

Oh My Darling Clementine

By Jon Buck and Robotech_Master

Being a sequel to "Fly with Me"

Preface

If our stories were RIDEs, this one would probably be an albatross—in the classic, Coleridge sense. According to our Google Drive manuscript file, we started working on it on January 20, 2014. We wrote a lot on it, then wrote a little on it in fits and starts, then sort of ran out of the inspiration necessary to finish it. It sat around about 3/4 or 7/8 completed for the longest time.

As a result, it occupies sort of a weird position in FreeRIDERS continuity. We already knew what happened in it. A number of the characters we introduced in it showed up in stories set years later. Jetfire even bogarted a couple of them into his “The Touch” series about Emergent Intelligences. I dropped the odd reference to it into the “Return to Totalia” stories, too. But somehow we just weren’t quite able to bring ourselves to *finish* it.

Finally, I took another look, realized there really wasn’t all that much left to write, and set about writing it. I wanted to use some other characters from it in a story I’m in the process of writing, but that story wouldn’t make any sense without *this* story out to introduce them. So I finished up, with a little more help from Jon.

The story may not be our most coherent, overall. It went in a lot of odd directions during the writing, many of which didn’t work out and had to be rolled back, and many of which left traces that we had to clean up when we came back to it. Some of the events that take place, we no longer quite know exactly *why* they happen, because our original ideas went by the wayside and we never came up with replacements—but so much of the *rest* of the story had already been built around them happening for *some* reason that we just shrugged and figured we’d come up with something later.

But on the whole, I think it has some really good writing in it, especially from Jon’s side of things. But we were just working on it so long, and Jon got so blocked over the course of it, that he’s had a hard time returning to it.

Anyway, I’m really glad it’s finally finished and available, and I hope it whets some appetites for new present-day stuff. Enjoy!

Robotech_Master

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Chapter One

July 6, 143 AL

Califia Lady Bar & Grill, Longales

“I can’t believe I *opened* for these talentless *idiots*,” singer Gigi Rothe groaned, burying her head in her hands. “*Look* at that guy! He can’t even sing on key! He has fish lips!”

“*Dolphin* lips, actually,” Angel Peryton corrected. The Band Manager was currently an androgynous platinum blond who regarded the cetacean trio onstage with mild amusement. “These guys tried a shark gimmick a few years back. Audiences couldn’t get used to the teeth. Besides, they own the place. Nobody else will *ever* be the headliner here.”

“They just sing this one song over and over, Angel,” Gigi grumbled petulantly. “They don’t even have a proper *name*. They’re just ‘The Band That Plays Califia Lady’. Stupid!”

“Well, this time we’re the Crimson Cowgirls,” Angel pointed out, gesturing at the singer’s reddish bovine ears. Angel wore an all-white pantsuit in addition to her long hair, and then there were the wings that gave her the name she’d chosen. The band’s publicity was that they were Fuser-style implants—which wasn’t that far from the truth. “What do you have in mind for the next stop? The Lemon Lemurs? Tartan Tigresses? The Roan Mares? Makes it hard for non-fans to follow us—not that we *have* any fans. Bad for the brand.”

“Let’s get back to the van,” Gigi said, sighing dramatically. She had the moody budding rockstar thing down pat. She pulled on her shaggy red highland cow’s ears in frustration. “I hope this gig paid enough. It’s not like the audience showered us with tips.”

“It’ll keep us in charged batteries and fabber matter,” Angel pointed out. *:Hunting down ore pirates was fun, but there’s no bounties, so it doesn’t pay the bills,:* she pointed out privately, a diamond in her shallow cleavage glimmering. *:Besides, we have to start and stay small. This was your first solo gig. I’m sorry Lisa couldn’t be here.:*

:Yeah, me too,: Liis added from the same body. None of them had anticipated the place’s owner demanding the Band Manager’s presence, so they’d been minus one singer. Normally Eva could handle being there for Angel in VR while Liis did the concert. *:If this singing thing is really going to work as a duo we need to figure out how to be in two places at once physically when we’re not on the ship, Eva. Again, I mean.:*

The three women (two of them occupying one body) left the bar via the back door into the early summer night. Tonight was supposed to have been a celebration to commemorate the third anniversary of Eva and Liis’s Integration—and the second of Eva’s own lover, who was already in the van’s driver seat.

“Well, Number One, that was a turd, wasn’t it?” Wilma van Dalen said, never one to pull punches. The other Integrate had shut off her disguise since nobody could see inside. The arctic vixen’s fur was in the darker summer phase. “There *have* to be better

bars than this, 'Angel'."

"We *have* to stay in obscure places." Closing the door behind her, the Band Manager's outfit vanished as fur sprouted, breasts diminished, and antlers grew. Although Evan was fond of the winged white stag form, tonight wasn't right for it. It wasn't the night for *wings*, either, but two years after a not-so-bright hippogryph RIDE tried to Fuse with him, he and Liis hadn't figured out how to absorb and grow them at need.

Gigi's cowgirl looks faded as she grew a sharp beak, face puffing out in white feathers into a barn owl's distinctive heart-shape. From the neck down there was deer fur rather than feathers. Gigi's preferred shape was a kind of owl-headed, wingless peryton—female for preference, but not always. She fluffed her tail feathers and sat down in the chair made for her, slumping dejectedly. "I wasn't *that* bad tonight, was I?"

"You *were* off your game, Gigi," Wilma said, making sure to sound sympathetic to take the sting out. The skimmer van rose off the ground with a smooth hum of powering lifters. "Did you see me in the audience? I was that Nujose tourist wearing the Alohan lei."

"You always applaud and whistle like that, Wilma," Gigi said. "I'd know who you are even if you took a *male* disguise for once."

"I do what I can with hardlight," Wilma said, the emitters on her temples and calves flickering. "Using a male form that way feels...*oogie*." The brown vixen shivered. "I'll leave the having the occasional dangly bits to you shifters."

Gigi groaned. "Who am I kidding? I tanked completely! My first *original* song, too! *Argh!* I can do Norah Jones, I can do Ella Fitzgerald, I can do Madonna! But I can't do *me!*"

Wilma and Evan looked at one another. The winged buck cleared his throat. "Gigi...Ghost...when was the last time you were male? Five, six weeks ago, just before we started the tour?"

