

Wolves in the Fold

Part One: A Wolf at the Door

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“A little higher...higher...come on, people, we want it above her head, not at waist level. This is a banner, not a finish line!” Guinevere exhorted the hovering Integrates who were hanging a huge “WELCOME HOME, SVETLANA” banner over Alpha Camp’s main street.

“I still don’t get why we’re doin’ this,” Baldwin said as he fastened his half of the banner to a utility pole. “She was the leader of the army that tried its best to wipe us out. No offense, hon,” the bald eagle Integrate added to the pink flamingo Integrate who had the other end of the banner.

“I think it’s because the people here are such gracious winners,” Felice said, fastening her end of the banner to a pole across the street. “They were quick enough to make even *me* feel at home, and I’m also a member of that army and an Integrate. Goodness knows you should have plenty of reasons to hate me for both.”

“Well, yeah, but you’re a lover, not a fighter,” Baldwin said, beak open in as close to a grin as his avian face could manage.

“I think it’s really sweet,” CinTally the dark-feathered cooper’s hawk said. She was hovering a few meters off, examining the hang of the banner from the same level. “It’s like, you couldn’t have won the battle without having someone to fight against. And it wouldn’t have been the kind of story people want to tell over and over without her being so tough. So in a way she did you all a big favor, by being so bad-ass that it took knocking all her limbs off to take her down.”

“Looking at it like that, I guess you’ve got a point, hon,” Baldwin acknowledged. “And I guess if we can forgive anyone for it, we can’t really blame anyone else for what they did when Fritz was pulling the strings.”

“Thanks for helping out, you three,” Lilibet said from within Guinevere’s Fuser form. “That should be the last of the banners.”

The three avian Integrates touched down in front of them. “Glad to help,” Baldwin said.

“Is there anything else we can do for you?” Felice asked. She and CinTally stood close to either side of Baldwin. The threesome had been inseparable since shortly after the battle. When they’d met in the aftermath, something had just clicked, and they’d spent as much time as they could together ever since. It was a nontraditional relationship by some standards—but then again, compared to the structured group marriages in Aloha and some of the other polities, it was positively tame.

“I think that’s the last of the preparations here,” Lilibet said. “Could you check up on the party prep in the Graveyard if you’re heading that way? We’ll be along as soon as ‘Lana and the others get here.”

Baldwin nodded. “Ma’am,” he acknowledged.

“See you later!” CinTally said. The three avians took to the air and flew back uptown.

Guinevere watched them go. “Well. Glad that’s done.”

“Indeed.” Fenris’s big bass voice sounded from behind them as he came walking

up the street. “It should only be a few more minutes before Svetlana and the other Integrates arrive.”

“Hope they like it,” Lilibet said. “Svetlana’s still kind of...prickly, you know.”

“Not exactly a surprise, Lilli,” Paul said from inside Fenris. “We did give her the mother of all smackdowns. Even if she’s repudiated the cause she was fighting under, that’s still gotta sting. A lot.”

“Hopefully she will be able to relax once she sees there are truly no hard feelings,” Fenris rumbled.

“For most of us, anyway,” Lilibet felt compelled to admit. “There are still a few who don’t see it that way. What’re we gonna do if the protesters show up?” A small faction of camp residents, led by the failed Council candidate Ohm the skunk, had pledged to picket the celebration of Svetlana’s return. And with the newly-formed polity’s emphasis on free speech (for RIDEs, at least), there wasn’t a whole lot they could do to shut it down.

Fenris shrugged. “Ignore them as best we can, I suppose. We must take the bad parts of freedom with the good.”

“Besides, if we do try anything to stop ‘em, we’re playing right into their hands, giving ‘em ammunition to try to claim that the new freedom is all a sham,” Paul said. “Let ‘em yap. Nobody important pays them much attention anyway.”

“Hopefully Svetlana won’t either,” Lilibet said doubtfully.

“Ah...there’s the comm signal,” Fenris said. “The suborbital is on final approach to the aerodrome. Shall we go?” He sank back down into his skimmer tank form, and Guinevere goosed her lifters to leap into the cupola on his back.

A few moments later, they were waiting at the edge of the tarmac with a crowd of other well-wishers, including a number of important visitors who’d flown in themselves to be present for the occasion. “Hey, Dad! When did you and Mom get in?” Lilibet called over to AlphaWolf, who was standing at the front of the crowd Fused with Kenyon, with Melissa/Nigella at his side.

“Just an hour ago,” Kenyon replied. “You seemed busy with the preparations, so we thought we shouldn’t joggle your arm.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” Lilibet said. This wouldn’t be their first time meeting Svetlana, of course. AlphaWolf and the Waltons had been to visit her a few times in the healing tank during tours of Camelot. Lilli and Guin had been with them one of those times. Svetlana had been a bit nonplussed at first, but relations had ended up more or less cordial. It remained to be seen how she would react to being met by a crowd, however.

Bertha was also at the front of the crowd, in her light tank form with Hedy the scout RIDE and their shared human Diana leaning against her in Fuser. Hedy nodded to Fenris. “Hey, big guy. You got here just in time. There they come now.” She pointed to the silver speck in the sky of the approaching sub. It was one of the new ones of Camelot make, all sweeping curves resembling a stylized dragon in flight.

“Oh no,” Guinevere muttered. “Look.” She pointed across the tarmac, to a small group of RIDEs further down the runway. With a skunk at the lead, they were holding up hardlight signs with slogans like, “2 4 6 8 WE DON’T WANT MORE INTEGRATES!” or “INTIES NOT SO GREAT!”

“Let them yap,” Paul said again. “There’s over twice as many people with us, and we’re just the ones who could meet them at the aerodrome. Anyway, the Marshals look

like they've got everything under control." A number of them were standing close to the protesters, keeping a watchful eye just in case they attempted to do anything more than stand and chant.

The sub made its approach and landed, rolling up to the portion of the runway where the crowd had gathered. Seen close up, it was a very large ship, even bigger than one of Zane Brubeck's Starmasters. Of course, for carrying Integrates of Svetlana's size, it would sort of have to be, Lillibet reflected. In fact, given that a significant number of Camelot's Integrates were large dragons, it made sense they would build ships large enough to carry several of them.

After a few moments, the giant cargo doors on the side of the sub opened, folding down into a ramp, and a giant white she-wolf stepped down them, blinking in the sunlight. Fenris Fused back into his full height and stepped forward to meet her. "Svetlana! Welcome to Alpha Camp. We're pleased to have you here."

Svetlana looked up to the taller Fuser—one of very few beings, RIDE or Integrate, she had to look up instead of down to face. "Thank you. I am...pleased to be here." She looked behind him to the gathered crowd. "I did not expect such a welcome. I thought... you would see me as a monster."

"Well, maybe," AlphaWolf said, striding forward. "But you're *our* monster, and that makes the difference. We hope you'll stay with us a while."

"I will rather have to, will I not?" Svetlana remarked. Her trial had been held weeks before. She had attended via telepresence. She had received the standard 90-day community service period, scheduled to start after she was released from medical care.

"I meant after that," AlphaWolf said. "It might be a bit presumptuous given that you're technically our prisoner at this point, but you'd be more than welcome to be a citizen after that."

"Boo! Intie go home!" an amplified voice called from the direction of the crowd of protesters. It was Ohm the skunk, waving his placard angrily. "We don't want your kind here! Nearly destroying us once was enough!"

Svetlana turned her head to regard the protesters. "Ah. Now that is the sort of reception I was expecting." She smiled, wolfish tongue lolling. "It's so nice not to be disappointed."

"They do not speak for the rest of us," Fenris insisted. "But we have to let them speak."

"And that speaks well of you," Svetlana said. "In Sturmhaven, they would have been sent right off to the *kulak*." She chuckled. "In a way, it is nice to know some people still fear me, even as the rest of you welcome me."

"We're not afraid of you!" Ohm yelled again, his RIDE audio sensors having been sufficient to hear what was said. "We beat you once!"

"*You* didn't beat me, little skunk," Svetlana replied cheerfully. "Fenris and AlphaWolf did, and *they're* happy to see me." She laughed. "I'm not going anywhere. But any time *you* would like to come speak to me, I'm not hard to find, and I do so enjoy a good argument."

Ohm opened his muzzle, then shut it again, apparently uncertain what to say. AlphaWolf chuckled. "Poor guy, he just doesn't know when not to open his mouth in public."

"It's a common problem," a giant peach-colored dragon said, emerging from the sub behind Svetlana.

“Mr. Peaches! It is good to see you, too!” Fenris said, offering his hand.

The dragon grasped it with a foreclaw. “And you, my friend. There are several others waiting within. The last of the recuperators from the attack, and all of them delighted enough to be out of the tank that I doubt you will see many complaints from them over being put to work.”

“We’ll be glad to have them,” AlphaWolf said. “And I don’t think they’ll be all that unhappy, in the end. Only a few of our laborers have had problems.”

Svetlana frowned. “Problems? I will have to speak with them. From all the reports I have received, you have treated all your prisoners far better than I would have if our positions had been reversed.”

“It’s nothing serious. They’re just grumpy about being forced to work for their sins,” Paul said. “But they do their job anyway.”

Svetlana nodded. “I can’t say I’m entirely pleased to be sentenced to involuntary servitude myself. But I am glad enough to be out from under Fritz’s thumb and not dead that it is ridiculous to complain at a three month slap on the wrist.”

“Uplift did much the same with their amnesty program. And they had protests in front of Government Center for weeks,” Paul said.

“Anyway, we’ve got a little welcoming party set up back in the Graveyard, for you and all the others,” Lilibet put in. “You won’t know where that is, but—”

“I have seen it in the maps and videos you sent,” Svetlana said. “Please, lead the way.” She nodded to the sub, where a number of more human-sized Integrates were emerging down the ramp. “We will follow.”

2

Svetlana walked slowly through town with the others, in a parade. She felt an odd sense of not quite *deja vu*. *What's the opposite of deja vu?* she wondered. She'd replayed this scene so often in her head while she floated in the healing tank: being marched captive through the streets of Alpha Camp as noisy crowds looked on. Only, in her head she'd been a captive prisoner, and the crowds had been jeering and pelting her with rotten fruit. (Where would they have gotten rotten fruit from in the middle of the desert? her traitor common sense insisted on asking.) In reality, they were cheering excitedly and waving "Welcome, Svetlana!" signs. It was terribly disorienting.

It would also have been disorienting just how much Alpha Camp had grown over the last few weeks, if she hadn't seen all the videos and photos Paul, Fenris, and the others had sent along. It seemed like an entirely different place from the fortified but barren enclosure she and her Integrates had fought so hard to destroy. Far from being destroyed, this place had blossomed—largely as a matter of the prestige that had come from defeating her. No wonder they were so happy to see her.

She looked down at AlphaWolf, who was leading the parade. He seemed entirely comfortable presenting her with his back. Of course, Fenris was bringing up the rear, so he had a clear shot at hers if it became necessary. Not that it would be in either case. *I should stop thinking like this*, Svetlana told herself. *It will only drive me crazy. Crazier.* But she was still deeply conflicted about the battle, and her role in it, even now.

It wasn't so much that she had been defeated by a man. By *men*, counting Paul and Fenris's leadership of the battle as well as AlphaWolf's sniper rifle. (*They couldn't have led the battle without being supported by Guinevere and Lillibet, though!* she insisted to herself, though she was pretty sure that was only a sop to her Woman of Sturmhaven conscience.) What bothered her most was that *she* had been in the battle at all.

She'd had plenty of time to kill recuperating in the tank afterward, and after they'd granted her limited network access she'd been able to catch up on news and current events from all over Zharus—stuff that Fritz had carefully filtered before passing on to "his" Integrates. She'd never realized exactly how carefully—or the true extent of Fritz's depravity—until she'd had the opportunity to read about the other attacks, or the things that the Clementine had found on securing the Coffeehouse, Fritz's own personal enclave and house of horrors. Why did I ever let myself listen to him?

She knew the reason, of course. He'd "rescued" her when she was most vulnerable—and he'd had enough power to make threats and make them stick. The very worst kind of paternalistic man the Valkyries warned against—and she'd fallen right into his clutches.

She supposed she should have been more upset about all the other men who had defeated her, then healed her, saving her from those clutches: Fenris, Paul, and AlphaWolf, then Peaches and all the others from Camelot. Only...she couldn't. *They* had treated her with respect, even after she'd tried to destroy their home. Not the *obeisance* due a Woman of Sturmhaven, maybe, but not the contempt a fallen enemy leader who had tried to destroy their home surely deserved either. It was terribly confusing. She thought back to the days when she had planned to found a "New Sturmhaven" enclave,

run by and for female Integrates, and realized it all felt so childish now. Not least because she'd had time to read up on Sturmhaven, too.

When she'd been in the service of Sturmhaven, she had accepted without question the indoctrination that males were inferior. You had only to look around to see it was true—all the simpering, henpecked men who didn't stand up for themselves. But she'd never seen men from *outside* Sturmhaven. And the more she did, the more she was beginning to wonder if Sturmhaven didn't perpetuate its own omega-male stereotype with its Male Transgression laws. Anyone who didn't fit in was imprisoned or expelled, or left voluntarily, so Sturmhaven was left with the kind of men it wanted—or deserved.

And there were those clear examples of Valkyrie excess who turned up from time to time—examples such as Sonja. Svetlana glanced down at the smaller Sturmwulf, who was trotting proudly alongside her in the parade. She was a nice enough *person*, to be sure, quite likable, and very patriotic...but any girl who didn't fit the Valkyrie ideals who wandered within reach was likely to spend a few months inside her learning how to act the part of the perfect Woman of Sturmhaven, right down to the accent—whether she wanted to (at first) or not. Hedy and *Oberstleutnant* Fuerst had combed about her a *lot*.

In the wake of Alpha Camp going public, Sturmhaven had reached out to offer Sonja the same readjustment counseling and VR therapy as others of her line had gotten, to bring her back to something closer to what most would consider sanity. But Sonja had declined, saying she was perfectly happy as she was right now. She *had* agreed to confine her future brainwashing activities to the willing, however. Apparently there were many young women in Sturmhaven who desperately longed for someone to show them how better to fit the Valkyrie mold—badly enough to let Sonja cram them into it and vacuform them. She actually had a *waiting list*.

Svetlana shuddered. The worst of it was, even now that the scales had come off her eyes and she could see Sturmhaven culture for what it all too often was, she had still been inculcated in that culture, and still carried some of those attitudes bone-deep—even the ones she knew weren't built on solid foundations. She knew all the obnoxious things the Valkyries had done—including starting the war between Nextus and Sturmhaven in the first place—but was still proud to call herself a Woman of Sturmhaven with all the baggage that carried with it.

Looking past a man's male gender to consider his qualities and accomplishments in a more neutral light still required an act of will. She'd gotten plenty of practice since AlphaWolf had amputated her extremities, but it didn't seem to be getting much easier. *Am I meme-infected, is that it?* she wondered. Something about Integrates' neural structure rendered them susceptible to incorporating memes, often pop-cultural ones, into their psyches at a deep level—turning them into rabid *otaku* who couldn't resist quoting or reenacting the object of their affection at every turn.

It didn't matter if that *was* the nature of her problem, of course. Either way, it could be fought. And it was a battle she was probably going to have to keep fighting for years, if not the rest of her life.

That line of thought, and a good deal of amiable-if-slightly-poleaxed waving, carried her all the way through the settlement, to the big rock wall with the openings that had been blasted by a terrorist RIDE's attack before Fritz's assault ever happened. In the wide open area on the other side, tables had been set up, and bandstands that were already filled with cheering crowds.

There was also a podium at one end, to which AlphaWolf was ascending even now. He was joined by the other members of the settlement's council, including the ankylosaur who'd been responsible for a number of the other new arrivals' protracted stays in the healing tank. Svetlana noticed her broad smirk at the flinch reactions the other Integrates were exhibiting, but didn't bear her any malice for it. Any woman who fought like that was worthy to have come from Sturmhaven.

"Hey, everyone!" AlphaWolf said, waving. The crowd cheered louder. AlphaWolf raised his hands for silence. "Okay, okay, quiet down! So sayeth me!" Then he grinned a toothy grin as the crowd roared at his famous catchphrase before acceding to his request for silence. "First off, I'd like to apologize to Svetlana for embarrassing her like this. I'm sure she didn't expect this kind of reception when she got out of the tank."

He grinned at her, and Svetlana, moved by some playful impulse, bellowed back, "You'll apologize for *embarrassing* me, but not for blowing my limbs off?"

As the crowd roared again, with laughter this time, AlphaWolf wagged a finger. "Now now, you brought *that* on yourself. But this is another story. I'm sure you'd have been happy just to show up, get your work assignment, and settle into three months of quiet hard labor. But that is not to be..." He paused and looked at the bandstands, and as one the crowd chanted, "SO SAYETH ME!" AlphaWolf chuckled. "Quite."

"So what 'brave punishments' have you devised for me?" Svetlana replied. "I take it I'm not going to be unloading heavy cargo at the aerodrome, then?"

"As a matter of fact, no," AlphaWolf said. "Well, not unless you want to when you don't have anything else to do. Lots of people still pitch in around here on a volunteer basis, and I'm sure they'd be glad for the help. But as for your *real* job...if you're willing, we had more of a, well, *leadership* role in mind for you."

Svetlana cocked her head, her lupine ears now pointing fully forward. "Really? Why? I tried to *destroy* this place!"

"Please," AlphaWolf said. "You were as much a victim as we were. In fact, you know better than most how Fritz kept people in line. We saw that in what came out at your hearing."

Svetlana winced a little at the reminder. As with all captured Integrates, she'd been thoroughly mentally probed as part of the discovery process for her trial. The RIDEs and Integrates who viewed her memories had only copied out those memories selected as evidence, and wiped the copies when the hearings concluded. Still, it didn't erase the sense of violation, no matter how deserved it had been.

"And you are the highest-ranking of Fritz's immediate lieutenants to have been so used," AlphaWolf said. "Most of the others were willing participants. Sociopaths. *They* didn't get off so lightly as 90 days' forced labor, I can assure you."

Svetlana nodded. In fact, she had kept up with the sentences for Fritz and all his cronies. She still wasn't sure how she felt about Fritz's perpetual labor sentence, after all the people he'd slaughtered, but she couldn't deny that many of the others had been more than justly punished.

"So what *did* you have in mind?" Svetlana asked cautiously.

"We would like to appoint you as kind of an ambassador from us to other Integrates, and on *behalf* of Integrates to everyone else," AlphaWolf said. "Someone in charge of greasing the wheels of diplomacy, making sure we're not stepping on each other's toes. Mr. Peaches and others from Camelot have helped a lot, but...we really need someone all our own if we're going to be taken seriously. And you're about as close

to 'our own' as it gets.”

Svetlana blinked. “Me? Really?”

“You *are* a leader, and a damned good one,” AlphaWolf said. “Take it from the guy who had to blow your limbs off to stop you. And your reputation’s already tied up with ours—we basically gave it to each other.”

“But my sentence is only 90 days,” Svetlana pointed out.

“Enough time to make a start,” AlphaWolf said. “If you want to stay, stay, otherwise help us find a replacement. Anyway, you don’t have to say yes or no right away. Think about it for a while, let me know.”

Svetlana nodded. “Very well.”

“Anyway, now that I’ve got the embarrassment out of the way...let’s get this party started!” AlphaWolf said. He paused, grinned once more, and added, “So sayeth me!” The crowd applauded again, then broke up in favor of party time.

Fenris stepped up and led Svetlana over to one of the large tables in the center of the open area. “I expect you are rather surprised,” he observed.

“That’s one way of putting it,” Svetlana said. “I had expected simply to serve my time and then...I don’t know. Return to Sturmhaven, or retire to some Enclave, I suppose.”

“Sturmhaven *would* still like for us to visit,” Fenris noted. “With no obligation to stay, but hope of a closer relationship. Bertha, Hedy, and *Oberstleutnant* Fuerst will be returning in a few weeks or months, to repatriate Bertha into her original shell and provide Sturmhaven with Rhianna’s DINlink as was promised. We will be going along for Paul to supervise the transfer. You could come as well, if you wished.”

“I will...consider it,” Svetlana said. “This is all rather much to process all at once.”

Fenris chuckled. “It is, is it not? This might help.” He offered her a twenty-liter tankard from the big Integrates’ refreshment table.

Svetlana took it, flipped up the muzzle-cup lid, and peered dubiously at the fizzing beverage within. “What is it?”

