane had already promised herself not

to push any further if that turned out to be the case. But no, these RIDEs were “replaceable equipment,” and they had all too easily been replaced.

“Happy with ourselves, are we?”

Diane looked up to see an Integrate parrot standing in front of her. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, we are. Can’t see that you have anything to complain about. Nobody ever saw me and I kept it clean.”

“Hmph.” Human expressions weren’t always easiest to read from a beak, but Diane got the distinct impression Perry was frowning. “All right, fair enough. It’s not exactly uncommon to want to settle old scores after you Integrate. Not like I can *really* complain. Not entirely innocent there myself.”

“See? There you go.” Diane grinned. “I’m gonna be a good little girl from here on out, I promise. No freaking the mundanes, no trying to comm my old friends....or even my mother, you bastard.”

Perry shrugged. “Sorry about that, but it’s simplest that way. Make a clean break and don’t look back.”

“You know, I’m curious. You don’t work for Fritz. He has the Snatchers. Who do you work for, Perry?”

“If I said ‘Freakazoid’ would you buy it?” Perry said. “No? Well, I’ll just say that Olympos is watching and you are made in the likeness of our goddess.”

“Goddess?” Diane pointed at him. “Stop right there, Perry. You just buried the needle on my bullshitometer. I don’t want to hear another word.”

“You’ll find Intie life is generally somewhere around 90% bullshit, most days,” Perry said, strumming his guitar. “That’s why it’s so great being a Candlejack. Don’t

have to deal with it most of the time.”

“And the cost is having to disappear people?”

“It’s dirty work, I know. But it’s dirty for the greater good,” Perry insisted. “Serena should be here soon, so don’t go anywhere.”

“Argh. Did you *have* to call her?” Diane rolled her eyes. “I’m a grown woman. I love her like a sister, but I don’t need her to act as a surrogate parent.”

“It was either that or Fritz himself,” Perry said. “Something tells me you’d be better off not drawing the bosscat’s eye for a while.”

“Point,” Diane said. “I’ll be good. I said I would.”

“I just can’t leave you alone for five minutes, can I?” Serena said, touching down next to the parrot.

“Hey,” Diane protested. “Like I was telling Polly-wanna-cracker here, I stayed below the radar. Everything’s hunky-dory.”

Serena snorted. “Oh, sure. Everything’s fine from the *outside*. But you pull too much crap like this, you get stepped on just because.” She shook her head. “So, was it worth it?”

“I gave some Sturmie cheaters their just comeuppance and...maybe drove them a little mad. Just a smidgen.” The doe held her index finger and thumb a couple centimeters apart. “They changed the Nature Range rules so they could catch and eat me, wouldn’t let me out until they were finished with their little revenge plot. Well, it’s one thing to change the rules on the battlefield when your life is at stake. Using *God Mode* in Nature Range, like they did to me? Well...how could I pass this up?”

Serena shrugged. “Well, if *you* can still live with

yourself, I don't see a problem. Just like with crossriding, everyone goes a little crazy in the first few weeks. Now that you've got *your* crazy out of your system, *maybe* you can survive your next encounter with Fritz with your pelt intact."

"I suppose that's some—what the living *fuck*?" Diane felt the ground vibrate beneath her. From her taps into the camp's systems, Diane felt a shudder. On camera a fountain of blue dust surged out of the shaft, then alarms started blaring.

"Oh shit," Perry said. "I *knew* it was a bad idea for them to dig so close to a faultline."

"They opened Shaft Six?" Diane said incredulously.

"New Foreman. Efficiency nutbar. Thought the safety studies were 'within sufficient tolerance,'" Perry said distractedly. "I'd better get back to camp."

Diane got to her feet. "I'm coming, too."

"What? Like *hell* you are," Perry said. "Fritz would skin me alive and use my feathers for a piñata. You two return to Shangri-La. I'll deal with this." Then he was gone, hardlight projectors leaving a colorful after-image in the air for a few moments.

Diane stared after him for a moment.

"Oh, no," Serena said. "I know that look. You are *not* going anywhere near that camp."

"I'll stay cloaked!" Diane said. "Those are *my* friends down there, and maybe even some of yours, too. And if these fancy lifters can help clear away the rubble, I'd never forgive myself if I didn't pitch in."

"Cloaking won't help much with all that q-dust," Serena said.

“So I’ll use the damned moose! Everyone will be going too much nuts anyway to notice.” Diane shook her head. “You don’t have to come. I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

Serena facepawed. “If I thought for a moment I could *keep* you from going...”

“Well, you can’t. So come or don’t. Either way...” She fired her lifters and streaked skyward. Seconds later, she reached the top of her arc, the camp halfway to the horizon ahead of her. Then she was falling, the buildings growing larger moment by moment. She barely slowed as she dropped into the camp, throwing up her hardlight disguise as she passed between the emergency vehicles lined up at the entrance and slipped into the shaft.

Rather than a vertical shaft with an elevator, Shaft Six went down under a mountain at a 45 degree angle, following the lay of a slanted seam of qubitite that looked like it led into an even bigger one. The one problem with it was that, in the event of an earthquake, there was a mountain waiting to fall on everyone’s heads. And it looked like at least part of one had. The shaft ended in a pile of rubble about fifty meters in. There were already two RIDEs on the scene—a mule and a bat—sweeping the pile with their sensors—with Perry right behind them.

“What the *hell* are you doing here?” Perry squawked.

“Did you really think I’d flag-tail and leave?” Diane said.

The parrot gritted his beak. “Guess not. Keep that shell up and use muscle power.”

“Hey! Authorized emergency workers only!” the mule complained.

“You’ve got thirty trapped below and aftershocks on the way. We can’t wait,” Perry said. “This whole damn seam should’ve been filled with concrete. There isn’t anything but *prayer* holding this Q together.”

“Muscle power isn’t going to cut it, Perry,” Diane said. “You can make out the lay of that rubble as well as I can. We’re going to need to hold up the top layer while we shift the stuff underneath, until we can see about shoring it up with something. I got some lifter upgrades before...you know...so I can handle the heavy lifting. You and Serena get the loose stuff. And get those guys out of here, and keep anyone else from coming in.” She nodded to the RIDEs.

“Serena?!” Perry squawked.

“Yes?” Serena said from right behind him.

Perry facepalmed. “I am so going to be Kentucky fried parrot when this is over.”