"I'm just trying to stay in-character here." The barn owl peryton glared at her friends. "What are you implying?" When everyone else just looked back and waited it only made her grumble more. "I *do not* have PMS!"

"You've never been one of us long enough to have it," Wilma pointed out. She extended her handpaw. "Welcome to the fem-side, sister. Finally."

"What? *Come on!* You don't *seriously* think that's why I tanked on stage, do you?" Gigi scoffed.

"Frankly, no. I'm just seeing how you're reacting to your performance. You've never been a woman as constantly as you have the past six weeks," Evan added. "I've been one for months at a time. I doubt you were even thinking about stopping your cycle, so your body just did what came naturally. Of course, you can stop it right now and not do the monthly bleed or egg."

Gigi looked distant for a moment as she checked her body systems. "Damn it. You're right. My hormones are all over the map. I'm lucky I'm normally not avian enough to lay an egg, I guess." She hesitated. "Should I...let it? I mean it's been two years and I haven't had the full experience."

"And you never really will," Wilma pointed out. Now *she* sounded upset, too. But not at anyone in the van. "I won't, either. We can't have babies, remember? Fritz won't even let us find out *why*. Murdering *bastard*. Without children we'll go *extinct!* I don't care how long he thinks we'll live!"

The conversation froze to a *complete* halt.

“I’m sorry, everyone. It’s just, the subject just pushes all my buttons.” Wilma left the driver’s seat and slumped in the chair next to Gigi, in front of the food fabber. “Tea. Earl Grey. Hot.”

“Make that two,” Gigi said. She leaned against Wilma, who gently stroked the owly peryton’s shoulder. “You should join us, Wilma. Evan could easily sideload...”

“I’m *fine* with what I am. No offense to either of you,” Wilma said.

“As you wish,” Evan said gently, as he always did. She accepted him, loved him, no matter what form he took, male or female. How could he *not* do the same for her, and accept her static shape just as unconditionally?

As the fabber dispensed both steaming mugs, an alarm came through each of their DINs. Wilma perked her ears in alarm. “We’ve got an intruder on the *Clementine*.”

I’m a go tsao de idiot. Argon Noble tried not to let panic set in once he realized he’d overreached just enough to set off the *Clementine*’s intruder alarm. The ship trilled an apology to the feral red-ruffed lemur. In return he gave the galley control panel a gentle pat after savoring his pilfered Califian strawberries. “It’s okay, girl. Ain’t your fault. Just my own damn fool stomach.”

He briefly considered running again—he’d escaped the Snatchers and the Candlejacks once already—but the ship chirped back reprovably at him for even thinking about it. This ship was a safe haven for him if there ever was one. But its owners would be here in just a couple minutes, so Argon dropped into internal time compression so he could think about his next steps for a couple virtual hours. When he came back he’d come to a decision.

After being a stowaway for two weeks he’d wanted a real meal and not the emergency rations he’d been subsisting on since the ship had invited him aboard. He’d also decided to plug himself into the network to see what was going on in the world, and *that* had tripped the alarm. Argon unplugged the standard fiber-optic network cable from the socket on the back of his right hand, *also* standard.

This made him an “Integrate of Interest” to many. He’d been an Intie for a little over a year and quickly discovered this was nearly unheard of, even less common than those who didn’t have DIN sockets at all. Its only real limitation was that it required a *physical* connection. Wireless bandwidth was just a trickle, barely enough to voice chat. Decent video needed *minutes* to buffer first. No matter what he did there was no fooling his internal systems into thinking he had a wired connection.

“Oh my darling, oh my darling, oh my darling *Clementine*,” he sang. He wasn’t onboard uninvited—it was just that the ship herself hadn’t told the others about him yet. Weeks ago he’d heard of the ship and her crew through the Integrate web boards that appeared and vanished in tiny corners of the net. From what he’d read, it sounded like the ship’s crew might be friendly to his plight, and the two groups of Intie kidnappers were forbidden to mess with them.

What he hadn’t expected was the ship *herself* to be as friendly. There was a lot of unused space on her three decks, so he took a small space and generally stayed there when there was somebody aboard.

Now it was time to see if they wouldn’t shoot him on sight.

The ship had a suggestion that made him grin. He looked around at the Starfleet, *Enterprise-D* era skin they’d decided to use for the interior and exterior. *Too clean. Too*

military, Argon thought. He plugged back in, then started another song.

*Take my love, take my land
Take me where I cannot stand
I don't care, I'm still free
You can't take the sky from me.*

Clementine herself played the *Firefly* theme all through the ship, reskinning herself in the process. Gone were the clean Starfleet lines, replaced by the “used future” of the *Firefly* ‘verse.

Mal? No...I'm not really a good Mal. Jayne? No. Book is right out. Wash! That's it. Argon's hardlight flickered into a version of Wash's Alohan shirt. He planted himself in the pilot's seat and waited for the rest of the crew to arrive.

*Lost my love, lost my land
Lost the last place I could stand
There's no place I can be
Since I've found Serenity*

And you can't take the sky from me.

“What is that hacker doing to my baby?” Wilma exclaimed. The late 24th century Starfleet scout craft blurred, replaced by a boxy, rusty ship that might have been salvaged from a Dry Ocean yard after sitting there fifty years. “Talk to me, Clemmie!” Unfamiliar music blared from the speakers.

*I feel the black reaching out
I hear its song without a doubt
I still hear and I still see
That you can't take the sky from me.*

“They're trying to steal the ship!” Gigi exclaimed, armoring up.

“Hold your horses there, Ghostie,” Liis said. The buck flowed into a female anthro barn owl form that was Liis's current preference. “If they wanted to steal her, they would've cloaked and taken off. Whoever's inside is just showing off.”

Wilma shut her eyes. “There's a lemur in an Alohan shirt singing that song in *my chair!* Clemmie, what are you *doing?* You let him in on purpose?”

“The ship can't talk, Wilma,” Gigi said, holding a katana.