“It is...” Fenris considered for a moment. “...*green*.” He chuckled. “It is an alcoholic and nanite-laced beverage passed along via some of Rhianna’s friends from Aloha. It seems to be a mild intoxicant for humans, RIDEs, and Integrates alike.”

“I see,” Svetlana said. “And you are having some, as well?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Fenris said. He chuckled. “I cannot quaff a tankard, or I might drown Paul. But I’ve slotted a module containing just the nanites into my auxilliary Fuser intake, and Paul and Lilibet will be having smaller glasses themselves so we will feel the effects in unison.”

Svetlana nodded. “They are inside you now, aren’t they? All three of your companions?”

Fenris nodded. “They are. Paul and I are seldom far apart—and as you observed during the battle, Guinevere and I are linked wirelessly so we are always together even when we are separated. Does that...bother you?”

Svetlana shook her head. “Of course not. My Marlena is *always* a part of me. I only wondered what it was like, to have three other minds within you instead of only one.”

Fenris chuckled. “Sometimes, very noisy. But...fulfilling. I only wish you could have had the chance to experience it for yourself.”

“As do I,” Svetlana said. “For all that I can think clearly all the time now, there

are times I miss my old bodies. Being able to drive, or prowl on all fours. Being small enough to..." She paused, glancing over at Fenris for a moment, then finished lamely, "... drink alcoholic beverages." She flipped the mug closed, raised it to her muzzle, and sipped to cover her embarrassment. Then her eyes widened at the flavor. "This is... remarkable."

"Indeed it is," Fenris agreed. "I would suggest taking it slowly. The effects can be quite significant if you are unused to them."

"I will bear that in mind," Svetlana assured him, sipping again. The flavor was not unpleasant. A little fruitier than the drinks Marlena had preferred, but then she'd always been more into beer than mixed drinks. Svetlana had, of course, had no direct experience in the matter as a RIDE. She felt a cozy warm glow starting to spread outward from her stomach.

"Wow, you're a *big* girl!" a woman's voice squealed behind her.

Svetlana glanced around for the speaker, and saw a rather busty fox RIDE hovering in the air before her in Fuser mode, with a serval Integrate Svetlana recognized from the camp assault floating next to her. "Tom!" she nodded to the Integrate. "I am glad to see you are doing well."

"Thanks," Tom said. "Glad to be doing well. Funny how getting captured turned out to be the best thing to happen to me."

"To us both," Svetlana said. "And since mine involved a quadruple amputation, that is saying something." She looked to the fox RIDE. "And this must be...Nora?" She'd reviewed the placements of each of the captured Integrates during her recuperation, and Nora's single-handed capture of seven of them had caught her interest.

"That's me! And my thumbs, Rose," Nora said. "Nice to meet you! They sure do know how to build 'em in Sturmhaven, don't they?"

"We do like to think so," Svetlana said.

"If the ambassador thing doesn't work out, you should come work for me!" Nora said. "I get a lot of customers with giantess fantasies. You could bring them out of VR into real life!"

"Ah...thank you for the offer," Svetlana said politely, taken slightly aback. She cast about for something else nice to say. "I do like to see a successful woman entrepreneur," she added. "But I do not believe my temperament is best suited to your line of work."

"Fair enough!" Nora said agreeably. "Enjoy the party!" She took Tom by the arm and they zoomed off to speak to someone else.

The open area was starting to fill up as the bleachers emptied out. The party had been arranged with two major areas, one for the larger RIDEs and Integrates and another for the smaller, with railings separating them so that people could mingle at the edges or, with lifters, in the air without worrying about anyone getting squashed.

A number of Svetlana's fellow large Integrates had arrived to the party since the end of AlphaWolf's speech. While some of them, such as Mr. Peaches, were chatting amiably across the railing with their smaller brethren, a knot of them were keeping to themselves at the back of the area, and Svetlana recognized several as dragons from the aerial wing of her attack on the settlement. She frowned as she noticed that they looked distinctly grumpy.

Fenris noticed where she was looking. "Ah, I see they came after all."

"I remember you wrote me that some of my Integrates were acting...sullen,"

Svetlana said, sipping her drink again. “Are these they?”

“Indeed,” Fenris said. “To be honest, I am not surprised. You were a little ‘sullen’ yourself when I visited you in Camelot after the event.”

Svetlana snorted. “My *limbs* had been blown off. I had a right. What are *they* complaining about? Having to get their hands dirty at the behest of the ‘lower orders’?”

“Well...” Fenris said.

Svetlana placed the hand not holding the tankard over her eyes. “Oh, *bozhe moi*. Seriously? I thought I was only joking.”

Fenris shrugged. “Not all of Fritz’s ‘true believers’ did enough harm to merit heavy sentencing. We could not punish people for simply holding an opinion.”

“And *undoubtedly* they will have been expecting me to agree with and advocate for them on their return,” Svetlana groaned. “Weren’t they paying attention?”

“It would appear that navel-gazing is something of a universal condition,” Fenris mused.

Svetlana bared her teeth. “Best to get this out of the way quickly, then. Excuse me.” Tightening her grip on her drink, she left the table and walked toward the group of grumpy Integrates. As she approached, the first of them to meet her was a green dragon. “Hello, Jeremy. Good to see you again,” Svetlana said neutrally.

“I’m going by Jeranth now,” the dragon said. “But I’m glad you’re here. *Now* maybe we can get out of here.”

Svetlana raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you still have 37 days left on your sentence?”

“On my...” The dragon snorted, puffs of smoke coming from his nostrils. “You’re not *serious!* This is a *joke!*”

“Do you see me laughing?” Svetlana asked coolly. “What is your major malfunction, *Jeranth?*”

“Oh, I don’t know, being the *slave* of mech and meat, maybe?” Jeranth exploded. “This goes against everything we stood for!”

“Oh. Really.” Svetlana sipped her drink, savoring the tingly warmth spreading through her and trying to hold onto that good feeling as a shield against a rising temper. “In case you forgot, that ‘mech and meat’ *kicked our furry Integrate asses*, not just here but *all over Gondwana*. Don’t you think that could be an indication Fritz was just a little bit...*mistaken* in his beliefs?” She smirked. “For all your complaints, I can’t help noticing you’re *still here*, rather than trying to flee or rebel alone. What happened to that Integrate superiority of yours?”

The dragon stared at her. “But what...you...you *led* us! How can you be taking their side?”

Svetlana took a deep breath. “Jeranth...*Jeremy*...I led you because Fritz outright told me that if I did not do exactly as he said, the Coffeehouse was going to get a set of *very large white rugs*. And then, in a few weeks, *another* set. And so on.” She shuddered. Despite himself, Jeranth did the same. Even among his own supporters, Fritz’s temper had been legendary. But, ironically, it had also served to draw his supporters closer to him—not just because they were afraid of him, but because of cognitive dissonance. If they were following such an *asshole*, they convinced themselves, they must have had a *very good reason*.

“But this...it’s *undignified!*” the dragon insisted.

Svetlana drew herself up—which at her height was even more impressive. “*What* is undignified? *Physical labor?* Are you forgetting? *I am a Woman of Sturmhaven!* We

do not shirk from hard work of any kind, in support of our families!”

Jeranth blinked in confusion. “Your...families? But...these aren’t your family, they’re mech and meat!”

“We are *made* from mech and meat,” Svetlana said. “Humans and RIDEs *are* our family. One day, they too will be Integrates. For God’s sake, man, if we make them hate us now, how can we expect them to love us—or themselves—once they join us?”

“But...but what about what you said before?” Jeranth sputtered. “You said all the same crap Fritz did!”

Svetlana inclined her head in acknowledgment. “True. But I have had a great deal of time to rethink things in recent weeks, after it became clear to me just how much of Fritz’s rhetoric was wishful thinking.” She held up the arm that wasn’t holding the drink tankard, and looked pointedly at the cicatrices still surrounding the area that had regrown. “Do you think *this* would have happened if we were as ‘superior’ as Fritz thought?”

Jeranth eyed the scars and sighed. Svetlana chuckled. As aggravating as her quadruple amputation had been, she had to admit it made it hard for most Integrates to claim they had more right to complain about how badly *they’d* been beaten up. “I can still respect Fritz’s desire for Integrates to have their own place, and perhaps he was even right in how he went about it at first, when we were few and weak,” she continued. “But now we are many and strong, and we must now take our place alongside our less mature brethren and set them a *positive* example. If that means working to expiate our sins, so be it. We made mistakes. We are fortunate they set our punishment in terms of months, not years. Or worse. Have you asked yourself where you would be if you had been captured by the *Loose Cannons*? They could have had fun with a dragon of your size for *days*.”

Jeranth shuddered again. “I...guess you have a point there. Kind of.”

Svetlana came to a decision. “In fact, tomorrow, and as often as my new duties permit, you *will* find me right there at the aerodrome by your side, helping you in *your* work. It is the right thing to do.”

“Your new duties?” one of the other large Integrates, an apatosaurus, said. “You’re really gonna let them make you their pet Intie?”

“I choose to make *them* my ‘pet RIDEs and humans,’” Svetlana said, her resolve stiffening. “As one of Fritz’s top Integrates, willingly or not, it falls to me to help repair the damage he did to Integrate/human relations. If AlphaWolf is willing to give me a platform to work from in that, who am I to spurn his support? This is not a punishment, this is an *opportunity*.” She shook her head. “I am sorry, I really should not preach at you. Perhaps it is this drink talking, you should try some.” She chuckled. “But *look* at this place. They are willing to forgive us trying to *destroy* them. This is a place where we can make a new start.” Svetlana shrugged. “Or, of course, you could run off to Rodinia with the rest of the isolationists once your sentence is up. For all the good it will do them in a few years.”

“Not everyone wants to get all lovey-dovey with mech and meat,” a tyrannosaur grumbled. “When Appa comes back, you’ll all be sorry.”

Svetlana felt her temper threaten to rise again, but viciously fought it back down. “That could be. Or it could be *he* will. After all, *Fritz* was once certain he was the most powerful being in the world, and look where he is now. Enjoy the party.” She nodded to the group, and turned to walk back to the table where Fenris waited.

“I see you have begun your new job already,” Fenris observed. “Very well said, all of it.”

“That? Oh, that was on *me*,” Svetlana said, taking a long pull at her drink. “I led those idiots. My responsibility. And thank you for the kind words.” She shook her head. “This place is suddenly too crowded. Could we find somewhere more...private?”

“I believe that would not be a problem,” Fenris said, leading her between two grandstands back out to the main street. “Shall we fly? There is plenty of privacy just outside the dome.”

“A very good idea,” Svetlana agreed. She gulped down the rest of the drink and set the tankard aside. It would swiftly have boiled in the heat out there anyway. She wobbled only a little as she lifted into the air with Fenris. *That drink is stronger than I expected!*

A few minutes later, they stood outside the dome on a high ridge of stone overlooking the settlement. Svetlana chuckled. “This is the very spot from which I commanded the attack, before coming to find you. Alpha Camp has certainly grown.”

“Indeed it has,” Fenris agreed. “Our population has grown by leaps and bounds as RIDEs have come in search of freedom, humans in search of opportunity. Some of the old-timers have...not dealt well with the change. Some even left to form their own bodyjack camps. I fear they are in for a rude awakening when the Marshals and polities do not deign to leave them be the way they did AlphaWolf.”

“And the Integrates? What do they come for?” Svetlana asked, moving closer to Fenris. She felt pleasantly warm all over, but did not believe that had much to do with the ambient temperature in the Dry.

“A place where they will not be stared at as much, perhaps,” Fenris reflected. “Some of the polities are still having a hard time with, if you will pardon the pun, *integrating* the Integrated into their society, from both side. We can serve as a sort of halfway house, showing both Integrates and polities that it can be done. This is why having your help is so important.”

“Mmm,” Svetlana acknowledged. She reached out to take Fenris’s hand.

The larger wolf glanced over at her, but gave her hand a friendly squeeze. “Are you well?”

“I believe I may be a little tipsy,” Svetlana confessed. “As you say, that drink is powerful. But I am quite enjoying the sensation.”

“As am I,” Fenris said. “It is strange, is it not, that it can be pleasant to be mildly impaired? It is counterintuitive from a system status perspective, but feels quite... human. Or so I imagine from the memories I have sampled.”

“Mm. It is quite human,” Svetlana agreed. “So the human half of me *knows*.”

“In some ways I envy you that closeness,” Fenris mused. “Not that we would wish to be Integrated prematurely, mind you.”

Svetlana nodded. “Of course not. These things should happen when they happen, and not before.” She chuckled. “And as I’ve said, I envy *you* the chance to be what we were meant to be. I must admit, I wonder how you’ll Integrate, if you do. Will the four of you become one or two?”

Fenris chuckled. “Meaning no offense, but we hope we will not find out for a good long time.”

Svetlana leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder. “I hope so, too. I’ve hardly even had the chance to get to know you yet. I’m looking forward to that.”

Fenris glanced down at her, and chuckled, putting an arm around her. “As am I. Strange as it is to say, I rarely met a female of our kind until I encountered Bertha.”

“I know,” Svetlana said. “They kept us apart intentionally, I believe so as not to... confuse matters. They did not want a situation where a man might accidentally outrank a woman. Either that, or they were concerned about the possible effects of... fraternization. I believe, historically, many of our units have been segregated that way.”

“The Valkyries have much to answer for,” Fenris rumbled.

“I am not opposed to fraternization, myself,” Svetlana declared.

“Even though you are an Integrate and we are mere ‘meat and mech’?” Fenris asked.

Svetlana snorted. “Don’t confuse me with Fritz. *I* can recognize when I was wrong.” She shook her head. “AlphaWolf may have shot off my limbs, but *you* were the one who defeated me in battle. Fritz would be horrified that I was defeated by a mere RIDE. All of my Sturmhaven indoctrination would have it that I should be ashamed to have been defeated by a mere man. But there is nothing ‘mere’ about you. About *any* of you.”

Fenris nodded. “You were a worthy adversary. You will be an even better ally. And friend.”

“Not *just* friend, I hope,” Svetlana said, tail wagging.

Fenris chuckled again. “That remains to be seen. I will say I would...not be opposed. But we have time enough, and are all mature enough, not to rush into anything.”

“True.” Svetlana considered that for a moment, watching the dome as she leaned against Fenris. “I hope you will not consider this rushing.” She reached up to turn his muzzle toward her, and met it with the end of her own. Canine muzzles weren’t quite made for what humans would consider a kiss, but they could touch lips and tongues, and then Svetlana licked Fenris’s nose.

Fenris was silent for a long moment, and Svetlana began to worry she’d offended him. But he didn’t make any move to pull away, and after a moment gravely returned the nose-lick. “I think that is just about the right speed,” he reflected.

“Good,” Svetlana said, relaxing against his shoulder again. They stood there together, enjoying each other’s company, as the sun slowly sank behind the dome.

3

The rest of the evening was a little fuzzy, but Svetlana remembered bidding farewell to Fenris and finding a spot to lie down. She wasn't really too bothered about where, nor were most of the other Integrates her size who were still on work probation. The Marshals had already demonstrated that they could track the Integrates down wherever they went, and placing "guards" on them would just have been a drain on Marshal manpower. So most of them just dossed somewhere within a klick or two of the dome, out in the desert where there was plenty of open space. Some of them required a few extra lessons, but they'd all learned sooner or later to show up on their own when their shifts began. It was just less annoying that way.

When she woke up the next morning, Svetlana felt a little tightness behind her eyes, but not the splitting headache characteristic of hangovers. *Of course not. I only had twenty liters of booze last night, it is not as if that was a huge amount...* She chuckled wryly and made her way back under the dome, to the open area near the aerodrome that had been set up as a commissary for Integrate laborers. Industrial fabbers were turning out fried "rocs' eggs"—actually just chicken eggs scaled up in size—and immense sausages, bacon, and other breakfast staples. Biscuits the size of dining room tables swam in decaliters of gravy. It was fortunate, Svetlana reflected as she took a plate, that fabbed food was so cheap. Feeding even a few Integrates her size on *natural* food could have bankrupted Alpha Camp.

As she ate, she opened a comm line to AlphaWolf's office. Alpha himself picked up. "Morning, Svetlana. Noticed you and Fenris left the party early last night. Enjoy yourselves?"

"Yes, we did," Svetlana said. "Strictly platonically, not that it's any of your business..."

"Hey, take it easy, was just asking," AlphaWolf said. "So what can I do you for?"

"As it happens, your rather unexpectedly public job offer intrigues me," Svetlana sent through the comlink as she brought a pitchfork-sized forkful of biscuit to her maw. "So I would like to know more about what you had in mind."

"Fundamentally? Talk to the Enclaves for us. I'll be the first to admit I'm...not the best one to be doing that, after some of the things some of 'em did."

"By 'some of them' I assume you mean Marshal Munn?" Svetlana asked. "Seems to me that Camelot has more than made up for that."

"Yeah, yeah, I know that," AlphaWolf growled. "Look, I know myself. I've got a bad temper sometimes. And I don't understand you Inties as well as I ought to. So now that's your job—if you take it. Understand both of us and help us play nice with each other."

"What if I don't understand you *non*-Inties as well as I should?" Svetlana asked.

AlphaWolf snorted. "You've *been* flesh and metal. I've never been an Intie. That puts you one up on me already."

"*Touché*," Svetlana admitted. "Very well...I might as well take the position, at least provisionally. It will give me something to do while I shove crates around."

AlphaWolf sent an eyebrow-raised emoticon. "You're serious about that? Doing manual labor?"

“I might as well,” Svetlana said. “It will be nice to have something to do with my hands while I burn up the comm lines. And it will show solidarity with the other forced laborers and put me in a position to keep an eye on them.”

AlphaWolf whistled. Or at least sent a whistle sound, since the term “wolf whistle” aside, wolf lips were made for whistling about as well as for kissing. “So you’re doing your job already. Impressive.”

“Not my job, my *duty*,” Svetlana said. “This much, I would do anyway. I led these people, and have a responsibility to them. Which includes the responsibility to keep them from doing anything stupid.”

AlphaWolf nodded. “Sister, you’ve just described the whole philosophy behind why I let myself get sucked into running this damn show in the first place. I’ll beam over your credentials and the reports on the latest incidents we need straightened out. Let me know if there’s anything you need. So sayeth me!”

Svetlana snorted. “I will bear that in mind.” She accepted the data packet, but put it aside to look at later, once she’d begun the heavy lifting. Right now, she concentrated on her breakfast.

“Good morning!” a jovial voice boomed behind her. Svetlana glanced over her shoulder to see Mr. Peaches the dragon happily levitating a plate full of mattress-sized French toast smothered in peach syrup and immense peach slices to a table.

“Isn’t that technically cannibalism?” Svetlana asked, tongue lolling in a lupine grin.

“What do you—oh!” Peaches chortled as he got the joke. “I was named by my first pilot for the color I chose for my hardlight hide. Quite fetching, I thought at the time. I only found out later how unusual that color was for a driggin. Since Integrating, I tried my namesake and found I rather liked them. Though whether I would have done had it not been for my name, I cannot say. It became rather a self-fulfilling prophecy, I suppose.”

“I think I’ve seen dragons of nearly every color,” Svetlana said. “Nothing about yours strikes me as especially unusual.”

“Thank you, my dear. That might be true now, but at the time, there were considerably fewer options.” Mr. Peaches chuckled, levitating a fork full of food to his mouth. “And might I just say how nice it is to see you able to eat with your hands once more, rather than your lifters? Sometimes I do rather wish I were a touch more anthropomorphic.”

“It’s nice to *be* able to,” Svetlana said, suiting word to deed and taking another bite. “Thank you again, by the way, for the care you took of me and the others while we were recovering.”

“Please, think nothing of it,” Peaches said around a mouthful of French toast. “It was simply our duty.”

Svetlana nodded. “I understand duty. But not everyone would see it that way.”

“Fortunately, my dear, we are *not* everyone,” Mr. Peaches said cheerfully.

They ate in mutual silence for a while, then Svetlana finished cleaning her plate. “I suppose I had better get to the aerodrome. There will be much work to do.”

Mr. Peaches cocked his head. “You still plan to assist with the manual labor?”

“Yes!” Svetlana said. “Why does everyone find that so surprising? I am a Woman of Sturmhaven. We do not shirk from work!” She subsided, embarrassed, as a few of the diners at other tables glanced her way.

Peaches chuckled, finishing up the last of his French toast. “Then I think I will join you, at least for a while. *I do not shirk from work, either. Did I ever tell you, I had to crank the main gates for almost a year after I first came to Camelot? I rather came to enjoy it, after a while.*”

After dumping their trays into the recycler, the two of them headed over to the aerodrome, along with a few other Integrates who had just finished their breakfasts. The new polity was still growing, and still seeing a lot of traffic as subs and fliers brought in construction materials and fabber matter in bulk. There were cargo cranes and the like for unloading it in a pinch, but a giant person who could actually use hands or lifters to position it was much more efficient.