“What the hell are you—” the donkey began. Serena made a zipping motion, and he shut up. Then she waved a hand and the RIDEs turned around and marched back up the shaft.

“We are *not* the droids you’re looking for,” Serena said. “All right, let’s get this party started. The sooner we start, the sooner we’re out of your feathers.”

Diane raised her hands, palms out, lifter fields coming up. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the feel from her sensors, finding the half-a-dozen boulders on which everything else rested and getting a good hold on them. “Okay, got ‘em. Go, you two.”

Perry and Serena stepped up next to her, and began pulling out the rubble. Clouds of dust billowed up the shaft

as they sent the gravel and stones skittering along the floor behind them. *:Lucky we don't need to breathe all the time, eh?:* Diane said. *:Perry, can you find something to buttress this with? I can hold it for a few minutes, but I don't know if that'll be enough.:*

*:Yes, Your Highness,:* Perry said, slipping back up the shaft.

*:Well, so far so good,:* Diane said. The lower half of the blockage had been completely cleared. The boulders that blocked the top half of the passage floated in place, streams of dust trickling out here and there. Behind it a number of Fused miners were visible—including Glen and Bobby, holding the injured.

The elk looked up. “What the hell...? That’s not... Diane?”

Diane blinked. “What? Oh, shit.” The lifters were taking enough energy that her body had helpfully shut down the hardlight disguise to channel the power elsewhere.

*:Didn't I tell you to keep that shell up!:* Perry “shouted”.

*:You try holding up sixteen tons and see what you get,:* Diane said. *:I'm down to 20% on my batteries already. Hurry up with that shoring!:*

Perry placed the temporary hardlight support generators into the gap and turned them on. They hummed to life, clearing the air of Q-dust.

The miners didn't wait, and didn't stop to gawk at their saviors. As soon as the way was clear, they left as fast as they could, carrying the injured first. Glen/Bobby stared at her as they went by, but didn't stop to ask any questions.

Diane stood by to let them pass, gradually releasing her lifter fields as she made sure the emergency supports could take the weight. She sighed in satisfaction. That was when she heard the voice from behind her. “Well, well. Bartender *and* search-and-rescue, both. Might just have t’ give you a raise.” Diane slowly turned to see Clint Brubeck, a hard hat substituting for his traditional Stetson.

Perry groaned. “Now...damnit damnit *damnit!* This keeps getting worse! How am I going to clean this up? Fritz is going to skin me then Artemis is going to...to...I don’t know!”

“And Perry, wasn’t it?” Clint said mildly. “Looks like you two have lost a little weight. Looks good on you.” He nodded respectfully at Serena. “Ma’am.”

“You really shouldn’t be down here, Mr. Brubeck. We should all get out of here, in fact,” Diane said.

“Are *all* the miners clear?” Brubeck asked.

“Damn it! There’s still one pair unaccounted for,” Perry said. “Walter and his bighorn. I’d better get down there and search.”

“They’d have been working the right fork,” Clint said. “Come on.” He brushed past them, leading the way into the mine.

“Aw, c’mon, boss!” Perry said, hurrying after him. “You can’t keep running into danger like this!”

“I’ve spent my whole life running into danger, youngster! I ain’t about to stop now!” Clint said, breaking into a run.

:*And since he’s not in a RIDE, it’s not like we can stop him.*: Diane sent to Serena. “Well, let’s go help.”

“In for a centimu, in for a mu, I guess,” Serena sighed,

following.

A few hundred meters down the passage, they found another fall of rubble, including a couple of big boulders. A Fused bighorn sheep was lying halfway under it. “Aw, shit!” Clint said. “See if you can get all these rocks off.”

Perry shook his head. “The pressure from those rocks is all that’s keeping him from bleeding out right now. Even the med fusers can’t deal with this much internal damage, unless...oh, shit. Well, no alternatives, I guess. Sorry ‘bout this, Walter, Ramulus.” He placed a hand on the sheep’s chest.

:*What? What’s he—*: Diane said.

:*Shush, just watch,*: Serena said. :*You may have to do this yourself someday.*:

“What the hell?” Clint said as the sheep shuddered and began to shrink in on itself. Silver fluid trickled out like blood from a wound.

“No choice, boss,” Perry said. “They either Integrate or die.”

“Well, this is certainly an education,” Clint said dryly.

“It’s safe to shift the rocks now,” Perry said. “Let’s get the *hell* out of here before an aftershock hits.”

“Got it,” Diane said, lifting the rocks enough to pull the shrunken anthro sheep free. Her remaining battery charge was draining fast, dipping into the single digits before Walter-Ramulus was free. “Oh *God*, I need a drink and a charge.”

“I hear there’s a pretty good bar in this camp,” Clint said. “Why don’t we all go there? I think we need to have ourselves a chat.”

The camp was busy enough in the aftermath of the cave-in that nobody was looking to have a drink right now. Diane hung a “Closed For Private Party” sign on the door as they all filed in. Since there was nowhere else, Perry laid Walter down on the floor. He was covered in Q-dust and dried Integrate afterbirth.

Diane slid behind the bar and found the power socket. “Ahhhhh.”

After a moment, Serena joined her. “Nice little place you’ve got here. Just room enough for two.”

“It’s cozy,” Diane agreed. “So, introductions are in order, I guess. Serena, Clint Brubeck. Mr. Brubeck, Serena and Alta, the gal who taught me to be a bartender, crossrider, and Integrate, in that order.”

“We’ve met, at the LowRIDER,” Serena said. Some of her rosettes encircled her hardlight lenses. They shimmered. “But Clint wouldn’t know this kitty face.”

“So, all them rumors are true after all,” Clint said. He was back in his Stetson now, having ditched the hardhat as soon as they left the shaft. He reached behind the bar and found his bottle of scotch. “You don’t mind, do you Diane? I could use a belt or two.”

Diane slid a double shot glass across to him. “Knock yourself out.”

“Thank you kindly,” Clint said, pouring himself a full glass. “So, when’re you coming back to work? The place ain’t the same without you in it.”

“Um...well, that’s kind of not in the cards,” Diane said. “We’re not supposed to mix with mundanes anymore.”

“Bullpucky,” Clint said. “You signed a contract. The last couple weeks can count as sick leave, but we need an

open bar ‘round here.”