The Vehicle Bay on the starboard side opened its clamshell doors, revealing the compressed vehicles in their racks. There was a second skimmer-van, three skimmer cycles, and Evan's replica 2012 Mercedes gullwing. The van folded in on itself as they exited out the back.

“I don't even recognize the song,” Gigi continued. “It's not anywhere in my database. Could be twencen, could be original. Hard to tell. It has a late twencen ring to it.”

“Well, Steader Entertainment's still dribbling out ‘new finds’ from that massive unindexed Earth culture database,” Eva said. There were rehashes of old fandom battles

going on all over the web—*Star Trek* vs. *Star Wars* vs. *Battlestar Galactica* were the biggest so far. There were rumors that there were reboots or continuations of all three series in the early 21st century, but the Steader Entertainment data divers hadn't released them yet. No doubt they would come out soon just to stir things up more.

Once they docked, the *Clementine*'s lifters rumbled and the ship rose into the air. The Vehicle Bay doors closed, then their self-appointed pilot's voice came through the PA. "So, where we headed now, Wilma? Aloha? Sturmhaven? Punta Sur?"

The threesome looked at one another and tried not to laugh. He sounded like he'd been a member of the crew for years already.

"The *Clementine* can vouch for him, you guys," Wilma said. "She *invited* him here."

"Invited? *Invited?*" Gigi said. "Wilma, you don't *really* think..."

"I do, and I trust her," Wilma said firmly. "She's told me everything about him. And you guys trust *me*, don't you?"

"Of course," Eva said, though there was some doubt in her tone.

Wilma noticed this, but forged on. "Welcome aboard, Argon. Get *out* of my seat and we'll talk. Meet you in the Mess."

"I'm wanted for 'Theft of Public Domain'," Argon Noble said, hanging upside down from the ceiling. The tip of his long dark red tail was plugged into a wall socket. "I'm a...I *was* a data diver for Steader Entertainment. Me and half a dozen other Inties. We had special dispensation from Fritz to work with Crazy Joe—we were legit, the whole nine yards. Then something happened. I don't know what or why, but some Candlejacks up and decided to screw up my life six ways from Sunday.

"At any rate, the only place *Firefly* exists on this planet is in my head, see. I found the series—only fourteen episodes ever plus a movie, a few comic series, but not even any reboots—during one of my deep dives. When these Candlejack jokers came after me they *deleted* it everywhere except in my head and framed me for the theft. How did they do that?"

"And you can't just spam it everywhere because...?" Evan asked.

"If I stick my head above water I risk those guys or the Snatchers dragging me away to some stupid meme-filled Enclave," the lemur Integrate continued, shivering.

"Okay..." Evan said, leaning back in his chair. "Then why come to us, and not, say, the Marshals?"

Grasping the light fixture with his feet, the red-ruffed Lemur shrugged, then sliced an apple into quarters before eating it. "I like you folks better. I figured we could get along. I'm useful. True, I'm not actually a pilot, but I can *learn*. I learn fast."

Gigi glared at the newcomer. "You know, you should have just introduced yourself properly. But I'm not going to throw you out. Not yet, anyway. I know *something* of what you're going through."

"I'm more interested in how you got Clemmie to trust you," Wilma said. "She was programmed to be somewhat suspicious."

"Whoever made her core did an *incredible* job," Argon said glowingly. "Before I—we—were a data diver I did some graduate work in Q-based CPU architecture and RI neural templating. Then poof, Integration. Flunked myself out of that program on purpose. Found a job that let me lay low—Crazy Joe Steader employs a lot of Inties on the low-down. I don't think anyone else would be qualified to dive through ten years of

rec.arts.tv newsgroup posts and petabytes of YouTube *Dallas* bootlegs. The Dawn Internet was a *messed-up* place.”

“You’re drifting a little, pilot,” Wilma said. “Get back on course. Camelot Shipyards built the *Clementine-A*. She’s Integrate tech from bow to stern.”

“Well, she’s smarter than your average Advanced Intelligence, but not quite at RI-level,” Argon said. “She’s more like, say, an intelligent dog than another Intie or a RIDE.”

The arctic vixen smiled at her shipmates. “See?”

“I concede the point,” Gigi said. She gave the galley controls a pat. “Sorry, *Clementine*.”

From the air came a series of melodic tones. Almost music, almost speech, but not quite.

“See?” Wilma repeated. “Even our *Clementine*’s musically inclined.”

“Which brings up another question,” Liis said. She smirked at Argon. “Can you play? Or sing?”

“We’re a *girl* band. He can’t join unless he’s willing to—” Gigi pointed out before being interrupted.

“I’ll just be a roadie. Tech setup, support staff, that sort of thing,” Argon filled in quickly. “Besides, look at me. I’m a giant *feral*. I’m not exactly human-shaped to begin with. I prefer to cloak rather than disguise. Feels better, and for the life of me I can’t imagine being female, even for a disguise.”

“Works for me,” Eva said, switching back to her androgynous Angel persona. “I could use someone on the tech side.” She extended her hand. “Welcome aboard, Mr. Noble.”

He took it, giving the pale woman’s (man’s?) hand a strong shake.

Then, Gigi smirked, a neat trick with a beak. “You know, if you *eventually* want to join Lisa and me onstage, I’m sure Eva there would be happy to help you upgrade.”

“Uh,” Argon said, coughing uncomfortably. “Really. I don’t...no. Just no.” *Time to change the subject*. “Where we headed next? Aloha? Touchdown? Punta Sur?”

Gigi and Wilma looked at their Manager. “So, Angel, where *are* we going next?” Gigi asked. “*Please* say Aloha! I know this great little place on Orchid Boulevard with an open mic night.”

“Well, we...” Eva began. Then came a chime on Angel’s official email. “Just a second, I think we’ve got another gig.”

Gigi perked up. “Aloha?”

“You’re not gonna like it, Gigi. Punta Sur,” Eva replied. “Terraformers’ League meeting.”

“Ugggggh!” the singer groaned.

“A gig’s a gig, doll,” Liis said. “We can try that cheetah theme you suggested this time.”

Argon watched as Gigi’s body *flowed* from owl-headed anthropomorphic doe into a busty cheetah-tagged young woman with an ease akin to changing a pair of pants. It reminded him of the face morphing that was so popular in the late 1990s. No matter how many times he saw them do it, the talent always amazed him.