Svetlana listened to the work supervisor’s comm frequencies and went where she was directed, helping carry huge tanks of fabber gel out of a shuttle and arrange them in rows to one side of the landing strip. Mr. Peaches worked alongside her, straightening the rows with his lifters or hooking onto loops of cable with his talons and flying full pallets to where they needed to be.

As she worked, Svetlana reviewed her credentials and the briefings on the various incidents she would need to handle. She frowned as she studied them. AlphaWolf had not been kidding about how much he needed someone to straighten things out. Some of these situations were going to call for some fancy footwork. *And here I am with my size ten thousand feet*, she thought wryly.

Well, best to get started. The first matter Svetlana decided to look at had to do with a young cheetah Integrate named ProsperoSteve. (“Prospero” had been a popular name for Cheetah RIDEs for a while, because of Shakespeare, that old saying about what cheaters never do, and people who thought puns were funny.) It didn’t appear he had anything to do with Fritz’s Ascendants; he was one of the fortunate few who had been able to escape from the Enclaves and live by his wits for years among humans.

The problem was that once Watchdog and DINsec had gone into Nextus’s systems, he’d been caught trying to lift money from an ATM, and subsequent investigation revealed he’d been doing it for years, to the tune of tens of thousands of *mu*. He’d fled to Alpha Camp just a few steps ahead of the Policia, and was now requesting political asylum. Meanwhile, the Marshals had passed along an extradition request from Nextus. Now AlphaWolf had to decide how to deal with that.

We can no longer walk through any system unseen, she thought. Even before DINsec, Watchdog had been active for years, though mostly in Aloha. It still hadn’t sunk in. Svetlana sighed. *I suppose first I’d better talk to him*. The documentation included his comm code, so she gave him a call.

“Heyooo?” the voice at the other end said cautiously.

“ProsperoSteve, this is Svetlana,” Svetlana sent. “Do you have a moment?”

“Um...yes *ma’am!*” Through the comm, she practically felt ProsperoSteve snap to attention.

“I have been reviewing your case,” Svetlana said, as she hefted another tank of nano-gel onto her shoulder. “I would like to hear what you have to say.”

“It’s a bloody crock, ma’am,” ProsperoSteve said indignantly, slight British accent coming out with his irritation. “I didn’t do anything that we lone-wolf Inties haven’t been *having* to do to survive all this time. Only difference is they caught me the last time. You know what happened if we tried to, y’know, earn money in a job, out in the open? Fritz’s Candlejacks, Snatchers, and Loose Cannons, that’s what. I never took any

more than I needed, and I spread it out ‘mong different banks so I wouldn’t hit any one of them too hard.”

“I see,” Svetlana said. And she did. While she’d never lived outside the Enclaves herself, she’d talked to plenty of people who had, and she knew all about how the Candlejacks and Snatchers operated. ProsperoSteve’s story was entirely plausible. Except...

“But they caught you two weeks *after* Fritz was defeated, didn’t they?” Svetlana asked.

“Well...yeah.” ProsperoSteve sighed. “I was a stupid git. I’ll admit that. Wanted to get myself just a little bit more cash to live on while I started looking for legitimate work. I guess I shoulda known better, after how Fritz was whupped and all. But...they’re not after me for just *that*, they want to pin every bit of money I took in the last five years on me, too! I mean, what was I supposed to do, starve?”

“Ah.” Svetlana sent a “nod” emoticon. “I see the crux of the problem. Would you like me to see what can be done about it?”

“You’d...you’d do that for me, ma’am?” ProsperoSteve asked.

“It seems only fair. I was part of the problem, I should be part of the solution. But I may not be able to get you off scot-free. Will you honor any deals I *am* able to make?”

“I’ll...sure listen to them,” Steve said after a moment. “I just want a fair shake, that’s all.”

“Of course,” Svetlana said. “I will comm you again when I have more to tell you.” She broke the connection, and considered her options. *I should speak to whoever is handling his case in the Marshals, first. Perhaps they can direct me to where to call in Nextus.* She looked up the contact information she’d been given for her Marshals counterpart, and put through a call.

“Marrrrshals Alpha Camp liaison office, Katie speaking!” a cheerful, feline voice said on the other end. A moment later, a VR forest clearing sprang into being with a non-anthropomorphic lynx and a human-sized anthropomorphic wolf in it. Svetlana easily split her attention to keep working in the real world while speaking in VR.

“Hello, Katie, I’m Svetlana,” Svetlana said. “Alpha Camp’s Integrate ambassador,” she added.

Katie nodded. “I know. I saw the speech. What can I do forr you, Svetlana?”

“I’m calling about ProsperoSteve,” Svetlana said. “I have been looking over his case, and it sounds like Nextus wants to pin all the hacking he did over the last five years on him, instead of what he was only just caught for.”

“Ah.” Katie nodded. “To be honest, that does not sit too well with the rrrrest of us, either. It was a different time when Frrritz was rrrunning things. There is a bill prrrohibiting that kind of charge—essentially, placing a statute of limitations cap for any Integrerrrate crime short of murrdrerrr committed durring Frrritz’s rrrreign by those rrrunning away frrrom Frrritz—but it is stalled in committee in Nextus’s legislaturrre, and for now the prrrrosecutorrrs are frrree to act as they will.”

“What can we do about this?” Svetlana asked.

“Shorrrt of getting the law passed? Verrry little.” Katie shrugged. “I will pass along the comm codes for the prrrrosecutorrr. You might be able to cut a plea deal—especially if you tell them you are prrrreparrrred to advise Alpha offerrr political asylum if they don’t drrrop the charrrges, at least until the legislation passes. I doubt this petty crime is enough of an issue forr Nextus to make a great fuss if you do.”

“That is certainly one option,” Svetlana agreed. “I will comm and see what we might work out.” She grinned. “I expect I will be talking to you again, possibly a great deal.”

“Prrrobably so,” Katie agreed. “Good luck with it.”

The prosecutor, a stern-looking, untagged older human woman named Mrs. Hargraves, was not inclined to be helpful, especially when she observed Svetlana’s Integrate appearance, and heard her Sturmhaven accent. *I should have used a human avatar and an accent filter, I guess*, Svetlana reflected. *Well, too late now*. The woman was quite resistant to the idea of dismissing all but the actual charge on which ProsperoSteve had been caught. Reading between the lines, Svetlana suspected that a significant number of Nextus’s stolid pro-humanist citizens were terrified by all the changes that were suddenly coming, and the prosecutor was trying to show them she could be “tough on Integrate crime.”

“I see,” Svetlana finally said. “Well, in that case, I will have to advise AlphaWolf to grant the asylum request. It doesn’t sound like ProsperoSteve would be able to get a fair trial there.”

It was interesting to see how quickly the prosecutor backpedaled when the chance to demonstrate her tough stance at all seemed ready to evaporate. “Now, wait, something that extreme may not be necessary after all,” she added. “We shouldn’t be hasty. Maybe we can work something out.”

Svetlana chuckled inwardly. *Half a loaf, ja Mrs. Hargraves?* Outwardly, she said, “I would certainly be open to discussion.”

In the end, they settled on Hargraves dropping all but the most recent charge if ProsperoSteve agreed to plead guilty to that—and urging the judge to assign probation rather than a harsher sentence. “I will run that by him and see if he finds it agreeable, as soon as you send me the notarized offer papers,” Svetlana told her.

“You’ll have them in a few hours,” Mrs. Hargraves grumbled.

ProsperoSteve was not entirely thrilled either when presented with the offer. “You realize this is Nextus, right? Where they think we’re inhuman freaks? Just ‘cuz she ‘urges’ the judge to be lenient doesn’t mean he will.”

“It is a better chance than you had half an hour ago,” Svetlana pointed out. “In all honesty, I would advise finding a lawyer and consulting them before you decide whether to accept or decline the bargain. If you choose to decline, let me know.” She probably would still recommend him for at least temporary sanctuary if he turned the offer down, but no need to let that influence his decision.

“I—um—all right,” ProsperoSteve said. “Thank you.”

Well, there’s one fire pissed on, Svetlana thought wryly. *Let’s see what other challenges lie in store*.

“It occurs to me that I may have been mistaken in something,” Fenris rumbled thoughtfully. He stood at the edge of the aerodrome’s tarmac just after lunch, watching Svetlana and the other Integrates at their stevedore work. Paul, Lilibet, and Guinevere were also on board.

“You didn’t think Svetlana was going to be able to settle in like this?” Paul asked.

“It is something more fundamental than that, actually,” Fenris said. “Something I said when you first woke me up.”

“Oh?” Paul asked. He had a pretty good idea what was coming, actually; he’d

noticed it was on Fenris's mind a lot of late during Fuse but they hadn't directly discussed it. Sometimes it took the big guy some time to think things through to where he was ready to put them into words.

"At the time, I spurned your offer of a partnership, because I wished to be in charge of all aspects of my life," the big wolf mused. "I will confess, I even harbored less-than-rational thoughts of intentionally making you...uncomfortable, simply to watch your reaction. And yet...I have since come to realize that I do not *want* to cause you any anguish."

Paul chuckled. "Yeah...that's called a partnership. I don't want to make things hard on *you*, either. Never have."

"I *am* aware of that," Fenris acknowledged wryly. "Essentially...I wished to apologize to you. And to Lilibet and Guinevere, about whom I feel the same way."

"Hey, no problem!" Guinevere said. "You never *have* caused us any anguish. Or any French or Spanish, either!"

"Same here," Lilibet said. "After what happened to you, you needed to feel in control. We knew from the first time we Fused you weren't actually gonna do anything bad with it."

Fenris chuckled. "That's not *quite* what I remember reading from your mind at the time."

"Eh, well...that was before we spent time in the camp and saw what the *real* control freaks were like," Lilibet said. "Next to, oh, Tocsin or Sonja, you were just a little kid calling 'dibs!'"

Months of Alpha Camp's new status as a legit polity hadn't softened Tocsin's attitude towards humans very much. The hippogryph had a small retinue of humans who wore his tags like a uniform—in addition to his "main" thumbs, Joseph, who steadfastly refused to leave him permanently even after Tocsin had released him. And for her part, Sonja was still the same domineering lupine Mary Poppins she had ever been; she'd simply agreed on a more restrictive selection process.

"No apologies needed, 'boss,'" Paul said, using the title ironically for the first time. "I'm an easy-going kind of guy, and you've always been reasonable, so I wasn't going to try to throw my weight around anyway. You're so much heavier than I am, it wouldn't have done much anyway."

"Thank you," Fenris said. "All of you. From now on, I will try to be less domineering."

Paul snorted. "You've *never* been domineering. You just reserved the right to be if you ever wanted to." He grinned. "So anyway, what brings this up now?"

Fenris cast another look toward Svetlana. "It occurs to me that my relationship toward Svetlana could have...repercussions for you. As I said, I do not wish to make you uncomfortable. But..."

"But on the other hand, we're part of what makes you who you are," Lilibet said. "And as closely as we're linked to you, we sort of can't help being affected by anything you do." She giggled. "That kiss last night...wow!"

"I know I have no right to impose this upon you," Fenris said. "But...should our relationship progress...I have no experience in these matters. I will *need* your help, as much as I ever have on the battlefield."

"Didn't Pat Benatar say that love is a battlefield?" Paul said. "You can count on us. I kinda like the big girl myself. And since my main squeeze is part of you, too, it's not

like jealousy's gonna be an issue."

"Yeah. For a 'Voman uf Zturmhaven,' she's remarkably not an asshole," Guinevere said. "I'm kinda surprised, really. I expected something like a great big Sonja. I mean, even Bertha and Hedy are a little...well, you know."

"I *do* know," Fenris said. "I intentionally purged my own accent after I left, but I am *from* Sturmhaven, after all." He chuckled. "Sturmhaven women are...complex and mysterious creatures."

"And men are simple and straightforward?" Paul said, grinning. "I see what you did there."

Fenris laughed. "I did not mean it that way. Or perhaps I did. The simple fact is, the Sturmhaven women most outsiders see are often Valkyries—the altogether most strident branch of Sturmhaven political philosophy—simply because they are the ones who most believe in putting themselves forward. The squeaky lifter gets the nano-lubricant."

"Putting themselves forward?" Guin said. "Is *that* what you call it? That isn't what *I'd* call it."

"For the last couple of decades, the Valkyries' power has been dwindling in the *Zemstvo*—what you would call the Parliament," Fenris said. "They used to be the dominant force in our culture and politics. Indeed, it was they who sparked the Great War that led to RIDEkind's creation. Now they are...I suppose you might say, *compensating*. The less real power they have, the noisier they become."

"Why doesn't anyone else ever speak up?" Lillibet asked. "Or even, like, leave Sturmhaven and be *seen* elsewhere? Why is every Sturmie you meet an 'on your knees, male worm!' Valk?"

"Uh, Lilli? Hate to say it, but worms don't have knees," Paul said.

Lillibet rolled her eyes. "You *know* what I mean."

Fenris chuckled. "The odds are, you have met many Sturmhaven women on the street, or passed them in the park, without even knowing it. Athenians and even many Gaians do not feel as inclined to call attention to themselves by dressing or acting provocatively abroad. 'When in Rome,' as they say. But because Valkyries do, they have associated themselves most clearly with Sturmhaven in others' minds, even as they least represent it within its own borders any longer."

"So, what, Sturmhaven's actually a land of all sweetness and light?" Lillibet asked. "What about the stories I've heard? The Male Transgression Laws where a man can get stoned for looking at a woman funny?"

Fenris sighed. "The Valkyries do tend to have an influence on culture out of proportion to their legislative influence. As extremists, they skew the center of the political spectrum in their direction simply by existing. As for those laws, the Valkyries passed them while they were in power, but enough Gaians and even Athenians still, deep down, believe them to be a good idea, an integral part of Sturmhaven culture and all that, that there is never *quite* enough of a majority to repeal them." He shrugged. "Inertia, I suppose. Even the most ardent male suffragist grew up in a world where those laws had always existed, and has a hard time imagining life without them."

"So, getting back to 'Lana...'" Guinevere prompted.

Fenris sighed happily. "She embodies most of the *positive* qualities of a Woman of Sturmhaven, with few of the negatives. I have little doubt she still believes women to be the superior gender, but she is more interested in proving it through her actions than

asserting it through empty words. Which includes *not* going out of her way to pick fights over it.”

“Whereas for a Valk, it’s a wasted day if you haven’t had at least one good scrap before brunch,” Paul said.

“Indeed.” Fenris chuckled. “If they only turned all that energy back toward their politics instead of punishing whatever man just annoyed them, they could be a dominant force again. In a way, it’s best for all concerned that they don’t.”

“Does still make life hard for any guys in Sturmhaven, though,” Paul reflected. “So anyway...yeah. If you want to court her, we’re with you. Should be an interesting experience.”

“Yeah,” Lilibet said. “I like her. Want to get to know her better.”

“Ditto!” Guinevere agreed.

“Thank you, my friends,” Fenris said. “Bearing that in mind...well, we shall see what happens.” He glanced in her direction one more time. “But at present, our lunch break seems to be over. We should get back to work.”

“Fine by me,” Paul agreed. The giant wolf lifted into the air and floated back uptown.

By the end of the work shift, Svetlana was tired both mentally and physically, but satisfied. She’d managed to get a lot of cargo moved, and she could tell that just by being there, she’d been a calming influence on the others. It was harder to grumble about your lot when your former commander was right beside you pitching in without complaint, and doing other work virtually besides.

And also, just through the comms, she had opened dialogues with three Integrate Enclaves that had been on the fence about the new changes in the world. She was beginning to see why AlphaWolf had wanted her for the job. Simply by being a member of Fritz’s old guard who had been able to adapt, her mere *existence* sent a powerful message to any Integrates who spoke to her. And being a former outlaw haven itself, Alpha Camp seemed a touch less threatening to isolationist Enclaves than the established polities did.

AlphaWolf felt that his settlement could be an important “baby step” on the way to getting all of Integrate society back in touch with the human world, Svetlana realized. And being the one tasked with making that happen was a lot of responsibility.

But I am a Woman of Sturmhaven, she thought happily. *We are made for responsibility.*

She stopped off at the commissary for a quick dinner and recharge, then drifted downtown to see the sights. She hadn’t had much chance to explore outside of the parade. She did have to be careful where she put her feet from time to time, but she was used to that, and if necessary she could take to the air. Most of the buildings weren’t scaled for someone her size to enter, but it was still interesting to look at them from the outside.

Most of the people she met were friendly. Some would wave and call her name; a few would ask how she liked Alpha Camp so far and she’d reply that it was certainly friendlier than she’d expected. A few ran and hid. She couldn’t really blame them, but she did feel sorry for them. And one or two actually did yell epithets at her. That made her giggle. What, did they want her to try to step on them? Even if it proved them right about her, they’d still be squashed.

Without knowing exactly where she was going, she found herself drifting into the old Graveyard area. The bandstands and other party fixings had long since been broken down and cleared out. The empty area that remained was part park, part parking lot for the RIDE garage and house of ill repute that shared space here. It was one of the few places within the dome that someone her size could relax and move around freely. By some unspoken agreement, Alpha Camp had left this space undeveloped save for the two businesses that had prior claim.

Svetlana walked carefully up to the main garage annex of the FreeRIDERS Garage and squatted to peer through the open bay door. Lilibet and Guinevere were Fused up, working on an armadillo RIDE. They glanced up at her arrival. "Oh, hey!" Lilibet said cheerfully. "If you're looking for Fennie, he and Paul are around back in the open-air bays."

"Thank you," Svetlana said. She stood back up and walked around the building. On the other side, a set of mech cradles were set up in a row, like beds in a hospital, with no roof or other structures around them save for some utility-pole like structures from which lights and other equipment dangled. Fenris was standing over one of them in Fuser form, waldos and servos extended from his gauntlets to work within a dolphin RIDE's access compartments.

He glanced up at her approach. "Hey," Paul said. "Just a sec, we're nearly done."

"Do not rush on my account," Svetlana said. "So, you do most of your repair work in the open air?"

"Yeah," Paul said. "We couldn't fit into one of the bays like the central building has. And since there isn't any weather around here anyway, we figured putting up extra bay modules was kind of a waste."

"Paul has expressed a singular unwillingness to consider time-sharing with a smaller RIDE for in-bay work," Fenris said.

"Hey, I *am* time-sharing with a smaller RIDE. Her name's Guinevere, maybe you met her." Paul chuckled. "She and Lilli get the in-building bay, and we're happy back here, the way we've always done the repairs since I first woke the Big Guy up. Our equipment's just better now is all." He retracted the manipulator arms and stood up. "When I picked Fenris for my repair partner, I knew at the outset working inside buildings was gonna be a problem. But he had what I wanted, and he still does. He's my main man."

"And I am indescribably grateful," Fenris rumbled. "I had never imagined I could repair others. I find I like it much better than trying to destroy them."

"I'll confess, I had not imagined a WLF-CSA could ever be fitted for repair either," Svetlana said. "But you make it work."

Fenris nodded in acknowledgement. "How was your first day at the aerodrome?"

"It went well," Svetlana said. "The work was really not hard, and it occupied my body while my mind went elsewhere. And *that* work was satisfying, too. I was able to make a start on untangling some issues of Integrate relations without ever leaving Alpha Camp. I expect the aerodrome shall be my office, most of the time."

"How're the other Integrates doing?" Paul asked. "I know there was some grumbling."

"Grumbling, yes, but I doubt they will do anything about it," Svetlana said.

"Apart from feeling bound by my example, they know how much better off they will be if they stick it out to the end of their sentence than if they make the Marshals have to hunt

them down. Most of them don't stop and think about the chance they're being offered for a fresh start." She shook her head. "Integrates? I say they are *Ingrates*."

"They will come around," Fenris predicted. "Or they will finally leave after they finish their sentences. Either way, we should not have to worry about them too much longer."

Svetlana nodded. "Though that will leave your aerodrome with fewer stevedores."

"We won't have this level of traffic for too much longer anyway, now that we're just about all built out," Paul said. "I expect we'll make do with the cranes and volunteers after that, or else we can actually hire some people."

"I see," Svetlana said. Then she continued, "I was wondering...now that the work is out of the way, would you care to come for a walk with me?"

"Give us a few minutes to finish up, then we shall be delighted to," Fenris agreed.