The door opened. “This a private party, or can any cat bust in?” Fritz sauntered in, with a large unconscious body slumped over one shoulder, snagging the door with one foot and pulling it shut behind them. He dumped the body on the ground next to Walter. It was a bull elk Integrate, covered in the same silvery powder as Walter.

“Bobby?” Diane exclaimed. “Glen?”

“They saw you,” Fritz said. “I *really* hate having to play the heavy, but this shit always has a cost. SOP, people who know too much about Integrates get to be some themselves. I’d say I don’t make the rules, but I sort of do...and that means *I* gotta live by ‘em, too, or I’d be an even bigger hypocrite than I already am.” He slid onto the stool next to Clint and raised a hand. Another double shot levitated from the cabinet behind the bar across to it, then he snagged Clint’s bottle and poured himself a matching shot.

“Clint Brubeck, Integrate head honcho and grand poobah Fritz,” Serena said. “And vice versa.”

Clint eyed the unconscious elk, whose antlers were large enough to almost poke his back from where he lay. “Can’t say I’m exactly *pleased*.”

“Likewise, man,” Fritz said, tossing the shot off. “Mmm, dig that smooth malt. I gotta get me some of this brand.”

“So, Fritz, what do you plan on doin’ with me?” Clint asked, looking back down at the two new Inties. “I don’t know what you think you can do, but I won’t sit still and let you.”

Fritz grimaced. “Bad scene, man. What the fuck *can* I

do? If a nobody like your bartender or some of your miners vanish, that's one thing. *You*, on the other hand...hero of the galaxy, mining magnate...nobody would let that shit alone. It'd be the grassy knoll and magic bullet all over again. It'd do more harm than good." He shrugged. "Though there's plenty 'nuff I *could* do if you decide to make trouble."

"I don't see as how there needs to be any trouble over this," Clint said. "Firm believer in live an' let live, I am, an' after all your folks helped us out of a tight spot. And it seems t'me keepin' your little secret's best for everyone all 'round, at least for now. Ain't no percentage in causing a huge ruckus. Bad for business." Clint sipped his scotch thoughtfully. "I've just got one little condition."

Fritz raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? What's that?"

"I keep my people. Diane, Perry, those two..." He nodded at the unconscious Integrates on the floor.

"Serena, too," Diane insisted. "Er...if she wants, anyway."

"Hey, why are you dragging *me* into this?" Serena said.

"You're the one who followed me," Diane pointed out.

"Someone had to keep you out of trouble," Serena said.

Fritz golf-clapped. "And what a ginchy job you did of *that*, pretty kitty." He turned to look at Perry, who had shrunk into a corner and seemed to be doing the best he could to hide behind his guitar. "And don't think I've forgotten about *you*, boid."

"Eep!" Perry squawked.

Fritz thought for a moment. "Well...as long as you all

agree to keep yourselves under wraps...I guess that's copacetic." He nodded toward the pair on the floor. "Gonna need to take those two away for a while for recovery and orientation, though."

"Fair enough," Clint said. "An' if they'd *rather* stay with their kind, well, we can work somethin' out then."

"All right, fine," Fritz said. "And just to show what a stand-up guy I am, I'll throw in the pretty kitty. She can even keep her pretty pelt right where it is...*this* time."

"You're too kind," Diane said dryly.

"Like I said, doey doe, I like your style," Fritz said. "Nice touch with those Sturmies you just bought, by the way. I'd kick up more of a fuss, except I can't say I ever liked that kind much myself either. Plus, I really *do* admire your work with the 42nd all those years ago."

Diane shrugged. "What can I say? I'm a patriot."

Somebody knocked on the door. "You in there, Clint? Your son's asking for you!" Ken Masterson said.

"Just unwinding a bit, Ken! Thanks," Clint replied conversationally. "Tell Zane to meet me in the main office."

"You brought your *son* to a mine collapse?" Perry asked, incredulous. "He's what, eight?"

"Oh, so the master explorer has *spawn* now," Fritz said.

"We were all headin' from Aloha to home in Nextus when we got the alert, so we diverted," Clint said. "Allie's back in the flier with them." Then he looked at Fritz. "And if you even *think* of touching them, Mr. Fritz, the gloves are off."

"Hey! That's not my style at *all*, man," Fritz said. "I

got a problem with you, I come to you. I couldn't care less about your wife and kids."

"So, can I get anyone anything else?" Diane said. She checked the inventory. On the floor, Walter was stirring. "Pity I don't have any sarium salts here. They could use it."

"Too bad there's not a *mine* or something where we could get some of those," Serena said.

"We'd better get those two to Chakona, for the what-furs and where-furs," Fritz said. He gestured at Perry. "Go grab a skimmer, boid. I'm not carrying them two hundred clicks."

"Yessir. Right away," Perry said, hastily making himself scarce.

"Remember, *he's* part of the deal, too," Clint said mildly.

"He's part of the deal you made with *me*, but that one has another one to answer to," Fritz said. "You meatbags have your politics, we have ours." He shrugged. "Of course, the way that one feels about *me*, he-or-she'll probably want to pin a medal on him. Whatever. I can still throw a scare or two into him, anyway." He put his shot glass down on the bar. "Got a bottle of something for the road back there?"

"Coors Light," Diane deadpanned. "In a can."

"If it was good enough for the Bandit, it's good enough for me," Fritz said. "Hand it over."

There was actually a back entrance for delivering supplies. Perry landed a van at the loading dock and quickly ferried the two new Integrates under cloak. Fritz finished his can of beer before he was done.

"Well, can't say I'm unhappy to have met the

legendary Clint Brubeck,” Fritz said. “Always did like the taste of your Q better than Walton’s. You’re copacetic with me, for now. Try and stay that way, ya dig?”

Clint touched the rim of his Stetson. “Your people saved a lot of lives today. If there’s anything I can do, give me a call, we’ll talk about it.”

Confusion played out on Fritz’s face. “Uh...yeah. Sure, man. Sure. We’ll do that. Uh, time to blow this joint. Seeya!” He cloaked.

The remaining three people in Cheers waited a few minutes just to be sure they were alone again before speaking.

“Well,” Serena said. “I have to admit, you do keep life...*interesting*, Diane.”

“I ain’t had a day like this since I was based out of Eridani,” Clint said. “Hooboy! Got any more single malt back there? I may just have to take this bottle with me.”

“I think we can scrounge something up,” Diane said. “Well, it looks like we’ve got our second bartender.”