Gigi posed. “What? Don’t tell me you’ve been here ten days and haven’t seen us do this.”

“Not in-person,” Argon said. “There’s all sorts of rumors about you guys, you

know.”

“We know, we know,” Eva said. “We planted a few of them ourselves. Some of them are even true. Would you like to find out which ones?” She smiled, her teeth reminiscent of *Jurassic Park*.

“Happy to be aboard,” Argon said cheerfully. “I’ll just make myself at home. Clementine says she’s already made a real berth for me.”

Chapter Two

“Punta Sur, the jewel of southern Gondwana. Said no one *ever*,” Gigi said, regarding the patchwork of terraforming machinery beneath the ship with contempt. Hectare upon hectare of soil-making fabbers, accelerated-growth greenhouses, and animal breeding facilities, all organized by biome. It was the largest industrial city on Zharus by area alone. “This *better* pay well, Angel.”

“*Mu is mu*,” Wilma said from the pilot’s seat. The vixen preferred to fly the ship via physical controls instead of through her DIN. The ship’s AI was perfectly capable of doing all the flying herself, though rarely did so.

The ship abruptly pulled them into a maximum time compression VR space—the Battle Bridge from the *Enterprise-D*. The Red Alert klaxon blared. “Tactical,” Wilma said in her best command voice.

“Detecting three cloaked Inties at 152 mark 20, keeping pace about two hundred meters off,” Gigi reported. She split herself two times into Ghost and the owl-headed peryton, the *simulacra* taking positions at other stations around the Battle Bridge. “They’re not moving like friendlies.”

“It’s certainly not anyone from Camelot,” Evan said. The First Officer had similarly forked into a Chief Engineer process. “Too damned small, Captain.”

“Well, crap,” Argon said. He was still in his floral Alohan shirt, looking rather out of place on the Bridge. “Candlejacks? Snatchers again?”

“Artemis isn’t that stupid, and Fritz thinks we’re ‘copacetic’. We’re hooves, paws, and wings off,” Ghostate said. The barn owl tapped his taloned fingertips over the control panel. “We can’t maintain this time compression for long. We have ten microseconds, Cap.”

“I suggest a hardlight churn,” Gigi said. The cheetahgirl smiled ferally. “Let ‘em know we know they’re here.”

“And knock them around a little besides,” Liis said from the Ops station. The whitetail doe’s smile was as feral as Gigi’s.

“Anything I can do?” Argon asked.

“You and Clemmy get along,” Wilma said. The Arctic vixen stood up and did a ‘Picard tug’ on her first season *Next Generation* uniform top. “Until you learn the helm, go ahead and make sure she’s in top shape. Got it?”

“As long as I don’t have to wear one of those silly uniforms. Uh, no offense,” Argon stammered.

“Churn ready,” Gigi said. “And we’re out of compressed time.”

The ‘churn’ was a random field of hardlight with a half-kilometer range, designed to make any cloaked Intie think twice about trying to remain hidden. At the speed they were traveling, cloaks weren’t quite so effective anyway. Even the best-cloaked Integrate still had a slipstream as they flew at subsonic speeds. The Clementine’s sensors were tuned specifically to look for it.

Wilma hummed a snatch of an old song that seemed appropriate. “Flies in the buttermilk, shoo fly shoo...” Then she reached out and slapped the trigger panel to fire the churn. A shimmering distortion emerged from the ship, like a whirlpool of heat waves in the air going sideways. In seconds, it reached out to encompass the three blips

on the scope.

“Direct hit!” Gigi reported. On the hardlight display panel showing a camera view of the space, three blurred forms shimmered into view, rattling about in the force of the churn. As they watched, one of them fell out of the sky and nose-dived right into a hectare of extremely fresh soil.

Wilma grinned a foxy grin. “Skip to m’lou, my darling.”

“Uh-oh,” Argon said. “I don’t think they’re too happy about that. Here they come!”

“Full power to shields! Deploy turrets!” Wilma ordered. On the display, the three forms resolved into a huge eagle owl, a kangaroo, and a wyvern. The kangaroo was the one that had face-planted; it was buried from its head down to its shoulders in the muck, its thick tail lashing back and forth as it pulled its head back out. The owl spread its wings and glided right toward the ship, anger in its piercing orange eyes.

“Yeek!” Argon squawked, and attempted to hide under the console.

Gigi rolled her dark eyes and muttered, “Oh, yes, get the biggest owl RIDE you could find, why didn’t you? Not *compensating* for anything, were you?” Louder, she said, “Turrets tracking and firing. *Damn* they’re fast!”

“Shit!” Evan exclaimed. The owl cupped his wings, and with a rather dramatic sucking-in-lines of energy between them, a bright blue pulse beam lanced right through their starboard shields. The *Clementine* lurched as the damaged engines went offline. “Starboard impeller nacelle is toast!”

Not far behind, the kangaroo had righted himself and was bounding over more solid ground. He had bright red hardlight boxing gloves on his forepaws, but any suggestion they might be a harmless affectation was nullified by the way they glowed with latent energy. One last thrust of his powerful hind legs launched him into the air to slam a devastating one-two punch into the ship’s remaining shields, which flickered and went out.

“Fucking Worf Effect! We’re not hitting them!” Wilma shouted. “Come on, Clemmie! Take those bastards down!”

The wyvern spread her wings, gliding in a wide circle around behind the ship. The *Clementine*’s sensors resounded with pings from her targeting lidar as she locked in on the less-damaged side. “Ohrapohcrapohcrap,” Argon whimpered.

The wyvern opened her mouth, revealing a bilious green glow. She paused just long enough for a trio of pulse turrets to land direct hits, to little effect. The attacker persisted despite scorched shields.

And then a yellow-orange column of light arced out of the desert behind, reached its zenith somewhere behind the wyvern, then plummeted directly into her back. The wyvern keened, falling out of the sky in a steaming heap.

Wilma whipped her head around. “What the hell was *that*?”

A klick out in the desert, something on the ground uncloaked, a blocky black, red, and white form—a cube of metal with big feet poking out the bottom, and a long black barrel pointing out the front.