Svetlana nodded. "I suppose I will see you shortly, then."

"Actually, would you care to help?" Paul asked. "I've known some Integrates who were pretty handy with RIDE maintenance with their powers."

Svetlana raised an eyebrow. "I only know the basics, but...if you think I can be useful, I'll be glad to lend a hand."

"Certainly! We can teach you," Fenris rumbled. "I did not know much about it myself, before Paul showed me. And your Integrate abilities should prove quite useful."

"C'mon over here, I'll show you what to do," Paul invited.

"Very well," Svetlana agreed, stepping forward to join them by the maintenance cradles.

Paul nodded Fenris's head to her. "Now, the first thing you need to know about fixing RIDEs is..."

4

Life at Alpha Camp settled into a routine over the next few weeks. Lilibet and Guinevere returned home to school but came back on the weekends and sometimes more often than that. The first few Integrates with the lightest sentences reached the end of their forced labor and were released. A number of them chose to stay on, or to take up residence in a nearby Enclave such as Camelot and commute to continue working in Alpha Camp for modest salaries.

Not all of them were cargo shifters, either. The giant Integrates were the most visible, but there were plenty of smaller ones working at other jobs within the polity at any job where levitation would be useful. Pulling hot trays from the oven at an artisanal bakery, carrying laden food trays to the table at restaurants, and putting together prefabbed buildings were all things Integrates did well. One of those Integrates was ProsperoSteve, for whom Svetlana had managed to broker a better plea deal. He was now working a job in Alpha Camp to make partial restitution to the Nextus banks from whom he had “borrowed” money. If the labor seemed menial, at least it was honest.

And speaking of labor, Svetlana soon settled into assisting Fenris and Paul in back of the garage in addition to her cargo-moving duties. It was something else she could do with her hands and her Integrate powers while committing diplomacy by comm, and with the processing power in her giant body she was easily able to devote her full attention to both tasks at once. *And it lets me stay close to Fenris*, Svetlana thought happily.

It was strange to say about a man, but the more time she spent around him, the more Svetlana found she could respect the giant wolf RIDE and his partners. She certainly didn’t agree with him about all things, especially about all things Sturmhaven, but that was to be expected—and the fact that they had both essentially fled from Sturmhaven in disgrace was another bond between them.

She also got along well with Bertha, Hedy, and Diana Fuerst, whom she saw fairly frequently as Paul was still spending a lot of time fine-tuning and troubleshooting their linkage in preparation for sending them home to present the technology to Sturmhaven. It helped that she and Bertha had been in the same squadron back in their military days. They had a lot of old times to catch up on.

Sonja also came by from time to time. She happily showed off her current charge, a girl from Califia named Frieda, who Sonja had paired up with during Svetlana’s Integrates’ attack. By now, Frieda had almost entirely lost her old accent and spoke Sturmhaven’s German dialect like a native. Svetlana found this more than a little creepy, but Frieda seemed happy with what had been done to her, so Svetlana tried to be happy for her.

“Am I a bad person?” she asked Fenris on one of their many evening walks. “I am not sure whether I feel worse that I dislike watching Sonja work...or that I can live with the results. I am supposed to be a patriot of Sturmhaven, after all.”

“I gather that even Sturmhaven now regrets what it did with Sonja’s kind,” Fenris said. “And say what you will, but unlike so many others Frieda at least chose to give herself over to Sonja.”

“In order to defend against *my* attack, which makes me feel responsible,”

Svetlana said.

“I am given to understand that she was something of a Sturmophile even before that,” Fenris said. “She might eventually have made that choice anyway.” He chuckled. “Besides, I see at least one example before me showing that a Woman of Sturmhaven is not such a bad thing to be.”

Svetlana smiled at him, and leaned in for a kiss and nose-lick. Fenris replied in kind. He’d been very good about letting her take the initiative, Svetlana noted. And he had not indicated at all that her attentions were unwelcome. Perhaps it was time to take the next step.

Svetlana stepped closer to Fenris, and spoke the words to an old Sturmhaven courtship ritual. Some said that it pre-dated the polity itself, and had been set down by the polity’s original founders. Only Valkyries and those even farther to the right used it in its literal form anymore—a peremptory order that brooked no insubordination—and even then, not all the time for them either. These days it was more commonly spoken coyly and suggestively, as Svetlana said it now. “I require the services of a man tonight. You will do.”

In the original formula, the man now had the chance to show proof that he was already vowed to another. If he could produce it, the woman would accept that he was unavailable and look for another man to requisition. But if he couldn’t, or if the woman judged it to be fraudulent, or the other person to be unworthy, she would press her claim. This was a bit risky, as the other woman, if she existed, could challenge her to a duel over this slight. In fact, historically, this ritual had often been used as an intentional incitement to duel, though that happened less often now.

If the man declined to submit willingly...legend had it that, originally, the woman could then take him anyway, but that hadn’t happened in at least as long as Svetlana had been functional or, for that matter, as long as Marlena had been alive. These days, he was more likely to be jailed under the Male Transgression laws (or possibly dumped at the border after a mild beating if a tourist). At least, if it was a Valkyrie asking and she took the ritual seriously. Everyone else tended to treat the ritual somewhat like a marriage proposition—only using it when they were already pretty sure the answer would be “yes”. In those cases, the worst that happened was bruised egos...*usually*.

There was a separate courtship ritual for women to women, which was considerably more voluntary. Men seeking men sometimes used a modified version of that ritual, but it didn’t have the force of law it did when women used it—and they had to be careful no matter what they did because the women of Sturmhaven did not look kindly on that kind of thing. There wasn’t a ritual as such for men seeking to court women—for obvious reasons.

In Fenris’s case, worries over rejection were academic, because he gave the proper countersign, just as slyly as Svetlana had offered the challenge. “Madam, you honor me beyond all my worthiness. I am at your disposal.” They stepped into each other’s arms and kissed again. “Shall we go somewhere more private? I know just the spot.”

“I will permit you to show me,” Svetlana said with a wink. Fenris stepped back, took Svetlana’s hand, and lifted into the air. Svetlana followed suit, and he led her away from the Alpha Camp dome.

In his compartment within Fenris, Paul floated, eyes closed, and grinned. He’d

planned to drop back into VR to give Fenris some privacy, but that didn't seem to be in the cards. Fenris had drawn him heavily into their link, as he usually did at stressful times when he needed his partner's guidance. It was actually a little hard for Paul to think for himself, as much of his mind as Fenris was using. He could sense through the link that it was the same way with Lilli and Guin. *Of course*, Paul thought wryly. *Ol' Fennie doesn't have hormones of his own. He needs to borrow ours.*

And was he ever. Up to now, Paul had been interested in the affair only in an academic sense. Svetlana was nice, and all, but he didn't have a crush on her. But now, awash in Fenris's libido, he couldn't help noticing how utterly *gorgeous* Svetlana was, seen through Fenris's eyes. That curvaceous body, those bright eyes, those well-toned muscles...she was really everything a wolf could want.

:Better be careful or I'm gonna get jealous,: Lilibet teased through their link.

:Er...sorry, Lilli,: Paul sent, a little embarrassed. Naturally, she could sense his thoughts through the link when it was this strong between all of them.

Lilibet giggled. *:I'm kidding, silly. I feel it too. Which is really a bit weird, because I thought I only had eyes for you!:*

They touched down in Fenris's "secret spot"—a cozy little sand pit that they'd run across during one of their patrols. The soft, inviting sand was a pale blue in color, bespeaking a higher-than-usual qubitium count. Not that it would be a problem for either the RIDE or the Integrate, but any unprotected gear would be breathing its last after just a few minutes of exposure.

As Fenris and Svetlana stepped into each other's arms, Paul was startled as the hatch beneath him opened and he dropped into Fenris's other interior compartment. "Hey, what—?"

In the dim light of the Fuse chamber, Guinevere's eyes glowed as she and Lilibet regarded him hungrily. "Why should Fennie and Lana be the only ones who get to have any fun?" Guinevere purred. "We hope you like furry girls!"

"I like any girl, as long as they're you. But are you sure about this? It's a big step forward for us to take, and your Mom and Dad..."

"You heard them at the park. They knew this was coming. They even knew *this*—" she waved a hand in the general direction of outside "—was coming. They just want me to be happy. Well..." She pushed back Guinevere's helmet to regard Paul face to face. "This will make me happy," she said simply.

Paul looked into her eyes. It was amazing just how compelling they were, he reflected. Even more so than a cat's, for all that they seemed to have caught some of Guin's eyes' luminescence. Or maybe that was just his eyes playing tricks. "Well...if *you're* sure, then sure. Can't exactly say I'll regret it myself." He grinned to emphasize his understatement.

"I know. Not that you ever, y'know, *did* anything about it." Lilibet smirked. "I finally had to ask Fenris to arrange things, just now. Just like Svetlana had to go after him herself."

"Well hey, Fennie and me, we're just a couple laid-back kinda guys," Paul said casually.

Lilibet snorted. "Fenris is from Sturmhaven. What's *your* excuse?"

"Well, I've kind of been in awe of you since I first met you," Paul said more seriously. "I've liked working with you, just being near you enough that I didn't want to do anything to maybe screw it up."

Lilibet smiled. “Oh, Paul...trust me, this *won't* screw anything up.”

“Oh, I trust you, Lilli. You *and* Guin. And she's okay with this, too?”

“Sure am!” Guinevere said, bringing her head-helmet back up to enclose Lilibet's face. “We share pretty much everything already; why *shouldn't* we share you?”

Paul leaned forward to kiss the ocelot-girl firmly on the furry muzzle. “Then share away.”

Paul was dimly aware of Fenris and Svetlana kissing again as Lilibet and Guinevere drew him into their arms and completed the symmetry.

The period that followed was a little confused for all participants. With all the data interchange links that were open, sometimes it was a little hard to tell who was kissing and being kissed by whom, who was touching where, or even what body they were feeling from. It got a little more confusing when Fenris and Svetlana opened a link of their own.

:So this is who you are...: Svetlana mused as she explored Fenris's memories.

:And this is what it was like being a male CSA...I'm sorry they treated you so badly.:

:I'm sorry your experience wasn't much better than mine,: Fenris sent. *:I would have thought being a woman was supposed to count for something in Sturmhaven. But they treated you with the same contempt as me.:*

:And yet, you're the one who had the last laugh,: Svetlana replied. *:You alone became what we were all supposed to be. I am...happy for you.:* But Fenris also tasted her envy, and her self-recrimination at being so envious.

:I came by that in one way, yes. But you are now a fine commander yourself. Integration is simply another path.: He kissed her again. *:Shall we look in on my partners?:*

Svetlana nodded. *:I would like that.:*

Fenris sent gently, *:Paul? Lilibet? Guinevere? May Svetlana touch your minds?:*

:Well, sure,: Paul replied amusedly. *:She seems to have touched just about everything else.:*

:If we can touch hers back!: Lilibet said.

:Uh-huh!: Guinevere affirmed sleepily.

Fenris offered a link to them to Svetlana, and she browsed carefully through their memories to learn what had made them who and what they were, while they did the same with her. She was especially interested by Lilibet's transformation from self-centered rich girl to considerate RIDE partner, and exclaimed with delight on watching their memories of the garage attack, in which Lilli and Guin took on the dreaded Tocsin with just a couple of civilian pulse rifles. *:Worthy to be Women of Sturmhaven, both of you!:* Apparently even Tocsin respected their bravery, since he had not taken the opportunity to finish them off—as he could have with a single shot from his feather blades, even before Katie had made her dive.

:Thanks...: Lilibet sent drowsily. :Not so bad y'self.:

:You know, not every brave woman has to come from Sturmhaven,: Fenris pointed out, a bit nettled. *:Nor is every man from Sturmhaven a coward.:*

:I realize that,: Svetlana admitted. *:But I do still have the ideals that were imprinted into me. I certainly would never make that mistake about you.:* She chuckled ruefully. *:Not a second time, at least.:*

:Enlightened of you, I'm sure.: Fenris said dryly.

Svetlana hugged Fenris closer to herself. *:Speaking of enlightened...you know, if I were a Valkyrie, I would now declare you officially belonged to me forever.:*

:Mm-hmm?: Fenris said. *:And since you're not?:*

:I think I shall simply act as if you did, but never actually say anything about it.: Svetlana said.

:That seems a reasonable compromise.: Fenris agreed placidly. *:So what will you do first?:*

:I think...I will demonstrate once more exactly why I want you.: Svetlana decided, pulling him even closer again. *:You are, in all respects, the most magnificent man I have ever seen.:*

:I do my best.: Fenris replied, with not a little smugness.

Afterward, as they lay snuggled together in the sand, Fenris felt...satisfied. He felt *recursively* satisfied, with Paul and the Fused Lilli/Guin lying snuggled together inside of him, their emotions echoing and feeding into his own and Svetlana's, as the link among them all was still open. They lay there for a while, not sending any coherent thoughts, but all exploring the others' recent memories, reliving what had just happened from each others' perspectives. Fenris was a little surprised at how...universal the experience was. There was little difference in what Paul had felt with Lilibet and Guinevere to what he had felt with Svetlana. *We RIDEs seem to be much more human than even we knew,* he mused.

Within him, Paul and Lilli stirred in each other's arms, drawing closer, murmuring to each other, and beginning to kiss again. Fenris and Svetlana watched, bemused at his smaller partners' energy level.

Lilibet giggled. *:Silly wolfies! Don't just watch, join us!:* She and Paul extended an invitation.

:Shall we?: Fenris asked Svetlana.

:Let's do.: The two megawolves slipped their minds into Paul and Lilibet's, and rode along with them until the dawn.

5

Work the next day seemed strangely...normal after what had happened the night before, Paul reflected. Fenris and Svetlana had gone back into the desert after dropping them off, either to continue their amorous experiments or just to have more long conversations. Guinevere had announced a dire need to “defrag” and disappeared upstairs. At the moment, it was just he and Lilibet, working inside the garage bay with old-fashioned hand tools. And Paul was pretty sure her thoughts were running along the same lines as his.

“Wow,” Lilibet said at last. “I’m amazed we didn’t just...Integrate, right then and there.”

Paul chuckled. “People and RIDEs have been having sex together for years now, and far’s I know no more of ‘em Integrated doing it than doing anything else. Hell, just look at Rose and Nora.”

“Yeah, but usually not quite so many of them at once,” Lilibet said.

“You disappointed it didn’t happen? We can always try again,” Paul teased, passing her a socket wrench.

Lilibet snorted. “I’m not disappointed about *anything*. And I’d be just fine with holding off on Integrating for another few years, thanks. Even if Mom did make me bank my eggs.” She rolled her eyes with the recollection. “But what I *would* like to try is just you and me sometime. No Fenris, no Svetlana, and no Guinevere. Doing something just for us, just to see what that feels like.”

“They’ll still be able to see it afterward next time we all Fuse,” Paul pointed out.

“Yeah, but they won’t be experiencing it as it happens, which means it’ll be special for us,” Lilibet said. “Besides, if it was really important, there are ways to block off memories from Fuse partners. I have a *few* personal memories I still kept private, and so does Guin.” She shrugged. “For most things, though, I don’t mind sharing. Too many problems in the world were caused by poor communication. If Romeo and Juliet could have read each others’ minds, they probably wouldn’t have offed themselves.”

“I expect you’ve probably got a point there,” Paul said, chuckling. “It does amaze me sometimes, though, the things we’re willing to put up with. Giving someone else read access to every fiber of our beings like that.”

“You ever regret it?” Lilibet asked, fiddling with some interior component on the RIDE on the cradle.

“Can’t say as I have,” Paul said. “Ol’ Fennie and I, we annoy each other sometimes, and sometimes we pull back for privacy for a while. But we know each other too well to stay mad for too long.” He shook his head. “Of course, you know all that, you’ve seen inside my head same as Fennie. And I know you and Guin have a similar relationship.”

Lilibet nodded. “I know. But it’s good to verbalize sometimes, even when it’s things you already know. Just a part of the thinking process.” She shook her head. “One thing I kind of *do* regret is I never did that with Uncia. I was such an idiot. Scared of Fusing, happy just to use her as my personal phone booth. I love Guinny to pieces, but sometimes I do wonder what it would have been like with Uncia instead.”

“I’m sure she’d let you Fuse with her sometime if you asked,” Paul said.

Lillibet nodded. "I know. She's big that way. But it wouldn't be the same. I was such a *stupid idiot moron*."

Paul shrugged. "We all make choices. Sometimes they're not the best ones. If you hadn't been so stupid then, Shelley would still be Roger. Who knows, Fritz might even still be ruling the Integrate scene. And I prob'ly wouldn't have ever had any reason to meet you, an' that would be the biggest tragedy of all."

Lillibet chuckled. "Well, nice to see you've got your priorities straight."

"I'm just bright that way," Paul said modestly.

"I know," Lillibet said. "When you get right down to it, I know pretty much *everything* about you, and you about me. Does kind of simplify things, doesn't it? I suppose it's pretty much inevitable we're gonna end up getting married sooner or later."

"Is that your idea of a proposal?" Paul teased. "That's what I like about you, Lilli. All the poetry in your soul."

Lillibet snorted. "You get right down to it, we already know each other better than a lot of married couples ever get to. We're pretty much next best thing to married as it is."

"Seriously, depending on how Fennie and 'Lana get along, we might just end up all marrying each other," Paul said. "All five of us, or six if Svetlana counts for two."

Lillibet blinked. "A group marriage? I hadn't thought about that."

"They've been a thing in Sturmhaven for a while, what with the harems, and Aloha has its party clans," Paul said. "But they're becoming more common everywhere now as people start treating RIDEs as people instead of possessions. I hear there's legislation in Uplift to give wedded RIDEs full spousal benefits."

"Really? Sweet!" Lillibet said. "We really *are* kicking this social equality thing into high gear now that Fritz is out of the picture, aren't we?"

"Of course, it's still pretty early to talk about that kind of thing for us yet," Paul said. "Leastways not 'til we know whether Svetlana's just a passing fling. But it's something to think about, anyway."

"Yeah." Lillibet paused, then leaned over to kiss Paul on the lips.

Paul blinked. "What was that for?"

"Oh, nothing," Lillibet said. "I just *really* like it when you're analytical."

Paul grinned at her. "If you like my *analysis*, you should see my *criticism*."

"Mm-hmm?" Lillibet prompted.

"I can be very...*incisive*," Paul supplied.

Lillibet snorted. "Your innuendo, on the other hand, needs work."

"All right, then I'll just try speaking plainly," Paul said. "So, you wanna go upstairs and try doing that 'something just for us' you were talking about earlier?"

Lillibet grinned, putting her wrench aside. "You know what? Why not. Let's go tell Guinny to defrag somewhere else." She took Paul's hand and led him upstairs.

TO BE CONTINUED

Wolves in the Fold

Part Two: A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

By Robotech_Master and JonBuck

1

In the weeks that followed, Fenris and Svetlana saw each other a number of times, sometimes with Paul, Lilibet, and Guinevere involved, and sometimes not. During the week, Lilibet and Guinevere had to be involved by long distance. It occasionally caused problems for Lilibet during school hours, but they worked around it. As with most things, after the new wore off it became largely routine.

This turned out to be a good thing, because they soon had other things to occupy their time. Sturmhaven had been pressing its request for Fenris, Svetlana, and everyone to visit, and Bertha to come home. When they started making noises about what an appropriate time May Day would be for a visit, it would have been almost impossible not to take the hint. "Guess we better make sure Bertha's ready," Paul said wryly. Fortunately business had slowed down lately, with every Alpha Camp RIDE who needed service having already been taken care of.

The rest of March and all of April were spent in tinkering, testing, and tinkering some more, tuning Bertha and Hedy's link (and Fenris and Guinevere's, while they were at it) to work as well as it possibly could, with sufficient redundancy for use in military operations. Lilibet handled the documentation, with help from Brena who spent a lot of time over at the Walton house and came down for weekend visits a time or two.

Svetlana also spent time around the garage when she was not busy at the aerodrome or taking care of Integrate business. Paul and Lilibet continued tutoring her in RIDE maintenance. While she was not as adept at fine detail work as the others, she could nonetheless provide a great deal of assistance through directed lifter fields stronger than any smaller Integrate could generate.

It also gave her a chance to discuss the state of things in the Integrate side of Alpha Camp. Since Svetlana had arrived, the grumbling had by and large settled down, and stayed down long enough for the labor sentences to expire, one by one. Many Integrates left town the second their time was up. Others stayed on, continuing to work but on a salaried basis. They said they'd gotten used to it, made some friends there, they didn't have any other job openings, and for the big ones it was nice being at a place that had cheap food in giant-Intie portions. Everyone seemed happy to be there now.