“I’m sure we can work out a few things with HR,” Clint said. “Regarding your ‘missing persons’ status and all that crap.”

“I’m ‘missing, presumed dead’,” Serena pointed out.

“So was I, three times I know ‘bout and probably more,” Clint said. “Don’t worry about it, ma’am. This is Zharus; people get misplaced all the time.” He chuckled. “Now if y’all will excuse me, I’ve got to go meet my son. Didn’t expect this would end up being ‘take your kid to work’ day.”

“Bring him back here,” Diane suggested. “I think we’ve got some sarsaparilla under the counter.”

“I might just do that, later,” Clint said. “Right now, I think there’s going to be some parched rescue workers who could stand to wet their whistles.

“Guess we’d better open up, then,” Diane said. She seemed to expand outward as she kicked in her Fuser hardlight disguise.

“Sounds like a plan,” Serena agreed, doing the same. “Though I hate to leave all that good booze behind in Shangri-La...”

“Let ‘em keep it. We can buy stuff legitimately now,” Diane said. “Hell, if you want you can probably split your time ‘tween here and there for a while, just ‘til they get another bartender.” She couldn’t resist giving the front door a telekinetic push, opening it to the thirsty horde outside. She knew *almost* every single one of them by name. There were a few new faces in her absence. “Come on in, ladies and gents! Hey Barry, hey Donna!”

“Today drinks are on the house,” Clint Brubeck said, tipping his hat to them. The crowd cheered to that.

*:So here we are, back among the mundanes,:* Diane sent as they served up the drinks. *:Missing your yellow pajamas yet?:*

*:I’m a very poor Buddhist anyway,:* Serena replied. Aloud, she introduced herself to each patron, back in her element again. A few, like Clint, even remembered her from LowRIDER.

*:And there’s another bright side. If you thought miners tipped well back in Uplift, wait’ll you see what you’ll make here,:* Diane said.

*:Really? Even ‘Fused’?:* Serena said.

Diane sent a chuckle emoticon. *:These guys have*

*been Fused so long, I think they've picked up their RIDEs' taste in women.:*

*:I wonder if we're going to get drafted into the Snatchers or the Candlejacks?:* Serena wondered.

*:Let's avoid that and forge our own path. Between us, maybe we can start a bar of our own?:* Diane sent.

*:We'll end up with quite a nest egg when our contracts are up. Especially if we sign on again for another year or two. And I can always finish college part time, if they let me.:*

*:A bar of our own, huh? Where everybody knows your name?:* Serena replied with a smirk emote. *:Well, you're the boss. Your bar, your rules. I'm just glad you brought me along for the ride.:*

*:It's payback,:* Diane said. *:You made us who I am today. I'll be happy to work with you as long as you're willing to work with me.:* She reached behind her for a martini shaker and started pouring ingredients for a Vesper into it. *:Now...let's tend some bar!:*

## Epilogue

*November 12, 157 AL*

*I've been uptight and made a mess  
But I'll clean it up myself, I guess  
Oh, the sweet smell of success  
Handle me with care*

The mellow tones of George Harrison's singing voice filled the Cheers bar in Uplift as Diane ran a damp rag over the bar top. It was the early morning hours and the bar was mostly empty, which meant she could play the jukebox as loud as she wanted. She tapped a hoof and wiped in rhythm to the Traveling Wilburys song.

*Ping! You've got mail!* Diane pulled up a VR overlay to open her mailbox as she tossed the rag in the sink behind the bar. It was from Cumulation Warehousing and Storage. The name rang a bell, but Diane couldn't quite place it. Curious, she opened it and read the contents. She read it again, then stopped and stared. "Oh no. Oh *fuck* no."

At the other end of the bar, Serena looked up, feline ears twitching. "Diane? What's wrong?"

Wordlessly, Diane bounced the email across to her. Serena took a look, then blinked. "Seriously? I thought you'd already done something about that years ago."

"I...um...no," Diane said. "I kind of...shoved the memory under a carpet, right along with why I did it in the first place. Unpleasant memories I didn't want to think about."

“This is going to cause some problems,” Serena said. Diane sighed. “I know.” She looked at the email again.

*Ms. Ferguson:*

*In accordance with provisions of the RIDE Civil Rights Acts due to take effect January 1, we have conducted an audit of all our storage units and determined storage registered to you contains five deactivated RIDEs.*

*Pursuant to the Acts, we hereby inform you that you are required to remove, reactivate, and unfetter these RIDEs and make whatever arrangements are necessary to grant them the freedom of choice provided by this law. If you have not done so by December 15, Uplift will automatically purchase them from you at fair market price by eminent domain and make its own arrangements in that regard.*

*Please contact us if you have any further questions.*

*Sincerely,*

*Margaret Hensley  
Cumulation Warehousing and Storage*

“Well, that’s going to set the wolf among the pigeons, isn’t it?” Serena said.

Diane wordlessly turned to the shelves behind the bar and took down a bottle of Shangri-La sarium ice vodka and poured herself a double.

“You know, that’s not really going to help,” Serena

said. “We don’t *get* drunk, remember?”

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Diane mumbled, draining the shot. “So what do we do?”

“What do you mean ‘we,’ paleface?” Serena said. “You’re the one who stuck ‘em in a hole. You’re the one who gets to pry ‘em out.”

*I was a vindictive bitch when I was younger,* Diane reflected. *Heh. ‘bitch’. I’ll bet they’ll just love to see me again.*

“I guess the first thing is to get them out of there,” Diane said. “Wake them up...get them up to speed...”

Serena came over and leaned against the bar. “You know, I know someone who’s been doing that sort of thing a *lot* lately. I think you know who I’m talking about.”

“Rhianna?” Diane said. “Right...and if I’m going to be giving them tuneups anyway, she’d be just the gal to do it. I’ll make the arrangements to have them dropped off first thing when they’re open.”

“And be there yourself, of course,” Serena said. “I’ll cover the bar while you’re gone, of course.”

“Right,” Diane said. She groaned, and took another look at the bottle. “Won’t *this* just be a barrel of laughs.”

“...run that by me one more time, Diane?” Rhianna said, rubbing her eyes. “I don’t think I quite got it.”

The deer Integrate sighed, her ears drooping in embarrassment. “Just before we Integrated, I—Faline—made the mistake of playing Nature Range with a bunch of wolf RIDEs out at the mine. Sturmies. They couldn’t catch me fairly—of course—so they cheated. It was the first and only time *anyone* ever took me down in Nature Range,

and they did it over and over again, for virtual months. I felt...violated. I really lost my shit. So, when I Integrated, and found I was hell on wheels..."