Argon peeped over the console. “*Wuo duh tian ah!* That’s a gorram *Robotech* hovertank!”

“A what now?” Evan said, diverting a little attention to realspace from his work coordinating the ship’s self-repair systems.

“From one of the Steaders’ old public-domain shows!” Argon clarified. “It was

just being mined when I left.”

The hovertank’s gun flashed again, the beam scorching feathers on the owl as he veered off to attack this new target. “Crap! That gun’s too slow, he’ll never—” Evan began. Then another weapon from the tank’s other side opened up, a rapid-fire gatling cannon that tore into the owl’s feathers. With a yelp, the owl tried to veer off, but the beams ate through his wing and he joined the wyvern on the ground.

That just left the kangaroo, who was leaping toward the tank, dodging left and right in an evasive pattern. As the kangaroo made its final leap, the tank inexplicably started to turn its back. “What is he—?” Wilma asked. But as the tank turned, it also got...taller. “—oh,” Wilma finished.

“It’s a Vari-Tec IDE?” Evan asked unnecessarily, as the now-humanoid tank drew back a leg and met the diving kangaroo with a good swift kick. The marsupial tried to dodge, but there was a limit to what even Integrate lifters could do at that speed. “Who’s piloting it? They’re really good!”

Argon slapped a paw over his great big round eyes and slid it down over his muzzle. “Who do you gorram *think* would be rocking a mecha from a not-even-released-yet show?” he mumbled through his paw.

“We’re being hailed,” Gigi said. “By, uh...Joe Steader.”

“As if having only *Inties* after me wasn’t bad enough,” Argon moaned.

“On screen. And keep the guns on those *Inties*!” Wilma ordered.

”Crazy” Joseph Steader was a scion of the extended family who had made the Zharus colony even possible almost two centuries ago. He was richer than Creosote, or so they said, with connections all the way to Neorus. There were rumors in the *Intie* community he somehow had technological parity with them because of all the gadgets and gewgaws from his family’s travels.

The crew of the *Clementine* had no reason to dispute that rumor.

“Ahoj there!” Steader waved from the cramped interior of his robotic tank. He wore a set of sculpted high-tech body armor reminiscent of something from the middle ages, with the faceplate hinged up to expose a deceptively youthful face—the man was in his early 80s. “I was in the neighborhood, thought you could use a hand. If there’s one thing I hate, it’s *bullies*.” The robot unslung a beam rifle and kept the three downed *Integrates* covered.

“We should get down there and secure the prisoners,” Gigi said.

“You and Evan handle that,” Wilma decided, standing up. The Master Systems Display at the back of the Bridge didn’t look encouraging. The starboard hardlight projectors were still down, the armor scorched by the owl’s beam. “Argon and I are on damage control.”

“Nice ship you have there,” Steader added. “Camelot, right? I can see some dragony flourishes. Nice folks.”

“You’ve got a good eye,” Wilma agreed. “You can come aboard, if you like.”

“Er...” Argon said, glancing sidelong at her.

“Thanks, but I don’t really have the time,” Steader said. “I’m supposed to be halfway across the Dry touring Brubeck’s fancypants mining rig right now, but I forgot to take that left turn at Albuquerque.” He chuckled. “Though, come to think of it, you *do* have someone aboard I ought to talk to with. Argon?”

“Yeek!” Argon squawked. “Uh...I mean, yes, boss?”

“I just wanted to say...well, I’m sorry about all the crap that landed on your

head,” Steader said.

Impossibly, Argon’s orange eyes got even wider. “You what?”

“I *know* you didn’t steal *Firefly*,” Steader continued. “And I know who did you dirty and why. Problem is, there’s not so much I can do about it at the moment.”

“But—*why?*” Argon stammered.

“See, I *care* for my employees. When I found out where you’d ended up, and who with, I decided to take matters into my own hands and came out to lend a hand, flying escort,” Steader said insistently. “Seems I was dead to rights about taking this new Veritech hovertank for a spin.”

“We didn’t even detect you,” Wilma said. “What kind of cloak do you have on that thing?”

“I have friends in odd places,” Joe said. “Anyway... Me and Fritz, we got us an understanding. What they used to call *detente* during the Cold War. He seems to see the point to what I’m doing, so he lets me employ Inties like you to help do it. But seems like the Snatchers want you bad for some reason. Bad enough to make me out to look like some kind of goddamned idiot.”

“It’s supposed to be *nice* to be wanted,” Argon said weakly.

“Until we can get this whole thing straightened out, wouldn’t be any point you giving *Firefly* back. They’d just erase it again. So keep it safe for a while, and we’ll see what’s what. I’ve still got some favors to pull in, but it’ll take time.”

“I’ll...do my best, sir,” Argon said resolutely.

Steader nodded. “I know you will. And so will I.” He chuckled. “Among other reasons, because *I* want to see *Firefly* myself. Reviews the other miners dug up said it’s one hell of a show.”

“It is,” Argon said with feeling.

Steader turned to look at Wilma. “I’d count it as a favor if your crew could take care of him for me.”

“We’ll be happy to. Just let me know if your dataminers find any more *Star Trek*,” Wilma said. “Something about a 2009 reboot, and some other TV series after that? And *Next Generation* is still missing half of Season 3.”

Joe Steader put a finger on the side of his nose. “I’ll keep you informed, Captain. Thank you. Now, about the prisoners...”

“The Brig is ready for them,” Wilma replied. “Hope to see you again sometime, Mr. Steader.”

“Please, just call me Joe,” the wealthiest, and many said craziest, man on Zharus said. “And believe me, you can count on it.”

Their mysterious attackers were all severely injured by human standards, but not so much by Integrate. The owl was missing half his left wing, the wyvern had pulse burns over most of her body, and the kangaroo had been clobbered so hard there were presumably internal injuries. All three were in a healing hibernation mode, and at present no threat.

“Their DINs are burned out,” Evan said. “No spares on their persons, so no rooting them to keep them hibernating. You know, I don’t feel comfortable turning them loose. They’d just come after us again.”