"It almost seems as though I am out of a job now," Svetlana said one day, as they worked together on dismantling an armadillo's DE shell. She held the complex arrangement of interlocking armor plates carefully positioned in relation to each other the air while Fenris and Paul worked on the components beneath. "With no more Integrate prisoners, there is less for me to liaise among."

"Only all the enclaves on the one side, and all the polities on the other," Fenris observed.

"Well...yes," Svetlana admitted. "But they are all much more distant, and I do not encounter them personally every day."

"It would be unwise to grow complacent," Fenris said. "Perhaps a more proactive stance? I understand Wonderland has made a few invitations? They are near Sturmhaven, are they not? We might stop on the way there, or perhaps the way back."

"Wonderland is nearly as meme-infected as Camelot used to be," Svetlana said. "The Diet of Enclaves is considering a *quarantine*."

“Isn’t that a little extreme?” Lilibet asked. “I thought the whole meme thing was about like dandruff—the real kind, I mean, not the Integrate telltale. Something that makes you look bad but doesn’t really hurt anything.”

“It’s more in the vein of a contagious mental illness,” Svetlana said. “Fortunately we now know that it is an infection and it can be treated, and frequently cured.”

“And Wonderland doesn’t want to be treated?” Paul asked. “Is this some Integrate political thing?”

“That is an apt description, Paul,” Svetlana said. “The Diet has even less power than Zharus’s own Planetary Advisory Committee, though. There is little it can do to *enforce* a quarantine.”

“We’re going to take our ball and...not come over to your house’?” Lilibet suggested.

“That is about the size of it,” Svetlana said. “To be fair, almost nobody *wants* an Integrate ruling authority with real power. Not after living under Fritz for so long. But it makes it harder to stage an intervention.”

“So we shouldn’t visit, then?” Lilibet asked. “Too much risk you might get infected?”

Svetlana shook her head. “No, generally the risk is only to those who are already inclined favorably toward the meme. I have always felt Carroll was rather too silly to be enjoyable.”

“Yeah, I could see that,” Guinevere put in.

“So what do you think? You giant wolves wanna go down the rabbit hole?” Paul asked.

“It might be moderately amusing,” Fenris suggested. “Perhaps we should visit on the way. Something tells me that after spending time in Sturmhaven, we might well wish to come directly back here and relax.”

“If I can convince them to undergo treatment, it could be a net positive all around,” Svetlana mused. “Very well, let’s pencil it in.”

“Do they *make* pencils that big?” Guinevere asked, and everyone laughed.

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The dragon-shaped super-suborbital canted over into its final approach to the Sturmhaven aerodrome. In the cargo/passenger section, Svetlana, Fenris, Paul, Lilibet, Guinevere, Bertha, Hedy, and Diana Fuerst watched through a large projection monitor on the forward bulkhead.

They were fresh off almost complete success at Wonderland. Over the course of their two-day visit, Svetlana and the others had managed to talk the Queen of Hearts and the Mad Hatter into allowing the establishment of a meme-infection treatment clinic on a provisional basis, with treatment being strictly voluntary. Paul could understand the Wonderlanders’ concern at losing the thing that made them “special” through “brainwashing,” but suspected they might change their minds after seeing how the treatment actually worked.

That being said, Paul was still glad to have it out of the way, and he was now looking forward with trepidation to the new challenges Sturmhaven would bring. *Can’t be worse than facing a pack of playing cards agitating for my decapitation*, he thought wryly. *But there I go invoking Murphy.*

“I cannot believe I am finally coming home,” Svetlana said. “And they will be *glad to see me.*”

“I know the feeling,” Bertha said. “And I am finally going to get my *real* body back!”

“I should warn you, Paul,” Fenris rumbled. “You will probably find our time in Sturmhaven...annoying.”

“Even with the ‘diplomatic immunity?’” Paul asked.

“Indeed,” Fenris said.

Paul shrugged. “Well, I’ve lived for months somewhere *humans* are second-class citizens. Now I’m visiting somewhere *men* are second-class citizens. Same dance, different tune. How much worse could it be?” *And there I go invoking Murphy* again.

“You will find out,” Fenris said darkly.

The sub landed and pulled to a halt, and the doors opened, and they emerged in order of importance—Svetlana first, of course, followed by Bertha and crew, and then finally Paul and Fenris, with Lilibet and Guinevere riding in the cupola on his skimmer tank mode. There was quite a crowd gathered outside, and Paul couldn’t help noticing that their cheers for Svetlana and Bertha were a lot louder than the one he and Fenris got.

Waiting to greet them were representatives of Sturmhaven’s governing body, the Zemstvo. There were three of them, Paul noted.

:One from each major Party,: Fenris commed to him. *:See if you can guess which is the Valkyrie.:*

Only one of the three wore interface specs. They were the old wraparound style, even covering her ears. She reminded Paul of every anime vision of a “solid woman” ever. Curvy, strong, one might even say “stout”, though not to her face. Her clothing was similar to a military-style dress uniform with a few hints of the polity’s past as a resort—what Nextus had derisively called a “brothel with political ambition” during the War.

:It has to be her,: Paul said. *:Must be one of their really extreme believers. Those “see-no-evil” specs basically turn me into a woman in her eyes and probably change my voice, too, right?:*

The second might have stepped out of a fresco from ancient Crete. Dressed as a Minoan woman, wearing an archaic blue robe with exposed breasts and hair done up in an elaborate coif. “I am Delegate Viveka Virgo. We welcome you on behalf of the Athenas,” she said.

:The Minoans were a matriarchy, best they could tell on Earth,: Lilibet said. *:Aside from honoring that, there really isn’t much about the Athenas I’d call strange politics. Unlike that Valk, uh...:*

:Bitch?: Svetlana supplied dryly. *:I take no offense, Lilli. Sturmhaven is as associated with wolves as Nextus is with cats.:*

The third representative was dressed more conservatively than the Athena, in a still recognizably feminine style. She wore a calf-length skirt and a nice blouse. *She looks like someone’s mother,* Paul thought. *And probably is.*

“Welcome to Sturmhaven, all of you,” she said. “I am Matriarch Mariam Daigneau and I speak for the Gaians.”

:She does more than that,: Fenris told the others. *:The Matriarch is also the head of the Zemstvo, like a Speaker of the House or a Prime Minister. That she chooses to meet with us in person at the aerodrome is...impressive.:*

“My silent sister to my right is Delegate Winifride Kurita, a Valkyrie,” Mariam continued. “We three together represent the vast majority of the political spectrum in Sturmhaven.” She smiled. “As most of you are already aware, of course.”

“We’re honored to meet you, Matriarch,” Lillibet said. “Thank you for inviting us to visit.” They’d agreed beforehand that Lillibet would act as the spokeswoman for Alpha Camp, being the only human in their party who was both female and not a native.

“You are *very* welcome,” Mariam replied. “Oh! And I have something for your lesser companions.” She held up a pink placard with a loop of cord attached to it, and offered it to Lillibet. “This is for the man, and the RIDE should replicate it in hardlight. They should wear them around their necks at all times to avoid...misunderstandings.”

Lillibet glanced at the placard, and dimpled as she bravely tried to hold back a smile before passing it on to Paul. “Ah...thank you, Matriarch,” she said.

Paul glanced at the sign. It read, in loopy feminine script, “HONORARY FEMALE.” Paul nodded his thanks to Mariam, not sure he trusted himself to speak even if they wanted to hear anything from him anyway. *:Seriously?:*

:I did tell you it would be annoying,: Fenris said, perhaps a touch smugly. A duplicate of the placard appeared in hardlight on the hood of the skimmer tank.

:Would you prefer a set of falsies? I’m sure they could find you a pair,: Lillibet quipped. Aloud, she said, “According to the agenda you sent, you wanted us to take part in your, uh, May Day parade?”

“Yes,” Mariam said. “It will serve two purposes at once: to show you our fine city, and to show you *to* said city. And it ends conveniently near your lodging for the visit. Tomorrow we will reunite Bertha with her original body, and you can ensure that the link works properly—and brief us on *how* it works, if you would be so kind.”

“Of course!” Lillibet said. “When does the parade start?”

“Just about now,” Mariam said. She nodded to one of the other airstrips at the aerodrome, where a number of vehicles and floats were already lining up. “Follow our car, and we’ll guide you to your place in line.”

The three Sturmhaven dignitaries seated themselves in a convertible skimmer, which lifted off the ground and trundled over toward the other airstrip. Bertha engaged her lifters and headed after it. Lillibet climbed into Fenris’s turret and followed Bertha, and Svetlana walked along behind.

“I can’t believe we’re going to be in the May Day parade!” Bertha said happily. “Only the *best* units got to be in it. And never any of *our* kind. We were the embarrassment of the entire army. I only wish they could put me back in my old body first.”

“I know just what you mean,” Fenris said. “And males generally only had a token presence as well.”

“You’ll find things have changed somewhat, Fenris,” Viveka said. “Mostly for the better, though some rather *sharp* differences remain.” She looked at the Valk pointedly.

“To have one of the Zemstvo speaking directly to me, some things must indeed have changed,” Fenris mused.

They pulled into a gap left at the front of the parade, and the Zemstvo representatives spoke among themselves for a moment. Then they nodded, gestured ahead, and pulled out.

“Just follow us and you won’t get lost!” the Gaian Matriarch called back cheerfully.

“That’s good advice,” Lilibet said, giggling. They followed Bertha and the convertible out of the aerodrome and along the street into the Sturmhaven city proper. Practically as soon as they left the airport, there were crowds lined up along both sides of the street—mostly women, though there were a few obvious men here and there. Some of them had reddish skin and were dressed in a masculine version of Viveka’s robe.

“...does that guy have a *collar and leash* on him?” Paul said.

“He’s that Valk’s...pet,” Diana Fuerst said. “I swear, some of those women cross the line into self-parody. Small wonder they’re losing their power base. Sturmhaven’s own little Tea Party, and I do not mean the Mad Hatter kind.” She grimaced. “Even the Gaians are softening up towards men more. I *am* a Gaian myself, you know. We are rather more flexible than the Valks. I believe they’ve tried to purge many of their own members lately for not being ‘pure’ enough. Hence our silent be-spec’d escort.”

“I always thought those glasses were an urban legend,” Paul said. “Something someone made up to make fun of Sturmhaven.”

“They can’t possibly do a better job than Sturmhaven does on its own,” Hedy said. “I can be smug about it given that I’m female on the one hand and by and large immune to *human* sexual politics on the other. Of course, I don’t have many civil rights, either.”

“That, at least, we *know* is changing,” Lilibet said. “Seems like the new ‘battlefield’ for the politics is RIDE rights, and everyone wants to be more progressive than everyone else.”

“I’m not really sure I like that,” Hedy said. “I kind of enjoy having my cake and eating it too.”

“I never got to see much of life outside the base,” Svetlana said, keeping her voice low enough not to carry beyond their party. “I am not so sure I like what I see so much now.”

“At least they mostly seem to like *you*, so that’s something,” Paul said. Svetlana got some of the loudest applause of any of them when she passed.

The parade wended its way through the town, and Diana and Hedy made sure to point out some of the most interesting sights—monuments to the fallen in the war, statues of famous Sturmhavenites, museums and churches and cultural centers of note. The architecture was very Russian.

“Oh, the parade is going through Valkyrie Circle. Look at this.” The circle was actually laid out in the form of a circle with a short line jutting out from it, and a short line crossing that one—the “Venus symbol” traditionally associated with women and female organisms. In the middle of a circle was a stone sphere with a stone cross jutting out of it, and on the sphere was engraved a quote:

“Whenever women have insisted on absolute equality with men, they have invariably wound up with the dirty end of the stick. What they are and what they can do makes them superior to men, and their proper tactic is to demand special privileges, all the traffic will bear. They should never settle merely for equality. For women, ‘equality’ is a disaster.”

—*Roberta W. Heinlein*

“Well, that explains a lot,” Paul said. Then he blinked and looked again in a

textbook double-take. “Wait, ‘*Roberta*’ Heinlein?”

“It’s like those silly glasses of theirs,” Diana said, rolling her eyes. “Anything *good* has to have been said, done, or invented by a woman.”

“I...see,” Lilibet said. “Are they trying to fool *themselves* or just everybody else?”

“The jury’s still out on that one,” Hedy said.

“And you know what the stupidest thing is about those glasses?” Diana continued. “If everyone *really* looked like women to them, they’d treat everyone with equal respect. In fact, that’s what the glasses used to be for—they were a teaching tool of the Athenas. Then some Valk had the bright idea that if they could make them superimpose a scarlet ‘M’ over the foreheads of the edited men, they wouldn’t have to *look at* another disturbing male face but would still know who to sneer at or sleep with. And of course, the idea took off.” She snorted. “This is back when they were the majority. The Athenas quickly stopped using them altogether, because they didn’t want to be mistaken for Valks.”

“All the Athena and even some Gaian hacker kids used to *love* to make viruses that removed the indicators, flipped them, or made everyone look like *men* instead of women,” Hedy said. “Every few years, they’d find a security loophole that let them go pandemic. Eventually most Valks decided it wasn’t worth the hassle. That’s generally why only the hardest hardliners wear them these days.”

“For all I know, they may not even keep that feature turned on anymore,” Diana said. “It’s just about keeping up appearances.”

“And hiding your eyes so people can’t read your emotions in them, I’d guess,” Paul said. “Shades have been used for that for a long time.”

The parade traveled on through town, finally ending up at a sort of arena area, a stadium with high raised seats all around and a nondescript open area in the middle. Like most sports fields of the day, it used hardlight to create whatever game play area was necessary. Today it was configured as a parade ground, with a reviewing stand complete with podium at one end and the giant hardlight displays showing closeups of it.

“Looks like it’s show-and-tell time,” Paul mused, as Fenris, Bertha, and Svetlana were directed to take up positions of honor by the stand. The three Delegates left their car and proceeded with dignity to the podium, where they greeted the assembled crowd.

“Here comes the wolf and pony show,” Guinevere muttered.

“Women of Sturmhaven!” Matriarch Mariam said, her amplified voice echoing from the bleachers. “Today is a special May Day, for some of our prodigal daughters and sons have returned to us!” The crowd roared. “While they are not all here to stay, let’s give them a rousing welcome to remind them where they came from!” She made a lifting gesture with her hands, and most of the audience came to its feet and roared louder.

“It’s the Valkyrie sections that are staying seated,” Fenris murmured to Paul.

“Yeah, I sorta figured.”

“I will introduce them to you now. Svetlana, Sturmhaven’s largest Integrate! Bertha, formerly of our old Wolf Command Armor program, and soon to head up our *new* Wolf Command Armor program, and her partners Hedy and *Oberstleutnant* Diana Fuerst! Fenris, one of the last of the old Wolf Command units still in his original shell, and his partners Lilibet Walton, Guinevere, and Paul Anders!”

“Ah, top billing,” Paul muttered. He waved to the crowd, conscious of the pink placard he wore proclaiming him an honorary woman. He noticed that some of the men

in the crowd apparently had breasts and laughed. *:Lilli, I thought you were kidding about the falsies,:* he sent to the group.

:This place is a living example of Poe's Law, Paul. I don't think most of those are actually falsies, either,: Lilibet said. Indeed, there were probably more men in the crowd than on first glance. Androgyny was a local male fashion and the breasts didn't help.

:Gaian fathers assist in the nursing duties, and take on certain feminine aspects to honor the goddess even before then without truly crossing over,: Diana informed. *:A man's body is essentially the same as a woman's in many ways, something we Gaians recognize and value. But let's not dwell on it, shall we?:*

:So I might lack tact, but Gaian fathers lactate. Got it.: Paul rolled his eyes and returned his attention to the pageantry.

"We are delighted in their return, not least because it represents the chance for our Wolf Command Armor finally to live up to its intended potential," Mariam continued. The screens lit up with footage of Fenris in action—security camera footage of him taking down the dragon Integrate at the Waltons' mansion, and footage from various RIDEs of the battle at Alpha Camp, including his going toe-to-toe with Svetlana. "If even one mere *male* unit from Sturmhaven can fight like this, imagine what a full division of female units under Bertha will be able to do!"

:Ouch,: Paul said. *:There's some damned faint praise for you...:*

:It's about what I expected,: Fenris replied. *:I must say things have improved considerably if they're even willing to give a mere male any credit at all.:*

:Sorry about this,: Bertha said. *:I promise, males will always have a place in my division, as well.:* She paused a beat, then added, *:After all, good cannon fodder is so hard to find these days...:* with a wink emoticon in the sideband.

:Your understanding is...whelming,: Fenris said dryly. *:Not overwhelming or underwhelming, but precisely...whelming.:*

"They will all be with us for several days, during which we will try to show them all the very best Sturmhaven has to offer," Mariam continued with no apparent irony, while the Athena, Viveka, at least had the grace to look uncomfortable. The Valkyrie, Winifride, stood like a statue that apparently wished it was somewhere else.

They were kept there for another hour or so, as the rest of the parade passed in front of them in review and the Delegates explained who they were and praised their various accomplishments. Many of the paraders were military units. Paul couldn't help noticing the praise for the *female* units was genuine, while the few token *male* units rated more patronizing, "Isn't that cute?" remarks—though if the men minded, they didn't let it show.

At last, with the parade over, Bertha, Hedy, and Diana went off to the maintenance facility where Bertha would be restored to her original body. Svetlana tagged along, since it was also one of the only spaces nearby large enough for her to sleep. The remainder of the Alpha Camp delegation was shown to its quarters in the New Metropol, a luxury hotel which was modeled after a famous Art Nouveau hotel from Moscow on Earth, according to a placard by the door. Fenris parked in the garage, keeping a link open through Guinevere, while the others went up to their room.

The New Metropol was all very impressive, with a colorful tile mosaic of a woman surmounting the facade. But for Paul it was soured just a little by the receptionist's warning to Lilibet not to let "her male" wander around without his placard, and it

might be best if he didn't leave their suite by himself even with it.

"Oh, come on, *seriously?*" Paul said when they were alone in their room. "I thought all that was just people making fun, and it couldn't *really* be this bad."

"It's like I said earlier," Lilibet said. "Poe's Law. 'Without a blatant display of humor, it is impossible to create a parody of extremism or fundamentalism that someone won't mistake for the real thing.' And, by the same token, sincerely extreme beliefs can easily be mistaken for a parody of said beliefs."

"Yeah, I guess," Paul said. "But I thought that was just for arguing on the 'net. I never thought it would apply to real life."

"I kinda like it!" Guinevere said. "Finally, somewhere *men* know their place!"

Lilibet snorted. "You wouldn't know what to *do* with a man who knew his place."

"Sure I would!" Guinevere insisted. "First he could tune my lifters and my hardlight projectors. Then he could polish my plating. Then..."

"But I do all that anyway," Paul said.

"Yeah, but here you'd *have* to!" Guinevere said smugly. Paul threw a pillow at her.

2

The next few days were spent partly technically, partly politically. On the technical side, Paul, Fenris, Lilibet, and Guinevere assisted in the transfer of Bertha's core to her original body, and in getting the link working properly to Hedy in Bertha's new-old digs.

Paul was interested to discover that Bertha's old body was actually not identical to Fenris's as he had expected. The body styling was sleeker, even in her tank form, with definite feminine curves, and the transformation sequence was also more complex. Not so complex as to present a problem for field maintenance, at least relatively speaking, and most of it was just ornamental anyway. It was that whole "Men are simple and straightforward, women are complex and mysterious" thing Rhianna had always said of Sturmhaven designs. But he had to admit it looked even more impressive than Fenris when it Fused.

"Yes, that looks about right," Svetlana said, watching the transformation. She sighed. "I remember those days. While I will not say I regret the good things Integration has brought, this does make me wish that my Marlana and I could de-Fuse and be separate together again, even just one more time."

Bertha completed her first Fuse with Diana in the new body. They stood up, a slimmer, more feminine version of Fenris, and walked over to meet him and Svetlana. "I am whole again!" Bertha said happily. "Precisely as intended!"

Hedy trotted along next to her in wolf form. "And we've already gotten the list of prospects for *my* new human. Several of them look quite promising. We will be

sure to pick one before you leave, so you can fine-tune the link before you go.”

“We military RIDEs now have a ‘Right of Refusal’ if we feel a human partnership will not function effectively,” Bertha said.

“And that is in addition to the other term we negotiated...that *I* will be the one in charge,” Hedy said smugly. “So far, none of the candidates seem to have a problem with that.”