"You managed things so they got shoved into cold storage," Rochelle said.

"I...well, yeah," Diane admitted. "I sort of drove them a little bit crazy, then bought them when their owners traded them in. And then I...well, *forgot* about it."

"How do you forget something like that?" Rhianna asked.

"Intentionally," Diane said, looking down. "I didn't want to think about what they did to me...so I shoved that memory, and all the ones connected to it, under seal so I wouldn't think about them by accident. Then I...didn't think about them at all until I got the email reminding me."

"So they've been shut down for *twenty-five years*," Kaylee said flatly, her ears lying back against her scalp.

"I didn't...well, I can't say I didn't mean to *then*, because I did." Diane sighed. "But I'm sorry about it *now*."

"So what should we do about this?" Rochelle asked. "Standard Rip Van Winkle wakey?"

"Whatever they need to get them back in shape, I'll cover it," Diane said. "I need to apologize to them, and then...well, see if I can do anything else for them." She glanced over at the five RIDEs arrayed on a rented flatbed skimmer truck. They ranged in size from Anya, a small light scout red wolf, up to Sif, a huge grey wolf heavy support RIDE about the same size as Bertha from Alpha Camp had been.

"These five were formerly members of the 22nd

Wolfpack,” Kaylee said. “Amazing they managed to stick together for so long after the war. I can see why they’d have some motivation to take you down as Faline.”

“They invited me into their Nature Range and went to God Mode, then icewalled the ways out until they’d had their fun,” Diane said. “I won’t deny a small part of me *still* wants to lock them into *my* Nature Range and hunt them down with a shotgun again. And again, and again...”

“I wonder if we should call in Lilibet and Guinevere for this, as representatives of Sturmhaven, in case they want to be repatriated?” Uncia suggested. “They’re in Nextus this week; they could be here in an hour or so.”

“A quarter century ago Sturmhaven was...a bit of a mess,” Diane said.

“Yeah? When the hell *hasn’t* it been?” Kaylee said.

“I mean, it’s a little suspicious that those five stayed together for nine years after mustering out, but I never really looked into it,” Diane said. “First I was too pissed off, then I put them entirely out of my head.”

“I’m inclined to doubt any sort of conspiracy theory,” Rochelle said. “Neither side gave much thought to RIDEs as anything other than equipment during or after the war. I don’t think the Sturmhaven government would intentionally set something up to try to take revenge on one.”

“Maybe the RIDEs influenced their riders to keep them together?” Uncia opined. “We do tend to chat with each other along sidebands and back-channels. If it came down to a choice between postings where their friends aren’t and where they are, a little nudge could make the difference.”

“What they did to me in Nature Range...” Diane shivered.

“Fearless Faline of the Fighting 144th,” Kaylee said. “I heard about you even in the MRS. Undeclared in Nature Range and the Real. Hell, *I* wanted a round with you back in the day.”

“Yeah, so much for *that*,” Diane said. “I told me sooner or later someone would break my streak, but I didn’t believe me.” She chuckled. “Of course, I’ve mellowed with age. *These* days I recognize it’s just a silly game, and it’s sometimes wiser to throw it just to be polite. Occasionally. Rarely.”

“Which is to say, you recognize it *in theory*, and maybe *someday* you’ll put it into practice?” Uncia smirked.

“Something like that,” Diane said.

“Well, let’s get them in the cradles and take a look,” Rhianna said. “Looks like we’ll need four normal-size and one extra-large. They’re probably going to have the usual mothball issues...bearings that have seized up, batteries needing reconditioning...”

“I could rebuild a wartime Sturmie wolf in passive,” Kaylee said. “Poor simple little beasties that they are. Never approached the level of sophistication of one of we Nextus works of art, eh Diane?”

“I took apart a few myself. Can’t say I ever put any back together again,” the doe said, but there was no bravado in her voice like there might have been just a few hours earlier. “Let’s get this over with. Here’s your fee.”

“Payment received. Thank you for your patronage,” Kaylee said. She Fused with her partner. “Now, let’s get to

work. I'm going to call a few trainees over to take care of the two smaller ones."

She wasn't kidding when she said wartime Sturmie wolves were simple. Despite the cultural design bias for women being "complex and mysterious" the wartime models didn't have the materials to waste on frivolous flourishes. They were as simple and as durable as the AK-47 assault rifle had been five centuries before, a design that was still in use in some places in human space. Each small-to-medium shell could be field-stripped and reassembled in an hour, faster with the help of a Heavy Support Armor. Dismantling the Heavy Support Armor would take a little longer, but not as long as her feline Nextus equivalents. Sturmhaven had been a year or so behind Nextus on the RIDE tech curve—probably one of the reasons they'd lost in the end.

"We should be done in a few hours, I expect," Rochelle said, as Uncia's full-sized shell engulfed her and she moved forward to help. "You can wait if you want, or go back to the bar and we'll call you before we wake them up."

"I think I'd better stay," Diane said. *If I leave I doubt I could make myself come back.* Her first months as an Integrate felt all the more surreal after all these years. Partly because at the time being an Intie had felt so special. There had only been around ten thousand of them. She'd been full of piss and vinegar. *Did I really mouth off to Fritz? I can't believe I got away with that with my pelt intact.*

"All right," Rochelle said. "Well, we're going to get to work. Comm us if you need anything."

"I'll be in the waiting room," Diane said. She lifted and

hovered off.

Four hours later, Rhianna stood back to survey their handiwork. It hadn't been as bad as she'd expected. Indeed, thanks to their 25 years in storage, the five RIDEs' shells were in a lot better shape than most of their contemporaries were at this point.

Anya, the light scout red wolf, had required the least amount of work. She'd evidently been used for surface prospecting rather than doing the dirty work of mining, so most of her parts had been practically new. It had just taken a little bit of cleaning and reconditioning, and she was ready to reboot.

Sabine was a light mobility armor grey wolf with a sable hardlight coat. She'd had a lot of Q-dust contamination, but very little wear on parts. Probably a miner who got plenty of parts maintenance, but they hadn't been as good at cleaning out Q-dust back then.