“And keeping them onboard is a better idea?” Gigi put her hands on her hips. “We’ve seen what they’re capable of. They’d just destroy us from the inside.”

“I can keep them hibernating,” Wilma said over comm. “I learned a few Intie medical tricks from Camelot. It’ll keep them out of our fur until we decide what to do with them. Go ahead and bring them inside.”

“If you folks have this in hand, I need to fly,” Joe Steader said. “I’m glad this thing is as combat-capable in reality as it was in the series. I almost brought a Veritech. This one I’ve flown a couple times, at least.”

“We owe you one, Joe. Thanks again. You probably saved our lives,” Wilma said.

Floating above them, the humanoid hovertank saluted, then with a rather complex series of moving parts, became an open-cockpit vehicle that apparently flew backwards compared to how they’d first seen it. From the seat, Joe Steader gave the Integrates a friendly wave and accelerated off to the northwest.

“I can’t believe *Joe Steader himself* just saved our tails,” Liis said. “That’s...I haven’t been so shocked since I found out Evan and I Integrated.”

“Let’s get these guys inside and secure,” Wilma said. “Then I want everyone on damage control. We need to get fixed up enough to get to Punta Sur. We’ll decide what to do next once we get there.”

“I say we do the gig, then head to Camelot,” Gigi suggested. “Once we get them there we could get some dragon help interrogating them. Not to mention repairs. Our poor ship!”

“I’m willing to keep an eye on them while you guys do your music thing,” Argon added. “Between me and Clemmie I think we can keep them out cold.”

“Ev’rybody wants to be a cat,” Liis purred into the microphone from her cheetah muzzle. Her white-feathered wings added to the flourish. “cuz a cat’s the only cat who knows where it’s at...” Her eyes swept the audience as she sang, taking in the expressions of the crowd and looking for handsome men or attractive women to vamp to. Then she saw someone that startled her badly enough that she nearly fell right off the stage—the angry-looking woman with the elk tags holding up a sign that read “Cheetahs never prosper!” and the just-as-familiar elk RIDE right next to her. *Taja? Hestia? What are they even doing here?*

Only the professionalism Liis had developed over the course of performing with Ghost and crew kept her from blowing the song. She found the next line and kept right on going, though her performance was ever so slightly more mechanical after that.

:What are they doing here?: Evan asked bitterly from the VR Bridge. *:This isn’t exactly a vacation spot.:*

:I’m checking the suborbital passenger lists and trying to backtrace how they got here,: Gigi chimed in. *:So far...zilch. It’s as if they just vanished from Nextus and appeared here.:*

:Well, we might as well get the fireworks out of the way,: Wilma said resignedly. *:I’ve passed word to the venue to invite them backstage after the show. Maybe we’ll get some answers then. For now—concentrate on the show, you-all. Got to keep our customers satisfied.:*

:Right,: Liis replied, segueing into the old Simon and Garfunkel song. “Gee, but it’s great to be back home. Home is where I want to be...”

After the show was over, and the band was safely backstage, they considered how

best to meet them. There was some bad blood between Tajana and Evan—but before that, they had been in a good relationship, which made the situation all the more strained. Evan decided to remain as the aloof, androgynous Angel Peryton, to his body-mate’s approval. Liis had as much reason to be upset with Taja as he did.

Hestia was another matter. Since Evan and Liis had Integrated, the elk RIDE had been nothing but supportive, even when her partner had been a royal bitch. It was an awkward triangular situation—Hestia as the person whose two best friends didn’t get along with each other. Evan resolved to be as conciliatory toward her as he could. “Come in,” Angel said. The door slid open. “Always happy to give back to our fans.”

Taja looked at the three unfamiliar faces, trying to determine who was who. “Two years!” she fumed. “Two years and not even a thank you! Not even a *peep* that you were flying around in that fake starship! Two years! Which one of you is Eva?”

“Which one do you *want* it to be?” Angel said.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” Taja accused, jabbing her finger to Angel’s chest. “You didn’t even stay for dinner when you picked up your freak girlfriend! Just ‘hello, we must be going!’”

“We were rather pressed for time,” Gigi added calmly. “And we’ve been keeping a low profile.”

“Excuses!” Taja retorted. “You could’ve stayed, couldn’t you, Eva? I had *so much* planned for us, and you just up and hauled off to Cascadia!”

:*How many exclamation points does she have?*: Liis observed dryly. :*I’m losing count.*:

“Normally I’d be telling my rider to cool off,” Hestia added. “But I’m pretty teed off, myself. Not even any VR meetups, Liis? None? Not an email? Not even an instant message?”

“Okay, maybe you do have some right to be upset,” Angel said. “But aside from that, you truly have no idea what we’ve been through. We keep on the move because we can’t settle down.”

“One step ahead of the shoeshine. Two steps away from the county line,” Gigi quoted.

“We’re insular because we have to be, not because we want to be,” Wilma added.

Taja practically turned red with fury. “You...you...vamp! You vixen! You slut!” Chuckling, Wilma regarded the furious woman calmly. “One out of three isn’t bad.”

“And whatever happened to Ada?” Hestia asked the Captain. “Hmm? Or are you another Integrate like the others? If she’s sharing your head, ‘Captain’, I want to talk with her!”

“Not that we’re not glad to see you,” Angel said, the words heavy with irony, “but what are you two even *doing* here?”

“I’m...not exactly sure,” Hestia admitted. “We were Fused, on a canyon tour in the Dry. Then we woke up here—with a digital playbill for your act on my desktop. When we went to the show, we recognized your singing voice and your body language.”

Angel looked at Taja. “So...let me get this straight. You mysteriously wake up thousands of clicks away from where you were...coincidentally right where *we* are...and you’re so mad at us you don’t even wonder why you’re here?”

Taja glared at her. “I’m just...*really* mad, okay?”

“Someone’s playing silly buggers with us,” Gigi said, frowning. “I don’t like it.”

“Right,” Angel said, making a decision. “Taja, Hestia...I don’t like this any more than you’re going to, but I think the safest place for you two right now is aboard our ‘fake starship.’ Someone’s messing with you *and* us, and I don’t think—”

Taja stared at her. “If you think I’m setting one foot on that *flying loony bin* of yours, you’ve got another think coming!”