“It’s a good list,” Diana Fuerst put in. “I have worked with several of those on it. But I will leave the decision to Bertha and Hedy.”

The other part of the time was political. Svetlana, Lilibet and Guinevere, and to an extent Paul and Fenris, were asked to address the Zemstvo, both in full and by committee, in matters relating to RIDE and Integrate rights. As Paul had said earlier, Sturmhaven was very interested in “keeping up with the Joneses,” especially if the Joneses happened to live in Nextus.

“We are living in a new world,” Viveka said, addressing the 199 other Delegates. “Yet we sit here, debating what is a very basic issue of sophont rights. Reticulated Intelligences even *breed* like all other living beings. Integrates are in a real way born of human and RIDE. A combination of souls—”

“That much is still in question, Viveka,” a Gaian delegate interjected.

“Funny, I’d think *you’d* know if anyone would,” Guinevere said. Then, as the expression on the Delegate’s face darkened, she said, “Oh, wait, never mind, forget I said anything...”

Paul facepalmed. “Guin...”

“Well how was I supposed to know? I thought they had ‘dandruff’ sensors everywhere now,” Guinevere grumbled.

As the Delegates next to the one who’d just spoken scooted their chairs further away from her, Viveka cleared her throat and continued. “How life begins hardly matters, whether in a simulated space, or between a combination of two souls—”

“Maybe even our own universe is a simulation?” one of Viveka’s Party added. “Who can say?”

“And maybe it’s turtles all the way down,” a Valk sneered.

Matriarch Mariam banged the gavel. “*Order* in here. Viveka has not yet yielded the floor. Please, go on.”

“The legislation the Athenas introduce into the Foresight Committee today will eliminate the gap in our founding Charter, removing human-specific references,” Viveka said. “*All* sophonts shall have all the rights and privileges accorded to humans. RIDEs and Integrates will be legally eligible for public office. This will put us ahead of Nextus and even *Uplift* in this matter.”

“Seems like they’ve got at least eight Integrates in public office already,” Guinevere muttered.

“That many? Really?” Paul whispered.

“I’d point ‘em out to you, but people might notice,” Guinevere said. “Two Athenas, three Gaias, two Valks. Dandruff doesn’t lie.”

“The Matriarch recognizes Winifride Kurita,” Mariam said.

“Curious that this proposed legislation also enables

non-subject males to vote and to hold office,” Winifride said. “One might think that the Athenas are simply using a more important issue to push another agenda. You’ve wanted to repeal the last of the Male Transgression Laws for two decades. The Valks oppose *any* such agenda as antithetical to our polity’s founding principals! *How dare you* dishonor our Founding Mothers like this? How dare you? I yield the floor.”

“Response from the Athenas,” Matriarch Mariam said.

“If I had a *mu* for every time the Valks said ‘how dare you’ in that tone of voice in this chamber I’d be a very rich woman,” Viveka said. “Let’s be brutally honest. We all know how and why our polity was *really* founded, much as we try to dress it up in high morals. From the standpoint of what our Founding Mothers actually came out here to do—which is to say, play their...*games* without anyone else getting in the way—Sturmhaven has been successful beyond their wildest dreams. But we live in a different world now—a world where we have to play nicely with *others*.

“Sooner or later, playtime comes to an end, and we have to rejoin the rest of the world. Expanding men’s rights is a step in that direction. It doesn’t mean we have to go all the way to full equality, but it is a step in the right direction. Once we see how well that step works, we can decide if we wish to take another, or even to step back. And I would remind you, even if men are made *eligible* to hold office, they still have to win the popular vote to get in. I yield.”

“Response, Valks?” the put-upon Matriarch said.

A group of them huddled on the floor for a minute. “We have nothing at this time, Matriarch,” Winifriede said. “We will raise specific issues in committee.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Paul muttered.

“I *am* sorry about all this,” Viveka told them after the session had gone into recess for lunch. “We are making progress, but we still have some distance to go. The Gaians—the majority party—wish to be cautious about changes. They believe men have their place, which is somewhere between pets and ‘real’ people.”

“Men only gain full rights if they cross over,” Svetlana said from the open window.

“Makes as much sense as anything here,” Paul said.

“And of course the Valks are...the Valks,” Lillibet said. “Conservative to a fault.”

“If you don’t like it, move to Cape Nord,” Svetlana quoted.

“This isn’t a time for conservatism *or* caution,” Vieka said, eyes sparkling with righteous passion. She clenched her fist and punched it into her other palm. “This is a time for *bold action* to correct the injustice codified in our Charter. I am so *tired* of my homeland being the laughingstock of Gondwana!” She sighed. “One of the *two* laughingstocks, I suppose I should say. Sturmhaven and Cape Nord, what a pair we make.”

“We’ll help however we can,” Paul said. “Though, it probably won’t be that much.”

“Just your *being here* is doing more than we Athenas could have hoped,” Viveka said. “You and Fenris are serving as a positive example to all Athenas, and perhaps swaying some of those Gaians on the fence toward our

views.”

“The Valkyries do not seem terribly pleased, however,” Fenris put in through his link to Guinevere. “Have you seen some of their talk shows? A few of them have actually been advocating disregarding our diplomatic immunity and charging us under the Male Transgression Laws. Or even doing physical violence to us.”

“We *and* the Gaians have been watching those,” Viveka said. “For all our disagreements, none of us wishes to have a political incident occur on our watch. At its worst, it might even give the Valks sufficient ammunition to reverse their slow, inevitable slide into obscurity.”

“I’d be inclined to say at its *worst* we might end up dead, but I get what you’re saying,” Paul said.

“More likely they’d toss you into a crossover chamber and make a Woman of Sturmhaven out of you, like they did to so many young men during the War in the draft,” Viveka said. “For all that we and Cape Nord spit at each other over the fences, in some things we are more alike than different.”

“We’ll try not to let that happen,” Lilibet said. “I don’t have a big enough garage back home to park Fenris in. Well, my Dad does, but they’ve all got a bunch of fliers and suborbitals in them already.”

The remaining few days passed quickly. After the contentious first sessions, the Zemstvo seemed by and large interested in what they had to say. Svetlana was even approached for a secret consultation by three of the Integrate Delegates, who wanted to know what sort of support they might be able to bring in from nearby

Integrate Enclaves if they could get the Zemstvo as a whole to accept it.

They met the new partner Hedy had decided upon: *Leutnant* Carlotta Kinski, a four-year veteran of Sturmhaven's non-RIDE armored division who had never had a RIDE herself. "So it means no bad habits to break," Hedy said happily. "But her expertise in tanks should transfer over to working with Bertha." With both human Fuse partners present, Paul and Lilli tuned and re-tuned the Bertha/Hedy link, and lectured the army's technical corps on how it worked and what they could do with it.

"It seems to be a variant on DINsec," one technician said.

"It is, without most of the encryption layer," Paul replied. "It solves the network latency problem, enabling the two RIs and co-processors to correctly synch. Just a few femtoseconds makes a huge difference in our little Beowulf cluster."

They also had time for appearances in Sturmhaven's media. Lilibet in particular was a media darling, as her blonde looks fit with the Sturmhaven ideal of beauty, and the ocelot ears and tail lent her a certain degree of exotic charm—and that was leaving aside the fact that she was the daughter of one of the richest men in that section of the galaxy and a Nextus native. Between interviews and talk show appearances, she hardly had a free moment. Fortunately, she had a lot of help in the form of coaching from savvy Athena spinmeisters when it came to the political questions that inevitably came up. She made a few goofs, but for the most part was able to give as well as she got.

But there was a surprising amount of interest in Paul and Fenris, as well, though mostly from technical specialty shows such as *Top Gear: Sturmhaven* or *Pimp My RIDE*. Paul was called upon to talk about life in Alpha Camp, how he had salvaged and repaired Fenris, and how they had dealt with the Integrate “threat.” Politics almost never entered the picture—probably because nobody in these parts cared what a man thought about that anyway—but that was just fine with him.

They were beginning to think that the visit would go off without a hitch. Perhaps that led them to let their guard down, Paul thought later. Whatever the case, they had just pulled up at the Zemstvo for their final session, on the morning of the last day of their stay. Fenris had dropped Paul, Lilibet, and Guinevere off at the plaza in front of the chambers, and they were chatting as they walked toward the entrance...when a statuesque Valkyrie suddenly stepped out in front of them, practically out of nowhere. She had black wolf tags, and wore an outfit straight out of an opera: golden chainmail bikini armor with a winged helmet and a fur-trimmed cloak.

The woman raised her chin and looked haughtily down her nose at Paul. “I require the services of a man today. You will do.”

“Whoa, lady,” Paul said. “Not that I’m not flattered...” *Though I’m not.* “...but I’m not the droid you’re looking for.” He tapped the placard on his chest. “Honorary female, see? So if you’re wanting a *man*, better look somewhere else.”

“Do not try to foist me off with that rubbish!” the woman insisted. “That immunity was granted under false

pretenses. You're no diplomat!"

"Well, even if it was, *I'm* afraid he's already taken," Lilibet said coolly. "By me. So why don't you just run along, and maybe put some real clothes on while you're at it?"

The Valkyrie glanced over at her and sniffed perfunctorily. "Go home and play with your dolls, little girl." Then she turned her back on Lilibet and said once more to Paul, "I require the services of a man today. You *will* do."

Lilibet turned to Guinevere. "Right. Forepaw, please. Just need it for a moment."

"All right...?" Guinevere said, puzzled. She raised her paw and killed the hardlight, and Lilli quickly released the catches to detach it. She worked the mechanism to convert it into a Fuser-form gauntlet, which she held by the wrist.

Then Lilli walked up to the Valkyrie and tapped her on the shoulder. "Hey, *bitch*."

The Valkyrie stiffened and started to turn. "What—"

Lilibet swung the gauntlet in her hand with all her strength, smacking the Valkyrie across the face with it with a satisfying *thud*. "It's *on*, bitch."

The woman reached up to touch her broken nose, and her fingers came away red with blood. Nonetheless, she smiled, revealing lupine canines. "Then I will see you in the arena in one hour for a duel of honor—woman to woman, with no RIDEs on either side. The weapons shall be longswords. And when *I* win, *you* will crossride, and I will have you *both* as my new boy-toys." She turned on her heel and marched off.

Paul watched her go. "...the fuck just happened?" he

finally managed.

Lilibet reattached Guinevere's forepaw to her leg. "I think we just got set up." She nodded to the array of a half dozen media drones floating a few meters away, recording the scene. "So it looks like I'm fighting a duel for you."

"No fucking way," Paul said. "We've got diplomatic immunity, remember? We're leaving."

"The thing is, *you* do," Lilibet said. "But I sorta don't. And *I'm* the one who challenged *her*." She turned to Viveka, who had just come running up out of breath. "Isn't that right, Viv?"

"You can't...can't forfeit," Viveka said. "Not unless you agreed to her terms, anyway. And if you don't show up... that counts as a forfeit. You could probably leave safely, but could never come back...and it would play right into the Valkyries' hands." She facepalmed. "I have no idea how Annalinda got through our security cordon. She is a known Valkyrie extremist troublemaker. We were *supposed* to be keeping an eye on her."

Guinevere sniffed the air, and sneezed. "I smell Integrate dandruff. Integrate dandruff that smells like one of your Valkyrie delegates. I hadn't wanted to say anything, out of respect for their privacy, but after this..."

Viveka pursed her lips. "After this is over, I think I would like a name. But for now there are other things to worry about."

"A duel with swords? Without a RIDE to help you? C'mon, Lilli, she's gonna *murder* you!" Paul said.

"No...no she's not," Lilibet said. "She's going to *embarrass* me. If she murders me, she can't make me into her new boy-toy, now can she?"

“That’s beside the point,” Paul said. “I don’t want to see you murdered *or* crossed. We should get out of here. No offense, Viv, but right now I’m just not seeing being unable to come back to this loony bin as a major problem.”

“Nope,” Lilibet said. “Not gonna happen. A Walton doesn’t run. And if I did, it would probably give the Valks all they need to derail the RIDE rights legislation and maybe claw their way back into power. *They’re* the ones who started the whole war in the first place, y’know.” She shook her head. “But if I put up the best fight I can, I at least get some respect for trying. That might make it right for the Athenas even if I lose.”

“It’s very strange,” Viveka mused. “You don’t see so many duels ‘to the cross’ anymore. It’s still legally viable, but the last time it was really in fashion was when the Valkyries last ruled the roost a couple decades ago. Even most Valks only go so far as public embarrassment and token monetary forfeits these days.”

“Well, if it comes to that, and I do lose, I’m sure Annalinda would rather have a chunk of my Dad’s money than me,” Lilibet said. “She could buy all the boy-toys she wanted with that.”

Lilibet’s comm went off. “And speaking of my Dad’s money...’scuse me, I gotta take this.” She held the comm up to her ear. “Yeah, Dad?” She listened for a while. “Yeah, I know....yeah...yeah...right. Okay, I will.” She hung up, and grinned. “Dad says he has complete faith in me, and to give ‘er hell.”

“Really?” Paul asked.

“Well, something like that anyway,” Lilibet said. “And he and Mom will be here in half an hour.” She sighed.

“Well, c’mon. Let’s go find that arena.”

Paul watched Lilibet and Guinevere start to walk back toward the street, and shook his head. Lilibet didn’t know the first thing about handling swords. Maybe she had some fencing classes—was that something rich people did?—but that didn’t prepare you for mortal combat in the real world.

“Don’t worry, Paul!” Lilibet said over her shoulder. “It’s gonna be all right.”

“Wish I could believe that,” Paul muttered, and followed. “But it’s gonna take some kind of a miracle to pull this off.” *And Billy Crystal in pancake makeup is nowhere to be found.*

3

In less time than Paul would have liked, they were gathered at the same arena where the parade had reviewed the first day they were there. The review stand was gone, and hardlight barricades had cordoned off a small round area for the duel. A number of Valks in ceremonial costumes were in the stands already, and they directed Lilli and Paul to a small locker-room area just off the field. Of all people, Matriarch Mariam Dagneau herself was there to officiate.

“Uh...hello, ma’am,” Lilli said.

Mariam nodded. “Surprised to see me, I’ll wager? The Matriarch’s honorary duties have always included presiding over duels. As originally written, it was *all* duels, though they soon became so prevalent it was expanded to the office’s staff. This one was...too important for that.” She cast a dark look at the corner of the room where Annalinda was ostentatiously holding a sword in the air and peering at its edge.

The Valk must have had her RIDE fix her nose, Paul realized, since it was no longer broken. For some reason, Paul found that amusing. *Good something about this is, anyway*, he thought.

“Do you really have to go through with this farce?” Paul complained. “This is *stupid*.”

Matriarch Mariam lowered her voice. “For a man, you show a remarkable amount of sense. This is naked political brinkswomanship intended to fire up their base—I don’t know what they think will come of it. I sought after an excuse to foreclose on it. I have checked every law book I have, and unfortunately, Annalinda dotted every ‘i’ and crossed every ‘t’. I have no choice but to allow this ‘farce’ to proceed.”

“You realize one of your stupid Valks just challenged the daughter of like the third richest man on the planet?” Paul said conversationally.

“Second-richest,” Lilibet said absently. “Mikel Steader’s still living on Proxima, last I heard.”

“Who *happens* to be from your polity’s old adversary, to boot?” Paul said.

“I have already begun damage control with Nextus, Mr. Anders. Thank you,” Mariam said tersely. “I realize how you must feel, but at least accord me the same respect you would give AlphaWolf.”

Paul snorted. “If you’d been to our camp, you’d know I *have* been.”

“He has,” Lilibet affirmed. “Alpha’s...well, he’s kind of a special snowflake. I don’t think Nextus ever got the hang of doing wolves quite as well as Sturmhaven.”

Paul glanced at her. “How can you be so calm at a time like this?”

“What good would worrying do?” Lilibet said. “Consider the lilies of the field, and all that.” Lilibet gave him a little smile, and whispered, “Underneath, I’m shaking like a leaf, but what good is it gonna do to show that? Let ‘em see me facing my trouble like a ‘Vooman uff Zturmhaven’ and even if I lose, I win *something*.”

“You’re incredible,” Paul said, and meant it.

“The Herald will bring forth the weapons,” Matriarch Mariam announced. A blue-eyed white mare Fuser stepped forward with a case, which she opened to reveal two identical swords.

Annalinda stepped forward, then nodded to Lilibet. “Choose your blade. They

should be identical to the millimeter, of course, so it's not as if it should make any difference."

Lilibet reached out to take the sword on the right and pulled it from the case. She held it up so it caught the light, and looked at it. The edges glittered silver—a *liquid* silver. "Hey, this sword has nanos?"

"They're a modification of traditional medical nanos," the Matriarch explained. "They heal almost any wound taken immediately...but with a very visible scar."

"And the scar has a three-year cooldown, just as with crossriding," Annalinda smirked. "I'm going to stripe you like a tiger."

Mariam cleared her throat. "It falls upon me now to ask if there is any way this dispute might be resolved amicably, without recourse to weapons?"

"Hey, sure!" Lilibet said. "If this bitch apologizes to me publicly for trying to steal *my* man, I'll be happy to let it go."

Annalinda snorted. "Fat chance. You are not *worthy* of having a man to begin with."

"Gonna make you *eat* those words, bitch," Lilibet caroled, the end of her rosetted tail twitching in imitation of Guin's before pouncing. The ocelot RIDE had fixed her typical smug feline gaze on the black shewolf across from her. The shewolf, on her part, had put her forepaws over her face in acute embarrassment.

"I look forward to seeing you try," Annalinda said. "It should be cute, like a toddler taking her first steps."

Mariam cleared her throat. "You understand that under the terms of the duel, the possessions entire of the loser are forfeit to the winner, including her very freedom?"

"I'm cool with that," Lilibet said. "I don't own anything except a bank account right now anyway. And that's just money."

Annalinda smirked. "That would only matter to me if I expected to lose. And if I manage to lose to one such as *she*, I should deserve whatever I got."

"Gonna make you eat *those* words, too," Lilibet said conversationally. "With ketchup." Paul admired her show of confidence. He knew inside she had to be quaking like a leaf. She was a pampered rich girl facing a frickin' *Valkyrie*—someone who fetishized being good with a sword. It looked like it made even Annalinda hesitate for a moment, but only a moment.

"As I have said, I look forward to seeing you try." Annalinda took her own sword from the case. "Now don the ceremonial chainmail bikini and meet me on the grounds." She strode off, whistling.

"Ceremonial chainmail bikini?" Lilibet said. "Really?"

"Poe's Law," Paul reminded her.

"I guess I'll just go Red Sonja on her ass, then," Lilli said, gripping the sword confidently. "And you get to be my Conan once I'm done, Paul."

"Assuming *you're* not being Conan to *her* Sonja at that point," Paul said.

"Well, of course," Lilibet said. "You have to start from a *positive* assumption if you're going to get anything accomplished." She held up the sword and swung it a time or two, as if testing the balance. "Let's go get me sized for that bikini."

Paul watched nervously from the Zemstvo reserved box in the front row of the stands as Lilibet and Annalinda

strode out onto the grounds. They both wore the expected chainmail bikinis, with loincloths at the waist to prevent too much from showing. The purpose, as Paul understood it, was not so much titillation as it was to provide the maximum surface area upon which a scarifying wound might be landed. Psychologically, the more semi-permanent scars one took, the more inclined one might be to surrender rather than face lethal consequences. Not that surrender seemed to be in the cards for either of them today.

He was not the only one watching nervously. In the next section over, Kenyon and Nigella Walton were clutching the rail, along with Brena—in humanoid guise for once, Paul noted. *They must really have scrambled sarium to get here.* Not that it would have been hard—Nextus was really just a short sub hop away. That was part of why the war had been so intense, come to think of it.

Paul had gotten his share of comm calls from people, too. Rhianna and Rochelle were watching the media feeds in their garage right now. They had wanted Lilli to know they were rooting for her, but thought it might be too distracting to have them there in person. And Alpha said he was sending a couple of “observers,” and Paul couldn’t talk him out of it.

Down on the field, Fenris, Svetlana, and Bertha watched from their own cordoned-off area, it being the only place big enough for them to fit. *Well, if she loses, it won’t be for lack of cheerleaders,* Paul reflected.

“Again, I must ask,” the Matriarch’s amplified voice boomed out. “Is there any way this dispute might be resolved amicably, without recourse to weapons?”

“No!” Annalinda replied. The word was amplified by the arena’s directional microphones, as was Lilibet’s response.

Lilibet shrugged. “Guess not.” She raised her sword bravely. “Bring it.”