Magnild, a medium comm black wolf, had seen a lot better days. Half of her comm lasers had been burned out, and it looked like they'd been that way for a long time. Not surprising; there wasn't so much call for a comm unit in tunnel mining. She'd probably been sold cheap for the physical labor she could do rather than communication. Well, that was going to change.

Henrietta, medium assault white wolf, had 'alpha bitch' all over her, with very little wear and tear in general. Most of her parts were still original wartime military-spec. The information in her component co-processors said she'd been used more by foremen or middle management rather than workers down in the mine.

Sif, the heavy support grey wolf, had worn mount points clearly used for heavy mining equipment. She had a bad case of Q-dust contamination and had needed cleaning by Mavra, one of the Integrates on the garage staff, to return most of the flexibility to her joints and transformation mechanisms. In the near future she would need a major rebuild, but the cleaning and replacing of the most worn parts was all that was really needed for now.

“I guess we should fetch Diane,” Rhianna said. “She’d want to be here when we wake them up.”

“Yeah, probably so,” Kaylee said. “What do you think about all this, Rhi?”

“I’m not sure *what* to think,” Rhianna confessed. “To be honest, I’ve kind of been trying not to. Diane’s always been one of the nicest people I’ve known. For her to have a secret like this...”

“The downside of having a digital memory,” Kaylee said. “You can keep secrets even from *yourself*. I can’t believe she’d have let it go this long if she hadn’t buried it to keep from thinking about it.” She shook her head. “You know damned well how deep I buried my time in the Shed and anything tied up with it. Now I’m wondering...what else might *I* have buried like that? Do I even want to know?”

“This is all very meta,” Uncia said. “You old folks are amazing.”

Kaylee snorted. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Nuthin...” Uncia said, a hardlight halo appearing over her ears.

“By the time you get to be my age, you might have found a thing or two you want to forget yourself,” Kaylee

said. “Like, say, thinking you couldn’t get drunk on Long Island iced tea because ‘it’s just tea?’”

“Ow,” Uncia said. “All right, touché.”

“Silly kitties,” Rochelle said. “C’mon, let’s go fetch Diane.”

It wasn’t often an Integrate was in a waiting room like this one, and Diane tried to stay relaxed enough to chew her cud, but the quizzical looks from human and RIDE alike were enough to unsettle her in her present mood. She wondered if she should have reverted to her old Fuser disguise before coming in, but it was too late for that now.

Now that she’d broken the lock on her memories, it was hard not to relive them, and *cringe* at them. Early on her gaming habits had carried over to Integrate form and nearly reached meme-levels of obsession. If it hadn’t been for the bar and Serena it would have been a very short step to buying a replica “Catch a Ride” skimmer and driving around the Dry all cel-shaded, pretending to be a cervine Maya. She could even manage a phase-lock of sorts with her lifter field and some hardlight special effects.

She had to admit, the game had been fun. And using it to punish the Sturmie wolves had been even more so. *Too much* fun, in fact. She still felt the urge to do it again, especially when she let herself remember what they’d done to her. Perfect recall could be a curse, too. It meant remembering never quite lost the immediacy of the event. She finally forced herself to put that time in Nature Range under seal again, at least for the moment. No point in worrying at it.

*:They’re ready for you, Diane,:* Kaylee sent. *:Don’t*

*worry about bringing them up to date on what they've missed. We've got it covered.:*

*:The rest is up to me,:* Diane replied. *:Be right there.:*

A few moments later she stepped into the garage where the cradles awaited. The wolves had been closed up and polished, and all that remained was to wake them. “We’ll be bringing them online in VR. Bambi’s Forest,” Kaylee said.

“I *really* hate that name,” Diane said. “All right then. Let’s go, I guess.” Diane looked inward, connected to the garage mainframe, then...

“Looking very *animated* there, Faline,” Uncia said.

“No matter how many times I change it my body here always defaults to this,” Faline grumbled. She concentrated, losing the drawn, cel-shaded quality and puffing up to much more realistic levels. “There.” She had half a mind to rez up her Maya suit and Torgue shotgun, but set the thought aside. “All right, let’s see ‘em.”

A quintet of sleeping wolves materialized in the clearing, some paws were over faces, others curled up with their tail over their nose. The white she-wolf, though, managed to look quite haunted in her slumber.

“They have a number of fetters on them,” Kaylee said.

“Consider them removed,” Diane said, dismissing them with a wave of her hand.

“Good,” Rochelle said. “RVW packages uploaded and interleaved...”

“Hardware self-checks complete, booting,” Rhianna reported.

Diane hugged herself, waiting and watching. Even with the memory under seal, she still had bad associations

with this bunch. As she watched, muzzles started to twitch, ears to flick, and bodies to stir. Then...their eyes opened.

“Rise and shine, you bunch!” Rhianna said all-too-cheerfully. “Welcome back to waking life.”

The wolves slowly got to their feet, looking at each other, then at Rhianna, Kaylee, Rochelle, Uncia...and Diane.

“Yeah, hi,” Diane said flatly. “I expect you all remember me.”

The wolves glanced at each other again, sharing a flicker of sideband chatter. Diane recognized the signature of Rhianna’s DINsec encryption on it. Which was good. It removed the temptation of listening in—or of doing what other things she might. She waited to see what the wolves would say.

Diane had played out how the scene might go a number of times in her head. What she hadn’t expected was for Henrietta to step forward...then prostrate herself on the ground at her feet—followed by the others.

“Command us, Alpha,” she said.

Diane blinked, taken aback. “Er...what?”

“You defeated us in combat. You bought us. You could have destroyed us,” Henrietta said. “After what we did to you...I’m surprised you didn’t.”

“Oh, come on,” Diane said. “I hacked your systems. I’m an Integrate. It wasn’t exactly fair.”

“Neither was what we did to you,” Magnild said. “I was against it from the start...”

“*You* didn’t play games with the physics, like we did,” Sabine said. “We sometimes got away, even drew blood a few times...”

“Well, sure,” Diane said. “It wouldn’t have been any fun if you didn’t have a sporting chance.”

“Ours was not a fair fight, yet you didn’t respond in kind—at least, not so much. I’m at least willing to call it even,” said Sif. “*Damn* zat shotgun hit hard. I ended up all over ze place. Gibbs, gibbs, gibbs!”

“I am sorry for what we did,” Henrietta said. “You are worthier to be Alpha than I. Anyway, you bought us fair and square.”

“Well, about that,” Diane said. “There’s a law now that RIDEs are people, so no more ownership.”