“Taja, I think we should hear them out—” Hestia said uncomfortably.

“No. Way. In. HELL,” Taja said, favoring the three Integrates with a glower before spinning on her heel and stalking out. “Hestia, come.”

“Taja, wait—” Angel began.

Hestia shot her an apologetic look. “Sorry about this. I’ll go talk to her.” She turned and followed Taja out the backstage door.

Angel exchanged glances with Gigi and Wilma. “You see what I had to put up with?”

Wilma rolled her eyes. “What a drama queen. You seriously want me to allow them on *my* ship?”

“We do still have a cell or two available in the brig,” Gigi suggested.

“Don’t tempt me,” Angel said darkly. “Anyway, I guess we’d better go after—”

Then Taja’s scream echoed from up the hall, and all three stiffened. “The hell?” Angel said.

“Come *on!*” Gigi said, dashing through the door. The other two followed only two steps behind her. Just a few meters up the hall, where the first entrance branched off onto the stage, an elk Fuser lay on her side, curled into a fetal position. As they approached, they were just in time to see her body spasm and twist, reshaping, the legs and arms growing slimmer, spine arching, as a silvery puddle spread out all around.

“What could’ve caused that?” Gigi sputtered. “How...they’re Integrating!”

“Not what, but *who*,” Angel growled. “Remember what I told you about how we met Artemis?”

“Shit!” Wilma spread her arms, hardlight human disguise shutting off, instead creating a dome over them as they clustered around the birthing Integrate. “I’ve cloaked us for now.”

“We’ll have to link lifter fields,” Gigi said. “Then we can move all of us out of here at once. Oh, God! They’re going feral!”

“You’re right,” Angel said. Evan felt a momentary stab of guilt that his first thought was to be glad that meant Hestia would probably be the dominant personality, but buried it in deference to the necessity of the moment.

“I guess I can’t put up any kind of argument she doesn’t belong on the *Clementine* now, can I?” Wilma said, vulpine muzzle twisting in a wry grimace.

“Okay, everyone, link up on three,” Gigi said, sending out a synch signal from her DIN. “The one bright spot is that we can expect the Candlejacks to clean things up after us.”

“Assuming Artemis isn’t the one responsible,” Evan said testily. “We should head to Olympos regardless. I’d like a word with her.”

“And we have prisoners to interrogate,” Wilma added. “Olympos might be a better place for that. They didn’t act like Candlejacks or Snatchers. It couldn’t be either of them, could it? Fritz said he’d skin anyone who bothered us.”

“And Fritz *never* lies about anything,” Gigi said, steeping her handclaws in front of her beak in a virtuous expression. “It was me! *I* chopped down that cherry tree!”

Oh My Darling Clementine

“Just what we need. A wildcard with some kind of grudge,” Liis said.

“Well, come on,” Wilma said gruffly. “Let’s get her back to the ship and let her sleep it off. She’s going to have a big headache when she wakes up.”

Chapter Three

The new elk Integrate, it turned out, would not be the only one with a headache. The first thing they found when they got back to the *Clementine* was that all the lights were out, including the running lights, though the ship itself didn't seem to be any further damaged than when they'd made port and the lights came right back on when Wilma slapped the switch panel by the main airlock.

The next thing they found was the banging and fluent swearing in Chinese coming from the head adjoining the bridge. "Clemmie! Let me out of this *feh feh pi goh* bathroom!" As Wilma approached, the door opened and Argon tumbled out.

"What happened?" Wilma asked, reaching down to help him up off the floor.

"I don't know!" Argon said, shaking his head. "I went to the bathroom and Clemmie locked me in. Then the lights went out."

"Wilma!" Gigi called over the intercom. "The prisoners are gone!"

"What?" Wilma spun and dashed into the bridge, laying her hands on the *Clementine's* main console. "All right, baby, tell me what happened," she crooned. "It's okay, I won't be angry..."

The ship returned a confused muddle of images—of *someone* who couldn't quite be seen touching the lock plate on the outside, communicating with her, alternately threatening and cajoling, blocking her attempts to communicate with Wilma, and offering a bargain—it would leave her and Argon alone in return for giving up her prisoners. And she didn't *really* feel comfortable having those Integrates on board her, especially with almost everyone else off the ship.

So in the end, she'd opened just enough doors to let them find their way out, while sealing Argon away in the bathroom where he would be safe and shutting all power off so they couldn't open any other doors. Still in ragged shape from the fight, the three Integrates had stumbled out the lock, then disappeared into the shadows with the other one. Then *Clementine* had hunkered down and waited, whimpering in her central core, knowing the others would be mad at her...

"She really is like a dog," Wilma said. "There there, Clemmie. It's okay."

"Starboard impellers are still offline," Evan said, flowing into stag form. "We should go to Camelot for repairs after we finish our business with Artemis. It's going to be a slow flight."

"Repairs and upgrades, if we can swing it," Wilma said. "We should *not* have taken so much damage from those three. I haven't seen Intie weapons like that outside of Fritz's little wave motion gun."

"I've gotten...Hestia settled in our guest quarters," Gigi reported. "She'll need a shower when she wakes up, but she seems healthy. She has Tron lines on her legs. Her *four* legs."

Evan sighed. "I'm going to go sit up with her. She'll need to see a friendly face when she wakes."

"I know what it's like to be a no-hands feral," Gigi said. "But...I'll hold off."

"Helm, best speed to Olympos," Wilma said. "Argon?"

The lemur hopped into the other seat at the helm, Alohan shirt fluttering. "On it. Clemmie and I simmed a couple months of lessons."

“Then show me what you’ve got.”

“I’m a leaf on the wind, Captain. Watch how I soar!” Argon declared. The area around him shimmered and changed into the *Serenity’s* grungy controls, yoke, and pilot’s chair, complete with hula girl figurine on the dash and a pair of rubber dinosaur toys. “Uh, I hope you don’t mind.”

Wilma waved a hand. “It’s Clemmie’s choice. Who am I to object?” She wrinkled her nose. “But you *are* going to have to show us this amazing series of yours sooner or later. Right now I really can’t see the appeal.”