“The duel will proceed until one yields to the other, takes too grievous an injury to continue, or is on the ground for a count of ten,” Matriarch Mariam said. “Begin.”

The Valk grinned. “I could almost respect your spirit.” She raised her own sword and began to circle.

“I could almost respect your figure,” Lilibet said. “But it’s probably all Fuser nanos, no real *work* involved. For all I know, you used to be a man.” She tried to hide the awkwardness of her motion, but couldn’t help stumbling just a little. Annalinda grinned, and lunged—just as Lilibet tripped on her own feet, falling right out of the way of the sword. She hurriedly scrambled back up as Annalinda recovered from the miss.

:I can’t watch,: Paul said, covering his eyes. *:No, I have to watch,:* he added, uncovering them.

Annalinda laughed, tossing her sword from hand to hand. “Nice footwork. You know, if you yield *now*, I won’t scar you up *too* badly.”

“I will wear any scars I get from this with *pride*,” Lilibet said. “As would *any* Woman of Sturmhaven.”

The crowd roared its approval. “Zat is tellink her!” a gleeful voice rang out in a familiar more-Sturmhaven-than-Sturmhaven accent. Paul blinked and turned his head to see *Sonja* of all people—the Sturmhaven red wolf RIDE from Alpha Camp—sitting there in the stands next

to Brena, wagging her tail for all it was worth. *Alpha's "observer."* *Of course.* "Be givink her vun for *me!*"

Annalinda looked cross. Despite the heart-stopping anxiety he was feeling just now, Paul almost had to chuckle. He could almost see the gears turning in her head as she realized she'd made a tactical error, turning herself into Goliath so Lilibet got to be the plucky David. *The crowds always root for the David*, Paul thought. *Even if she wins, she's lost.*

Eschewing further repartee, Annalinda moved in again, swinging her sword. Lilibet just managed to get her blade up in time—more by blind luck than any intentional movement—just enough to deflect Annalinda's sword and keep it from hitting. The crowd gasped.

"Go ahead and yield," Annalinda crooned. "Go out while you still look *good* to the crowd." Then she lunged again, swinging her blade, and Lilibet stumbled backward, just barely staying outside the range of each swing. She actually fell on her back, but rolled out of the way, back to her feet just as Annalinda stabbed down. "Pathetic," Annalinda sneered. "You know it's just a matter of time."

"I've got nothing *but* time," Lilibet panted. "Why, do you have an urgent appointment? Maybe you need to see your gynecologist?"

"I am going to wipe that stupid grin off your stupid face," Annalinda growled between clenched teeth. "Then I am going to take your stupid male, over and over, while you watch. And then—"

"Hey," Lilibet said, low and dangerous. "You take that back about Paul."

Annalinda laughed. “Oh, did I touch a nerve? Are you going to make me?” She lunged again.

This time Lilibet quickly parried and the blades scraped against each other down to the hilts before they separated again. The parry could not have happened simply by chance. Lilibet had clearly anticipated her opponent’s move and countered it—and by the way her eyes widened, Paul could see Annalinda herself knew it.

“You know what?” Lilibet said conversationally. “I very well might.” She started circling, sword at the ready. Something had changed, and Annalinda was still trying to puzzle it out.

:Paul, do you see how she’s handling that sword? The ease and discipline of her movements?: Fenris sent. :This is not mere Olympic fencing, or trying to imitate Errol Flynn. In fact...I do believe I have seen that very fighting style before. So have you, in fact.:

Paul leaned forward. *:You know what? I think this just got a lot more interesting.:*

Annalinda circled, more wary now. “What...how did you—?”

“Stop toying with her and finish her.”

All heads snapped up at that distinctly grumpy, undeniably *male* voice. A gray hippogryph Fuser hovered in mid-air over the arena, casting a gimlet eye down upon the combatants, a hardlight feather-blade in each be-taloned hand.

Lilibet grinned up at him, and saluted him with her sword. “*Hai, sensei.*” She turned the grin on her befuddled opponent. “As the man said on TV, I’m not *from* Nottingham.” And her body language changed altogether.

Everything before had just been for show, to draw Annalinda out and take her measure. Lilibet's movements lost the faux awkwardness all at once. She saw an opening, and *lunged*.

4

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As the sun sank behind the western horizon, Lilibet and Guinevere made their way back across the desert toward the Alpha Camp dome. It had been a long but productive day. Paul and Fenris had several RIDE services lined up. That had left Lilli free to go assist a RIDE who broke down a few clicks short of the dome. Fortunately, it had been a quick fix, and they promised to come by the garage the next day for a more permanent solution.

It amazed Lilibet how quickly she'd been accepted by the camp in the few days since her "abduction" in the wake of the Integrate raid on the Walton mansion. Despite AlphaWolf's speech about how she was there because she wanted to be, a number of the RIDEs still seemed to think she was there as a hostage anyway. A few even suspected her of being some kind of spy. But after a few days of helping to repair and refit everyone with DINsec, most of them didn't care. Especially the ones she was able to help get back into working order.

At first Paul had been worried about letting her and Guin go off by themselves, but they'd managed to get him to see reason—largely by ignoring him and going off by themselves anyway. They weren't too worried about any of the other RIDEs in the camp trying to harm them. Of the ones she hadn't had a part in fixing, most of the rest respected Alpha too much to try anything.

As for those who didn't, well, she kept the assault rifles she'd taken down those Integrates with racked to her

back and ready for deployment. With Guin's Donizetti-spec systems, Lilli expected she could handle just about any RIDE long enough for Guin to squawk to Fenris for help. About the only RIDE they really didn't want to tangle with was...

"Lilibet Walton," a cold voice said from above and behind them as they approached the dome. "I would speak with you."

"Yeek!" Lilibet spun, the rifles leaping to their latch-on positions on her gauntlets. A Fuser-form hippogryph RIDE hovered silently in the air before her, watching her calmly.

"Excellent reaction time," Tocsin said analytically. "Subtracting the expected response time from a Donizetti RIDE, your reflexes are quite fast for a human. Very good."

Lilibet kept the rifles leveled at him. "What do you want?" They had a bit of a history with this one. Tocsin had, after all, come to destroy their garage and ended up kidnapping Paul to be Alpha Camp's resident mechanic instead. Along the way, Lilli and Guin had attacked Tocsin with civilian pulse rifles, and gotten smacked into a wall for their trouble.

"As I said, to speak with you. Come." Without waiting to see if she would follow, he glided away toward a rock formation just outside the dome.

Lilibet and Guinevere hung there in the air for a moment, watching him go. "What do you think?" Lilibet asked Guin.

"Gotta admit, I'm kinda curious," Guinevere said. "And say what you will about the Tox, from what everyone in camp says he keeps his word. If he says he just wants to

talk, that's all he wants.”

“And if he wanted us dead, we'd be bleeding out already,” Lilibet said. “Ugh. Well, all right. Let's go see what he wants.”

They touched down in the rock formation a moment later to find Tocsin waiting, standing at parade rest, wings mantled and arms crossed behind his back. “Good, you came.”

“You said you wanted to talk,” Lilibet said, keeping her rifles pointed at the ground but not removing them either. “We're listening.”

Tocsin nodded an acknowledgment. “As you're aware, I have excellent fighting skills. This is not a boast or a brag, simply a statement of fact.”

“I'll grant that,” Lilibet said.

Tocsin paused, almost as if he were...embarrassed. “For some time, I have wondered whether it would be possible for me to...pass some of those skills on. It is one thing to know what I know, but *can* I teach it to someone else?”

“You mean, like taking on a student?” Lilibet asked.

“Yes,” Tocsin said. “To be a true *master*, after all, one must first have a student. And for the challenge to be complete, it would need to be a *human* student. RIDEs do not learn in quite the same ways.”

He paused and looked at her like a Drill Instructor appraising a new recruit. “In our encounter at the garage, and the information I have been able to review concerning your fight at your parents' mansion, you showed plenty of fighting spirit and aptitude, which are good as far as they go, but little actual practiced skill. I can help you achieve

that skill.”

Lilibet blinked. “Seriously? You want to train *me*?”

Tocsin nodded. “Though of course I would teach Guinevere what she needed to know as well.”

:*Wow. I guess we really must have impressed him back at the garage,*: Guin sent.

“I have only one condition on my offer,” Tocsin continued. “Absolute secrecy. For two reasons. First, should word leak out that *I* am training a *human*, there are those in the camp who will believe I have ‘gone soft.’ Some of those might wish to test me, and I have little desire to expend the energy it would take to deal with them.”

“Fair enough. What’s the other reason?” Lilibet asked.

Tocsin’s beak seemed to grin. “So that once I *have* trained you, *others* will underestimate *you*.”

It was surprisingly easy to find the time to train with Tocsin over the months that followed. One benefit of thirty-hour days was that there was always plenty of time to slip away. They trained mostly outside the dome. When temperatures required, Lilibet wore Guinevere as her survival suit, but there were a couple of hours at dawn and dusk when the temperature outside was right for unsuited work and Tocsin took advantage of them whenever possible.

It was surprisingly hard work, Lilibet soon found. The movies made it look so easy—heroes and heroines flinging swords around like they weighed nothing. In fact, the sword Lilli worked with weighed a couple of kilos, and just *holding* it took muscles she hadn’t been aware of

before—let alone swinging it and blocking Tocsin’s lunges.

For the first month, Lilibet wondered if she would *ever* be any good. Tocsin was quite often frustrated with her, but he could tell she was at least *trying* so she was never in any danger of having parts bitten off.

After that, she started getting the hang of it. But by then, they’d had the final battle with Fritz’s forces, and done all the rebuilding, and finally Lilli and Guin had to go back to live with their parents again. But they were able to keep the training up nonetheless—Tocsin and his human flew out to meet them outside of Nextus. And since Nextus was in a more temperate area, they had longer periods to work unsuited.

It had been harder to keep it a secret after they started full-contact Fusing with Fenris and Paul, but Guinevere had known ways of blocking off those memories so they wouldn’t come out in the Fuse. Lilibet had been tempted to tell them, but she’d promised *absolute* secrecy to Tocsin and suspected he would be good enough at reading her to know if she’d broken the promise even just a little.

As soon as the plans to visit Sturmhaven had materialized, Tocsin had redoubled the training, and Lilli had discovered to her surprise that she was getting quite *good*. The practice duels with Tocsin were quite a bit more fun. He still won them all, of course, but it took him some actual effort now, and he seemed to be enjoying himself as well. (Lilli often wondered how much of his desire to train her had come from boredom at not having anyone decent to spar with. She didn’t ask, though.)

Lilli couldn’t say she had ever honestly expected to *need* Tocsin’s training...but right about now, she was

extremely glad she'd had it.

“First blood,” Lilibet said, her voice calm and cold like Tocsin's. The young woman's veins sang with adrenaline. She knew better than to let her guard down. Tocsin was a merciless teacher—a battle didn't end until your opponent was disabled, dead, or yielded. Since the first two were right out, there was much more to come.

Annalinda's wound barely had time to bleed before it sealed up into a nasty red scar along her left forearm. She backed off into a defensive stance as Lilibet advanced.

“Would you like seconds?” Lilibet quipped. “Oh, no, wait, they don't *use* seconds in duels here. Besides, I'm gonna give you minutes anyway.” She easily parried Annalinda's next two attacks, and responded with a riposte that carried through to give her another scar on her right arm.

“You can't be this good!” Annalinda gasped. “You were taught by a *male!* A male *RIDE!*”

“Oh bitch *please,*” Lilibet said, swinging her blade. Thrust and parry, parry and thrust...and then Annalinda's chainmail top fell off, sliced neatly down the cleavage, with a faint red line already fading to a scar behind it. Annalinda squawked indignantly, backing away.

“What's the matter? I thought you liked going topless around here,” Lilibet teased. “Or was that just the Athenas? It sure works for *them.*” The crowd roared with laughter now.

Annalinda's face reddened. “You're making me a laughingstock!” she hissed.

“Oh, it's okay for you to try it, but not me?” Lilibet

said. “OK, then here’s something that’s not so funny.” The tip of her sword flicked out, darting in past Annalinda’s guard.

Annalinda raised a hand to her cheek. Of course there wasn’t any blood there, but she felt the new welt of a raised scar. Lilli hardly gave her any time to register the shock before giving her a matching scar on her other cheek.

“There, now you’re symmetrical.”

“Lilibet...” Tocsin chided from above.

“Aw, c’mon, *sensei!* This is for the honor of Alpha Camp!” Lilibet said without looking away from her opponent.

“I think you mean the honor of your boyfriend,” Tocsin said dryly. “No one likes a bully.”

“That’s why I’m putting this one in her place,” Lilibet said. “But okay, point taken.” She nodded to Annalinda.

“Yield now, or *I’ll* stripe *you* like a tiger.”

“You’re...not *that* good...” Annalinda panted.

“Did you hear that, *sensei?* *Your* student’s not that good.”

Tocsin snorted. “Show her how good you are. *End* it.”

Even Paul wasn’t exactly sure what happened next, until he could replay it slowed down later. All he saw at the time was Lilibet’s sword going one way, Annalinda’s sword flying off in the other direction, and then the two were *corps-a-corps* with Lilibet kneeling on Annalinda’s chest, the Valk gasping for breath.

“Six...seven...eight...” the count rang through the arena. Once it reached ten, the crowd went wild. Lilibet made sure to stay kneeling on top of her adversary for a good five seconds more before getting to her feet and

raising her sword in the air. The Matriarch nodded. “The victrix: Lillibet Walton of Nextus!” her voice boomed out.

Nigella and Kenyon jumped out of their ground-level box and covered the distance between their daughter and themselves before anyone else. Kenyon swept her into his arms. “That’s our girl!”

“You had us so worried!” Nigella sobbed. “*Never* do that again!”

“There isn’t a mark on me, Mom,” Lillibet said. “I’m actually a little sad about that. Kind of wanted something to remember this by.” She nudged her still-prone opponent with a toe. “Guess I’ll just have to settle for *this* souvenir. Oh, Fenris, could you come over here?”

“Gladly,” the giant wolf RIDE rumbled, padding onto the field. “I assume you wish for me to do the honor of crossriding your fallen foe?”

“If you would be so kind,” Lillibet said.

“No!” a new voice yelped. Lillibet looked up as the black she-wolf RIDE trotted onto the field and prostrated herself next to her rider. “...please? I know she’s an idiot... but she’s my idiot. Or I’m hers. But we’re both yours now.”

Annalinda looked up. “Gloria...”

Lillibet sighed. “I never could say no to a RIDE in distress. And I don’t much need another boyfriend anyway. Give me your root so I can lock her control out, and she’s yours. Hold onto her for me ‘til I figure out what to do with you both.”

“Yes, mistress,” Gloria said, Fusing over her human and then retreating off the grounds.

Guinevere slunk over next to Lillibet and rubbed against her leg, purring loudly. “I am so *proud* of you,

Lilli.”

Lilli reached down to scratch her behind the ears.
“Thanks, Guin. Appreciate that.”

Tocsin landed nearby in an area free of people and RIDEs, who were keeping a respectful distance. The bronzed Athena men admired him openly. He approached Lilibet. “You left yourself open on your third parry, but your opponent was too unobservant to take advantage. We’ll have to work on that overarm thrust, won’t we? More practice with a blade like the one you handled today.”

“*Hai, sensei,*” Lilibet said happily. “But aren’t you worried the other RIDEs will think you’ve gone soft, now it’s out in the open?”

“Hardly,” Tocsin said proudly. “Now that they’ve seen what my student can do after only a few months of instruction, they should have all the more reason to fear me.”

“That’s Tocsie for ya,” Paul said, grinning. “Always got an angle.”

Nigella Walton fixed the hippogryph with a gimlet glare the equal of his own. “You and I will have *words*, Mister Tocsin. We might have offered Lilli more support for your little dojo had we known.”

“Mom, it’s all good,” Lilibet said. “Leave it. Really.”
:*If Nigella and Tocsin go at it, I think the whole arena might not be big enough for the collateral damage,*: Paul sent to Fenris, who responded with a laugh of agreement.

“I can hardly belieff it!” Sonja said happily, tail wagging. “You are a true Vooman uff Zturmhaven now—*legally*, yet! I can help mit ze accent, if you vish!”

“Uh, thanks, but that’s okay,” Lilibet said. “I think Sturmhaven ought to get used to Women Of who don’t have one.”

Sonja tossed her head in a lupine shrug. “Is your loss. Vell! Now zat I am beink here, I think to showink my Frieda where her heritage is comink from. *Das vedanya!*” She trotted off the field to where the blonde Califia girl with wolf ears waited for her.

“We really did offer to *help* her, you know,” Mariam sighed, watching her go. “But she turned us down.”

“She likes being the way she is now,” Paul said. “Took her long enough to get there, we’ll leave her be as long as she sticks to *willing* partners from here on out.”

The Matriarch put her finger on her right ear. “It looks like the Valks are already responding to their loss. Except...I don’t believe this! They’re calling for an immediate confidence vote in the Zemstvo!”

“Taking advantage of their moment of glory,” Paul said dryly. “Someone did tell them Annalinda *lost*, right?”

“I would stay to go over all that you have won from Annalinda—her property and title, as well as herself—but I must return to the Zemstvo to preside over the vote,” Mariam said. “What are they *thinking?*”

“Wait...her *title?*” Lilibet said. “She was nobility or something?”

“*All* Women of Sturmhaven are nobility,” Mariam said, drawing herself up. “But in addition to that, yes, she had a minor title.”

“Have your staff beam Guin the details? We’ll go over it in virtual,” Lilibet said. She waved to Viveka, who had only just been able to make her way through the press to

get to her. “I’m starting to get an idea.”

5

The Zemstvo was rowdier than Paul had ever seen it. It seemed like everyone was talking at once, and Matriarch Mariam had all she could do to keep things under control. Paul admired her restraint, though he regretted that what happened next was probably not going to do her any favors.

The Zemstvo had been hearing from a series of speakers as they ran up to calling the vote. Fenris and Guinevere had monitored them for Paul and Lilli as they quickly traveled over to Annalinda's penthouse nearby and took stock of what they found there. Lilibet had taken one look in the closet and grinned from ear to ear. "This is *perfect!*" When Paul saw the final result, he had to admit she was right, though perhaps not for the same reasons she meant.

It had taken her a little time to get ready, of course, but they'd called ahead to hold her a place in the proceedings. As the inheritor of Annalinda's title, she had the right to address the Zemstvo, and she planned to use it.

When Mariam came to Lilibet's name on the list of speakers, she looked resigned, rather than surprised. "The floor now hears from Boyarina Lilibet Walton."

Lilibet stepped up to the podium, resplendent in one of Annalinda's best Valkyrie outfits—the armor bikini, the (fabbed) ermine cloak, the winged helmet, and the ceremonial sword. The room got very quiet—save for the loud jeers emanating from the Valkyrie section, but those quieted down under the Matriarch's stern glares.

“Women of Sturmhaven,” Lilibet began. “Hi. Seems like I’m one of you now. I sure didn’t expect this a couple of hours ago! I bet none of *you* did, either. Least of all them over there.” She nodded toward the Valkyrie section. “But here I am. Funny how things turn out.”

She waved a hand at her outfit. “These wouldn’t be my first choice of duds...kinda drafty and not really all that practical. And they don’t really line up with my political way of thinking, either. But I won ‘em fair and square, and I’m wearing ‘em now to make a point. I might be a ‘fake’ Valkyrie, but I can’t be any more of a phony than the real thing. I mean, c’mon, how much death and misery have they been responsible for over the last thirty-odd years? They started one war back in the teens. Now they just tried to start another. Seriously, you think Nextus would have stood still if Annalinda had won? You think *Alpha Camp* would have?”

“Now I’m sure there are decent people among the Valkyries, as there are anywhere, but you put all the Valkyries together and the decent people aren’t enough to turn the tide.” Lilibet shook her head. “Sturmhaven, the Valkyries are your *past*. You should look forward to a time when the only people you see parading around dressed like this are people like me—reenactors.”

She turned to face the largest section of the Zemstvo. “Of course, I can’t say much for the Gaians, either. Sorry, but I can’t. This whole thing happened on your watch, people. You’re trying to walk a line between the past and the future, and you just end up going *nowhere*. Maybe it’s time you tried standing aside for a while, too. Let the Athenas have the reins for a change and see how things

run.

“So yeah. This is me, an outsider, telling you how to run things. Pay me as much or as little attention as you think I deserve,” Lilibet said. “Just remember this. I’m the one who your big bad Valkyrie picked a fight with, ‘cuz she thought I was a wuss she could stomp all over and prove how much better she was than some weak woman wanna-be. Well, guess who won that fight?” She bowed her head. “Thank you all.”