“But your file says there is a grandfather clause for RIDEs who are more comfortable being owned,” Anya said.

“As far as I’m concerned, we are yours,” Henrietta said.

“At least until we work off our debt,” Sabine said.

“It sounds fair to me,” Sif agreed.

“Now wait a minute!” Diane said. “What am I supposed to do with five Sturmhaven wolves?”

“Anything you want to,” Henrietta said.

“You know, everyone’s been after you for the longest time to expand the bar,” Rhianna said. “You could build on or franchise out, hire five new bartenders...”

Diane glanced at Sif, and tried to imagine a wolf Fuser that size making drinks. “Uh...”

Rhianna grinned. “Well, all right, four new bartenders and a supply truck driver, maybe?”

While the others had been talking, Kaylee and Uncia had found a semi-hidden spot under the underbrush, paws over their muzzles, trying *desperately* not to laugh at the

whole presentation. Finally the lynx couldn't hold it in anymore and rolled on her back, laughing. "Oh, Lordy Lord Lordy! Canids have *no* dignity. What a pack of goofballs!"

"Goofy is as goofy does, yes?" Sif said.

"Regardless...you brought us to realize that we have besmirched our own honor as Women of Sturmhaven," Henrietta said. "I never meant to do that." Then she forwarded Diane a bit of code that left the deer staring slackjawed and even trembling a little.

"You're...giving me *root*? *Really*? But...I could wipe you clean with this!" Root access was something RIDEs almost never shared. With it, Diane could bypass their DINsec layer as if it was not even there.

"You could have wiped us clean before, and we would never even have known," Henrietta said. And then a flurry of codes followed as all four of the others gifted Diane with their root access codes as well.

"All right," Diane growled. "All bloody well right." Codes in hand, she swept into the wolves' cores, rummaging through their memories. And what she found brought her up short.

The 22nd and its sister unit the 42nd had been the elite of Sturmhaven's army. They had gotten the best of everything—the best equipment, the best maintenance, the best rations, the best entertainment (including the best *men* for their pilots).

All that had changed when a single riderless doe RIDE had fought circles around the 42nd, wiping it out with a stubborn singlemindedness worthy to have come from the Motherland herself. Sturmhaven's RIDEs had consoled

themselves that at least it hadn't been a *male* RIDE...but to the powers that be in Sturmhaven, who saw all RIDEs as equipment, it was as if they had been steamrollered by a defective enemy jeep, whatever its sex. Which meant they must have been defective themselves. Which, in turn, cast suspicion on the 22nd's RIDEs as well.

Suddenly the 22nd got all new RIDEs, over the protests of many of its officers. The old ones had been relegated to mothballs, then after the war sold as menial labor survival suits or recreational vehicles. Before they even knew what hit them, they had gone from the next best thing to royalty to working as slaves in the mines, with operators who by and large saw them as expendable equipment.

Then, when by chance the author of their misery passed into their grasp, they had been unable to resist challenging her...but even then, in Nature Range, they *still* hadn't been able to defeat her. In their pain and frustration, they had pushed over the limit...and only realized it later, when they received the same treatment.

*:Aw, shit,:* Diane sent privately to the non-wolves in the area. *:Oh, those Sturmhaven bitches. And I don't mean the ones in front of us.:* She shared a digest version of what she'd just found out. *:So, apparently I'm the root cause of them getting shitcanned in the first place. As if I needed something else to feel bad about.:*

Rhianna sighed. *:Should have expected something like this,:* she said. *:It's Fenris and Sonja all over again. I'm going to pass this on to Lilibet, if you don't object. Something else for Sturmhaven to make reparations for.:*

*:Do it,:* Diane agreed. *:But I gotta figure out how to*

*deal with this now.:* Aloud she said, “All right, fine. We’ll draw up the documentation to state you’ve agreed to belong to me for the next little while. Rhi, you guys, you’ll serve as witnesses that it wasn’t under any coercion, right?”

“Right,” Kaylee said. “Hope you know what you’re getting into.”

“That’s never stopped me before, why should it now?” Diane said lightly. “Here’s what we’re gonna do. We’re gonna find you some human partners, and you’re all gonna work for me for a while. Leastways ‘til you can pay off what I put into your repairs. Then we’ll see what happens.”

Henrietta bowed her head. “Yes, Alpha.”

Diane rolled her eyes. “And *don’t* call me that. Maybe that flies in Sturmhaven, but this is Uplift. Our government doesn’t even wear pants all the time. Let’s be a little more laid-back about this, okay?”

“Whatever you want,” Henrietta agreed.

*:I wonder if any of their old Sturmhaven pilots are still alive, un-Integrated, and not currently partnered,:* Kaylee mused over the wolves-excluded channel.

*:Something else for Lilibet to check up on,:* Rhianna replied. *:They should probably get first crack, if they want it. Even if they’re not available, they’ll probably want to know they’re okay.:*

“Okay, right.” Diane cracked her knuckles. “First thing, I want all you guys at 100%. I *know* how badly they kept RIDEs up in the mining camps back then. So, Rhi, Shelley, do whatever it takes to bring them up to spec. They don’t have to be bleeding-edge, but I want them at least at the high end of consumer grade. A+ batteries, the

works. Rebuild them completely. I'm good for it."

"Ladies, your DEs are classics, and I have some apprentices who are quite skilled and can get the job done within a couple days," Rhianna said. "We'll have you up to modern spec."

Sif nodded. "Thank you. We appreciate zat."

"In the meanwhile, there are some personality quiz sites you can take that'll help match you up with possible partners." Diane shrugged. "After that...we'll see what happens."

"Thank you," Anya said. "I cannot believe half of what I see in this file. Integrates in the open? Fritz answering for his crimes? I am astonished."

"Yeah, a lot has changed. Even—or especially—in Sturmhaven," Rochelle said. "We'll have to invite Lil and Guinny in to see you guys and talk about it."

"Hmm. I wonder if, instead of just expanding the bar, I should open franchises somewhere else?" Diane mused. "Cheers Nextus, Cheers Sturmhaven...Ye Olde Cheers Camelot...have to see what Serena thinks."

"Shelley and I have learned a few things about franchising out," Rhianna said. "We're not letting ourselves get too big. Don't want to dilute the brand. Kaylee's a better businesskitty than I am, so she handles most of the actual management."

"That way Rhi can do her mad scientist inventor thing," Kaylee added.

"And I think for now you should see about adding on some rooms to *this* Cheers," Rochelle said. "You've been running at full capacity for months, and it's not like it's hard to build out."

“Yeah, yeah.” Diane shook her head. “I just keep thinking people are going to realize I’m just a fad and things are going to go back to the way they were. But apparently everyone else just isn’t that smart.”

“We are ready to serve, and *serve*,” Sif said. “I may not fit inside ze building in the Real, but perhaps zere are outdoor catering events to haul supplies to?”

“We don’t really do catering like that,” Diane said.

“Well, could you?” Sif said. “As a quartermaster, feeding large numbers of people was what I did.”

Diane gestured for them to approach. “Okay, everyone. Huddle. Tell me about yourselves. I didn’t dip too far into your memories, so I want to know what your strengths and interests are. You can skill chip up what you’re missing, but I want to know what *you* would like to do at Cheers.”

“I am good at looking and finding,” Anya said. “I could...keep an eye on the patrons? Look for trouble? And, of course, mix drinks. I watched you do it. It does not look that hard.”

“It’s more difficult than you think, and you’re a little small to be a bouncer, but I see where you’re going. You’re a scout. Perhaps you should be doing market research, looking for franchise locations, finding deals on rare liquor. It’ll mean a lot of travel, but I think that’ll suit you,” Diane suggested. “And once we have franchises, you can continue to keep tabs on them in person.”

“I did not think of applying my military skills that way,” Anya mused. “I think I could adapt to that.”

“Magnild?” Diane said, noticing the black she-wolf was wagging her tail.

“Do you have...music? A sound system?” Magnild asked. “I always sort of wanted to be a deejay. And I could answer your comms...even at the same time. And...do your taxes?”

“Well, taxes are pretty simple in Uplift...” Diane said. “But I like the idea of having a full-time DJ. Of course, we might need a dance floor...but if we’re building on *anyway...*”

Sabine gave herself a shake—in canid body language, a shrug. “I’m a mobility armor. I’m generic, jill of all trades. I can do whatever. Bouncer, drink mixer, janitor, errand girl...as long as it’s not Q mining, I’ll push a mop and grin.” She shuddered. “God, if I never see another chunk of raw Q, it’ll be too soon. Kill me every day in Nature Range, just don’t send me back to the mines.”

“Wouldn’t think of it. I was just going to let all of you go on your merry way before you decided I was your Alpha,” Diane said. She was still struggling with the concept of a Nextus doe being the alpha leader of a pack of Sturmhaven wolves, but it was hardly unique in the greater scheme of things. “I was an MMA myself, so I know about versatility. So hold that thought, Sabine.”

“I can be bouncer,” Henrietta said. “*And* mix drinks.” She sniffed. “I don’t care how hard it is, if *you* can do it, I can do it.”

“I’m willing to *teach* if you’re willing to learn,” Diane said.

“I am...flexible,” Henrietta said. “I just...would ask one last thing,” she said bashfully.

Diane looked at her. “Yeah? What’s that?”

“Will you...join us in Nature Range again?” Henrietta

asked tentatively. “Your own, if you like. Your rules. No cheating. We...want to redeem ourselves.”

“Or if you wish to be ze deer mit ze shotgun, we would be all right with zat, too,” Sif said. And the others nodded emphatically.

Diane blinked. “Really? Seriously? You’d even be *prey* for me?”

“Oh, you silly deer,” Sabine said, actually laughing. “You just don’t get it, do you? You *still* think you’re all evil for having hunted us down and shoved us in a little box for twenty-five years? *You got us out of the mines*. Even if we hadn’t cheated you and put a blot on our own honor, I would still bow down and lick your feet just for that.”

“And you are putting us back to full spec...and even finding us partners,” Anya said. “We don’t *deserve* such kindness.”

“We are slime, and we know it,” Henrietta said.

“Oh, you silly *doggies*,” Diane said. “Oh, that damned war. You took it all *personally*, didn’t you? I never did.” She sighed. “I didn’t get any joy out of killing your comrades. Maybe I took pride in that I was able to survive, but that’s not the same. I *hated* it. We RIDEs should stick together, not slaughter each other. But it wasn’t anything *personal*. Except I guess it was for you. Your bitch-ass bosses made it so.” She shook her head. “I don’t want there ever to be another war again. I just want us to *get along*, dammit.”

The five wolves assumed anthro form to see Diane face-to-face. “I think we’ve *all* lost our taste for vengeance,” Henrietta said. “I *will* still think of you as Alpha, it is simply in my nature as a wolf, but I suppose I’d

like to call you friend as well.”

“Then as a *friend*, I have a different suggestion,” Diane said, getting an idea. “Why don’t you all join me in Pandora for some Borderlands? Play any character you want. I have all the Rule 63 mods.”

“Zat’s where you got zat explosive-pellet shotgun you gibbed us with, ja?” Sif said. She rubbed her handpaws together in anticipation. “I’m goot for zat!”

“If we’re going to be a pack, we’re going to be a team,” Diane said.

Rhianna grinned. “You know...I think they’re gonna be all right.”

“Yeah,” Kaylee said. “Surprising as it is I can be glad about a bunch of *Sturmies* being all right, I am.”

“I guess we’ve all got our jobs cut out for us,” Uncia said. “I’ll get Guinny on the horn and fill her in, and she can let Lillibet know what needs to be done.”

Rhianna nodded. “Right. And I’ll get together the parts we need for the rebuilds and upgrades.” She watched as Diane and the five wolves faded away, dropping into another section of VR to run their games. “And that’s that.”

The four of them opened their eyes on the real world again. “Yeah, just another day at the Freeriders Garage,” Kaylee said. “Maybe we should start calling ourselves ‘Van Winkles R Us.’”

“Hey, when you find something you can do well, why stop?” Rochelle said, grinning. “And let’s be honest here. Rehabilitating *Sturmie* wolves? Without any stupid politics involved? This is gonna be fun.”

“And if it leads to there being more room at the

Cheers bar, that's just a side benefit." Rhianna grinned back. "Let's get this party started."

Rhianna and friends set about their duties as, somewhere else, a deer explained the difference between Torgue and Tediore weapons to five humanoid, cel-shaded wolves.

"No! No...don't chase them! They explode after you throw...*Argh!* Right, Tediore is *off the list.*"

**THE END**