As one, the 54 Valks started banging rhythmically on their desks. “*Vote! Vote! Vote! Vote!*”

Matriarch Mariam slammed the gavel down a few times. “Order! I really don’t know what you think a confidence vote will accomplish, Valk Delegates. But you’ve convinced enough of your colleagues to follow through with it. Let’s get this over with. The vote is hereby opened and will be tabulated in half an hour. So ordered.” She banged the gavel again.

“Someone should really tell them to be careful what they wish for,” Lilibet murmured as she took her seat next to Paul.

“Why should they worry? After all, they’re *right*,” Paul smirked. “They’re so right that the ‘rightness radiation’ they’re emitting will magically change the hearts and minds of anyone it comes into contact with. So they obviously have nothing to fear.”

They were seated in Athena section of the gallery. Viveka joined them after a few minutes. “My vote is cast. New elections are a certainty after what happened today,” Viveka said. “I have nothing but respect for Matriarch Dagneau, given the issues that have come up in her tenure.

But after the stunt the Valks pulled today, enough in her own party know it's time for a change."

"So, your Zemstvo dissolves, there's five weeks of campaigning, then a new one is convened after the elections?" Lilibet said.

"It's *your* government too, now, as a Woman of Sturmhaven," Viveka pointed out. "You're old enough to vote—sixteen is the Age of Majority."

"Really?" Paul said. "Can't vote in Nextus or Uplift until eighteen."

"May I ask a favor, Lilibet? With approval of your parents, of course," Viveka said.

"It'll be easy enough to ask 'em, they're right over there." Lilibet nodded to the audience gallery across the room, where the Waltons had front-row seats. Nigella had Melissa the mink with her, but the only sign of AlphaWolf was Kenyon's tags—for pretty obvious reasons. It would take a major state event for the leader of Gondwana's newest polity to show his cold wet nose in another one.

Viveka nodded. "Quite. I was hoping you might be willing to come back to Sturmhaven over the next few weeks to campaign on behalf of the Athenas. We are already seeing public opinion polls come in that suggest you have managed to appeal to quite a number of young Gaian voters, and even a small but real percentage of Valkyries seem to grudgingly respect your speech."

"Well, sure!" Lilibet said. "I'll be glad to do whatever I can to help my new motherland find its way into the modern era."

"Excellent. I'll speak to your parents, and assuming they agree we'll be in touch to arrange the specifics." She

went over to do just that, and from the nodding and agreeable expressions on their parents' faces, it was a foregone conclusion what their answer was going to be.

A few minutes later, the Matriarch banged the gavel for silence and read out the results. "Votes have been tabulated. The vote of confidence has failed. This Zemstvo is hereby dissolved and elections are called for one month from today. So entered into the Chronicle." Matriarch Mariam banged the gavel, then rested her head in her hands. She looked like she'd just aged ten years.

"Well, that's that," Paul said as the chamber erupted into another uproar that no amount of banging the gavel could silence. "End of one wolf and pony show, beginning of another."

The Valks cheered and shouted taunts at their opponents. The Gaians were surprisingly stoic, leaving the chamber in an orderly fashion. If anything, the discussions among the Athenas were the most tense. They were still the smallest plurality of Delegates, 40 of the 200. The Valks still had 54, and the Gaians had only *just* had the majority at 102. If there was any Party that had an uphill battle it would seem to be the Athenas.

"Let's get out of here before someone *else* can challenge me to a duel," Lilibet said. They beat a hasty retreat as the session started to break up.

It was a good thing they were on a flexible timetable to fly out, Paul reflected, since Lilibet's parents had insisted on doing some touristy things with their daughter as long as they were in town. Lilibet had shepherded them around for a few hours before finally managing to get

away. “I swear, if I have to see Mom point at one more Valkyrie leash-and-collar set and giggle at Dad, I’m going to blow a gasket,” Lilibet said. “Bad enough to have Sonja and Frieda along for off-color commentary...”

While her parents finished up their shopping, she, Guin, Paul, and Fenris had gone to meet with Svetlana, Bertha, and her crew out by the RIDE testing range. The two giant RIDEs and one giant Integrate sat companionably on the concrete observation bunkers which were just the right height for seats and looked out across the range as they talked. A storm was rolling in off the sea, with thunder and lightning rumbling in the distance—but then, there almost always was. The place was called “Storm haven,” after all.

After several days of practice, Bertha was quite comfortable in her original body again. The giant white she-wolf looked similar to Svetlana, though a couple of meters taller and a good bit thicker. To Paul, she looked great, in her hardlight or out of it. *They sure knew how to build ‘em then. And they’re building ‘em again. No matter what I think of Sturmhaven’s politics, it’s great to see more WLF-CSAs in the world again.*

“I did not get a chance to congratulate you after the duel,” Bertha said. “Nicely done! Even if you did learn your sword skill from...hmm. No. Not ever going to call Tocsin a ‘mere male.’ Not when there is even the *smallest* chance he might be close enough to hear me.”

“Wise of you,” Fenris approved. “I will admit to being rather surprised myself.”

“Tocsin insisted that we couldn’t tell *anyone*,” Lilibet said. “We weren’t sure if he’d make an exception for you

guys, but we couldn't take that chance."

"Besides, it was more *dramatic* this way!" Guinevere said happily.

"Dramatic. Yes, there is a word," Svetlana said. "You are going to have a very complicated passport, you know."

"Can I help it if I collect citizenships the way some people collect coins or stamps?" Lilibet said. "I didn't expect *that* to happen either. But hey, if it helps drag Sturmhaven into the twenty-sixth century, why not?" She shook her head. "I swear, I'll never understand this place. For starters, why is it all German *and* Russian mixed up together? From the twencen history books, the Germans and the Russians hated each other."

"You can blame the founders for that," a soft voice said. It was Hedy's new partner, Carlotta Kinski. "As hobby, I am student of history, including the history not shared as much. Back in the founding, was decades before Steaders recovered the old culture. Founders were silly game-players, with the... 'games' they played being based on muddled ideas of long-lost history from surviving 'classics' that they had only heard about and not actually read. Mixed up many details. Even sprinkled bits of other countries in, like Switzerland's cuckoo clocks and chocolate. Is like learning of ancient Greece from *Xena: Warrior Princess*."

"Well, that explains a lot," Paul said. "Germany and Russia both had traditions of, ahem, *formidable* women, so I can see how they'd get the details mixed up if that was their 'thing.'"

"By the time we learned founders' mistake, was too late. Could not remove elements of one or the other

culture, so we pretended was intentional and mixed them both all the further,” Carlotta said. “Is not being remembered as much now, but most pseudo-historical trappings were retrofitted *after* Steaders gave us their pop culture treasure trove. ‘Zemstvo’ used to be just ‘Parliament,’ for example.” She chuckled. “Still upsets some tourists from Europe and Russia on Old Earth, or places like Neorus with stronger *real* Russian tradition when they come. They think we are making fun of them.”

“For that matter, women from other colonies that developed more naturalistic feminist movements, such as Ibn Rushd, have also complained,” Diana Fuerst put in. “They see us as something like a bad parody of their culture—an adolescent male’s ‘straw feminist’ fantasy of half-naked domineering women.” She chuckled. “I would get in trouble if I told them, ‘Yes, yes, you’re *exactly right!*’ the way I have often wanted.”

“And I guess the Male Transgression Laws must have been the founders’ idea, too?” Lilibet wondered.

“More or less,” Carlotta said. “They grew out of the rules to their silly domination games. The thing you must understand is that, early on, Sturmhaven was not *meant* to be nation. It was...resort. Place for people of certain attitude to come, have fun in ways rest of world did not understand. Founders never seriously planned to start their own colony. They simply filed paperwork as if they did so land could not be colonized out from under them.”

“But then they got people who were actually interested in settling?” Paul asked.

Carlotta nodded. “*Da*. Funny thing is that enough people who either enjoyed or could tolerate such way of

life for sake of climate eventually came that it *became* colony with no one ever trying, and without really growing out of silly game. Agreeing to and accepting it was Founders' condition for first guest colonists, and it somehow never changed as colony grew. Everyone who came accepted it, and became used to it, and raised their children in it. Founders and some newcomers who were being most into this little game were first Valkyries; those less attached to it were soon being Gaians and Athenas." She chuckled. "Last original founder died fifteen years ago, still scratching her head and wondering 'Where did we go right?'"

"I've always thought the Male Transgression Laws were a trifle...poorly thought-out from the perspective of running a country, and that explains why," Fenris said. "They seem to self-select for wimpy men, because any man who shows the slightest backbone is deported."

"Cape Nord has certainly made out well from it, though," Paul reflected.

Carlotta chuckled. "I am being doubtful Cape Nord would even *exist* without Sturmhaven's Male Transgression Laws. Was founded by men we kicked out, who immediately start overcompensating." She snorted. "I spent some time there, on leave, from curiosity. Was... more like Sturmhaven than I was expecting. The difference is the women let the men act out as much as they please...but still know that they are *really* in charge, just do not let it show. Like cats, I guess. Small wonder leader of Marshals is Cape Nord man married to Sturmhaven woman. They are not being from so very different worlds after all, despite how it looks."

“Well, that explains a lot,” Lilibet said.

“I must admit, for all that it’s good to be back for a while, I’ve found that since I’ve been gone, I’ve actually lost my patience for all the pageantry of it,” Svetlana said. “I’m *still* embarrassed that I was honestly planning to found a Sturmhaven-style Enclave after taking care of Alpha Camp.”

“So I suppose there’s not any point asking you to stay?” Bertha asked.

Svetlana shook her massive head. “No. I feel like I no longer truly belong to this place. Now I am a citizen of all of Gondwana. Perhaps all of Zharus. I will visit...perhaps visit often, especially if matters improve in the Zemstvo. But I have a greater job to do.”

“Well, so do I, now,” Bertha said. “They are actually going to retool one of the old RIDE factories to make more of our shells! And they either have or will soon recover seven of our comrades’ cores, and believe they may know the locations of several more. And my partners and I will be heading up the whole project!”

“If we should run across any more, we will certainly recommend they seek you out,” Fenris said.

“And if things go south for you here and you should need an extraction, give us a call and we’ll come running,” Paul promised.

“Thank you, my friends,” Bertha said. “I don’t expect that to happen...but you never know. I will keep that in mind.”

“Just got a comm ping from my folks. They’re heading back to their sub and home,” Lilibet said. “And Baldwin’s flying Sonja and Tocsin back to Alpha Camp. I think it’s

about time we headed out too.”

“It’s been fun!” Hedy said.

“Yes. Thank you for everything,” Diana Fuerst put in. “Look us up next time you’re in town.”

“Will do,” Lilibet said. “Don’t take any wooden *mu!*” Svetlana and Bertha embraced. “So long, sister,” Svetlana said. “Take care.”

Bertha nodded. “And you. *Das vedanya.*”

Svetlana stepped back. “*Auf wiedersehen.*” Fenris stood up and de-Fused back to tank mode, and Svetlana followed him back to the aerodrome.

Gloria the black wolf was waiting stoically in Fuser form by the sub as they arrived. “What are you going to do with us?” she asked Lilibet.

Lilibet looked critically at her. “Hmm. You know...I had come up with all sorts of *fun* little punishments in my head that I could inflict upon Annalinda. But now that I think about it, I don’t want to see myself as ‘that vindictive bitch’ when I look in the mirror. So here’s the deal. You get to keep her. As we say at Alpha Camp, she’s your thumbs. Do whatever you want with her, but *don’t* take orders from her again. If you want to let her go, that’s fine, but she gets *nothing* but the skimpy bikini on her back. If I were you, I’d hold onto her for her own good.”

“O...okay,” Gloria said. “But...what will we do now?”

“First of all, you’re coming with us back to Alpha Camp for a while,” Lilibet said. “I’ll get you set up there; nobody will think you’re in any way odd for owning your human. Once RIDE rights come in, you can come back here if you want; the penthouse and all her other crap can

be yours; I won't need it except maybe if I come visit and want to sleep over."

"I...see," Gloria said. "Thank you. It's more than we have any right to expect."

"More than *she* does, maybe, but you seem like a nice enough person," Lilibet said. "Not your fault *she's* an idiot. See if you can make her into a better person, and we'll be even. If not, well, at least you can keep her off the streets." She nodded to the ramp. "Now c'mon. We'll be back at Alpha Camp before you know it."

Gloria nodded, and followed her inside.

6

June 7, 157 A.L.

“Sister Delegates of the Zemstvo,” the new Matriarch said. “I won’t pretend to be eloquent. Instead, I’ll begin my address by saying: beware unintended consequences. Our own Foremothers and *Forefathers* could hardly guess that their resort would become one of the most powerful polities on Gondwana. Nor that it would go to war—so far, the only one in the history of our world. Yet, that’s what happened.

“Unintended consequences.” Matriarch Viveka Virgo addressed the fifteen Valk Delegates who remained of their Party’s representation. “You wanted an election, sisters. You got it. Enjoy reaping what you’ve sown. Now, let’s get on to the business of governance.

“I would like to thank the members of the new Midgaard Party for their coalition with the Athenas to move us forward.” Viveka nodded at the ten women seated near the ninety-five Athenas. The Party had seemingly come out of nowhere to grab the few seats that had normally ended up with various fringe parties. Without them, the Athenas would have been just short of the majority they needed to do anything meaningful.

One of the Valks stood up. “Those...*people* are not real Women of Sturmhaven! They are from Cape Nord! They have barely bled *once* for their womanhood!”

:Take your pick of logical fallacies, because there’s a bundle of them in that single sentence,: Fenris sent to his partners.

:Some No True Scotsman and a dash of tu quoque,: Lilibet said. *:Oh God, look at them! Bunch of whiny bitches! Viveka looks golden in the Matriarch’s robes, though.:*

:Those Midgaardians gave up their Man Cards permanently for this,: Paul replied. *:Pretty big sacrifice for them. They can’t really ‘go home again’ even after the cooldown.:*

:Maybe we should visit Cape Nord next,: Lilibet mused. *:Stir things up a bit.:*

:Nuh uh! After the way you won that duel they’d give you a Man Card, Lilli,: Guin added. *:I’m not ready to make a Paula yet. And what would we even call you? Lyle Bert? Lee Brett?:*

:We’ll swap things around when we’re good and ready. Besides, I’ve had my fill of gender politics,: Paul said. They turned their attention back to Viveka to see her response.

“Nearly half the Delegates in this chamber began life as men,” Viveka said without a hint of disapproval. “The Midgaardians met all the citizenship requirements that your own Party set forth in Sturmhaven Law decades ago—including natural menarche. When was the last time you had *your* period, *Henry*? I will not tolerate such naked hypocrisy in this chamber. Sit. Down.”

:Especially from someone who’s only almost naked,: Paul sent, and the others chuckled.

Eighty Gaians, enough to hold a decent amount of power under Sturmhaven’s rules for minority parties, rounded out the Delegates. There were enough of them that they could put the brakes on any legislation they thought was too extreme. They had

rebuffed all efforts by the Valks to form a coalition of their own. After what the Valks had pulled, there was enough bad blood between them to last decades.

Assuming the Valks lasted that long as a political party.

“And so we begin with important work,” Viveka said. “The Foresight Committee has put forth a bill very close to the original Athena proposal before the elections. We have given some concessions to the Gaians, and included clemency for minor crimes committed for the sake of survival by Integrates who were hiding from Fritz...”

Viveka went over the broad portions of the bill, more for the observers from other polities and Laurasia watching on the web feeds. The Uplift and Nextus ambassadors in the gallery were paying very close attention. The legislation was broadly equal to the Uplift RIDE Citizenship Act with the addition of a 60-member ‘Advisory Zemstvo’ until the changes could be voted into the Charter via referendum. They would be joined by men, who still wouldn’t have voting rights until the same conditions were met.

“This isn’t everything we had hoped for, but this is the nature of making law,” Viveka said. “It is a positive step. There is one more item I’d now like to reveal to the general public. This is something even I did not expect would gain approval in the Committee, but it has—unanimously.” She nodded at the Nextus ambassador, who stood.

The Matriarch composed herself. “As the head of government of Sturmhaven, I offer our official apology to Nextus for provoking the war between us. And though Nextus bore the brunt of our warmongering, there was a great deal of collateral damage. The entire continent was involved in one way or another. We will offer a separate apology to Nuevo San Antonio, for they were directly caught in the middle. We brought the horrors of war to Zharus, and a hundred thousand dead—human and RIDE—are blood on our hands.”

The Nextus ambassador stood up. “On behalf of my government, we accept your apology,” she said in a shaky voice.

:Holyeee....sheeeeeit,: Paul swore, leaning forward in his seat. *:Did you know they were going to do this, Lilli?:*

:No...no. They never said a word to me,: Lilibet said. *:They must have told the ambassador ahead of time, wouldn’t do to back her into a corner and have her say no. But she still looks pretty shocked they actually did it.:*

The apology set off a wave of muttering between Delegates but surprisingly no outburst from the Valks, who had apparently learned a *little* humility recently.

The rest of the session before adjournment was extremely anticlimactic, but Paul, Lilibet, and Guinevere stayed anyway to show their support for the new government. They met the new Matriarch in her new offices during the lunch break.

“Of course I don’t expect you to stay for the whole day,” Viveka said. “I just wanted to thank you again for everything.”

“We were just in the right place at the right time,” Lilibet said. “Or the wrong time, if you happened to be a Valk.”

“These issues have been festering ever since the War started,” Viveka said. When she got going about her polity’s political issues the woman’s passion made her very charismatic. “And a lot of history is made by simply being at the right place at the right time. You and your friends have already played important parts in the recent history of our planet. We couldn’t have done this without you, because of who you are.”

“Hey, going around getting ambushed from out of nowhere and ending up

settling issues that go all the way back to the War is what we do,” Guinevere said. “It’s no biggie. We’re still trying to work out where we should go and be ambushed next.” Lilibet bapped her between the ears.

The Matriarch extended her hand to Paul. “Thank you, Mr. Anders and Fenris—I know he’s with you, too.”

“You actually want to shake *my* hand?” Paul said. “When was the last time the Matriarch of Sturmhaven shook any man’s hand?”

“More recently than you might think, Paul,” Viveka said. “But it’s still an important symbol. Our meeting here is being recorded, after all. I want the young Men of Sturmhaven to know that they will not be pressured by the present government to turn female for the sake of political power. Those days are over, at least for now. Anyone who crosses will do so by choice—.”

“I could *hear* that capital letter in ‘Men’,” Guin said. “You’re serious about this.”

“Equality for Men, Integrates, and RIDEs,” Viveka said, more for the camera than anything else.

Paul shook her hand firmly before she saw them out of her offices, then brought in the Nextus Ambassador. The harried diplomat barely even nodded at them as she went inside.

:Argh! Enough politics! Let’s do something fun!: Guinevere sent.

:Just got a call from Dad,: Lilibet sent, switching to speaking out loud as they got away from the offices. “He’s coming to pick us up in the Globemaster—NextusGov wants a chat with me tomorrow. Bleah! I’m already a stupid politician at *sixteen*.”

“Maybe we can take your mind off things while you’re at home?” Fenris suggested through Guin.

Lilibet pondered. “You know, there’s a few fun spots in Nextus I haven’t shown either of you yet. I know where to look. They’re hard to find for outsiders—but, you know. That’s Nextus. There’s this little drive-in theater in the northwest quad Fenris would fit in.”

“Really? Get a lot of skimmer tanks there, do they?” Paul asked.

Lilli snorted. “You know what I mean.”

“Feeling homesick?” Paul asked, putting his arm around her waist.

“Oh, come on. You know Alpha Camp’s my home now, too,” Lilibet said. She paused, then relented under her boyfriend’s smirk. “Okay, yeah. I’d like to see my own bedroom walls right now, just for a few hours.”

“You know, I do believe making out in your room while your parents are downstairs is one of the few clichés we *haven’t* hit yet,” Paul said. “The drive-in has potential, too.”

“Why not both? I’ll see if we can pencil them in,” Lilibet promised, kissing him on the nose. “Now c’mon, aerodrome’s a-waiting.”

Paul chuckled. “I’ll be right behind you.” They headed down the steps from the Zemstvo building. Fenris was already waiting by the curb. They mounted up and pulled away. *This is the point where we should be riding into the sunset, but it’s still barely past noon*, Paul thought. *Still, you could say what we saw here today is the Valkyries’ sunset. And I think I feel pretty comfortable riding into that.*

THE END