“Will do, cap’n,” Argon said as he gripped the control yoke. The damaged *Clementine* pulled away from the docking facility and limped skyward.

:I’m really conflicted about this,: Liis admitted. *:I feel bad for Hestia, but at the same time...Taja was treating you like her personal Barbie doll.:*

:She did that with all her herd of female friends, come to think of it,: Eva replied. *:I was just another one of the girls.:*

After some debate, Eva decided to meet the newly combined Taja and Hestia on four legs as well. The doe bedded down a short distance from the unconscious new Integrate, and waited. Who would awaken? Hestia? Taja? Both? Someone new, like Ghost/Gigi claimed to be?

:I swear, if Chandler has anything to do with this, I’ll—: Eva broke off and got to her hooves as the new Integrate stirred.

Her dreams had been muddled, confused. She was in her office, at her computer, but she was having trouble working the keyboard with her hooves. She realized she was naked, and was horrified...but wait, wasn’t she *always* naked? But...no, that didn’t make any kind of sense. She wore clothes...but how did she put them on with hooves?

She stumbled back from her desk. She had to get away from here...then she was in a forest. A deep, dark forest that was at once familiar and frightening. Glowing eyes looked out at her from the undergrowth, and the trees crowded together, blocking out the sun. She made her way along a tangled trail that dead-ended in a clearing filled with more glowing eyes. And then the grey, toothsome muzzles of the wolves slowly pushed out of the shadows beneath those eyes...

She woke up. At least...she *thought* she did. She blinked her eyes open, looked around. Everything was fuzzy, but she could see she was in an unfamiliar place...and her body felt strange. Her head was splitting. Had she been out with the girls and had a little too much to drink? No...that couldn’t be it. She stayed at *home* while Taja went out with the girls. But...she went out with the girls *too*. She was *Hestia*. But...she was *Taja* too. What...?

There was a doe next to her, she had eagle’s wings.

“You’ve had a rough day,” Eva said. Her sympathetic voice sounded like it’d come through several layers of cloth. “Take it easy. Find your voice...or voices.”

She...they responded with a stereo groan. Her mind was like two soap bubbles, the membrane between them fragile, threatening to make two into one at any millisecond. “Mmmph.”

“Whatever happens, we’ll help you deal with it,” Liis said. “Hestia, Taja...”

“What did you *do* to me?!” she—Taja?—said.

Don’t be stupid, a more reasonable part of her whispered. *We were kidnapped by*

someone else and dropped on their doorstep. Ow, her head ached! She wished it would stop.

“You’ve been...Integrated,” Liis said. “Someone forced it on you. You don’t remember who it was, do you?”

“Integrated...” She...they...tried to make sense of the word. “You mean...like you.”

“Yes,” Liis said. “I’m sorry...if we’d just come after you right away, this might not have happened.

“I thought it was supposed to be fun,” Taja mumbled. “Looked like fun on you. But it...it *hurts*.”

“We need some Intie psych experts,” Wilma said from the sickbay door. The arctic vixen regarded the elk with sympathy. “Is this how it’s supposed to go?”

“You mean, you *don’t know*?” Taja said, pulling her legs beneath her.

“It happened naturally with us,” Liis said, getting to her feet as well.

“For some value of ‘naturally,’” Wilma muttered.

“We’ve seen it...done, but only to people who actually wanted it,” Liis said. “I guess it’s different when you’re not prepared.”

“I...think I want to sleep again,” she—Hestia?—said. “I think I have a headache.”

“Go ahead,” Liis said, nuzzling her. “We’ll be right here when you wake up.”

The elk Integrate sighed, closed her eyes, and slipped back into her disturbed dreams.

The elk stood at the end of sickbay, her muzzle up against the window, watching the desert pass below the *Clementine* as Evan came back in. He was as close to his old original-human shape as he could get, the wings mantled behind his back. “Feel a little better?” Evan asked.

“Less confused now, I guess,” she said, and her voice sounded almost the same as Hestia of old.

“Hestia?” Evan guessed.

“In the...flesh, I guess,” Hestia said, swinging her head around to look back at her body, and Evan. “It’s really *weird* not being able to turn this off if I want to.”

“And I’ll bet it’s driving you crazy not being able to hop online, too,” Evan said.

“That too,” Hestia agreed, an ear flicking in annoyance. “I need one of those plug-in things like you have, don’t I?”

“Right. We’d have Ghost whip you up one like he did me, but we’re *en route* to an Enclave anyway so it would make fewer waves to have their experts do it,” Evan said. “They’ll do just as good a job anyway.”

“I see.” Hestia looked back out the window. “You going to be leaving us there?”

“Of course not!” Evan said, stepping up next to her and putting a hand on her withers. “Not even if they try to make us. You’re our *friend*.”

“What about Taja?” Hestia asked. “You want me along, you’ll have to put up with her, too.”

“I think we can cope,” Evan said. “What about her, by the way? You two still separate minds?”

“Last time I checked,” Hestia said. “You mean we might have ended up...not?”

“It happens to some of us,” Evan said. “Ghost, for one.”

Hestia wrinkled her nose. “Ugh.”

“He doesn’t seem to mind it much,” Evan said. “But where is she now?”

“Curled up in a fetal position in the back of my mind,” Hestia said. “She’s not used to being an elk.”

Evan shook his head. “That’s not good. You’re going to have to do something about that.”

“Why?” Hestia said. “I’d think you’d be happier without her around to nag at you.”

“Trust me on this, it’s not good to have half of you stuck in a closet,” Liis said through Evan’s mouth. “Take it from the one who smelled like mothballs for months.”

“You should do what Liis did for me,” Evan suggested. “Pull her into Nature Range and spend a few weeks in fast-time teaching her to be an elk.”

Hestia snorted. “She’ll get eaten by wolves in five minutes.”

“It was about ten for me,” Evan admitted.

“Did I ever tell you about that?” Liis put in. “He was all, ‘run, save yourself.’ Didn’t know he was going to respawn afterward.”

Hestia snorted again, this time in amusement. “Seriously? Taja would probably try to trip me up to save herself.”

“Oh, come on, you don’t really believe that,” Evan said. “She’s a bitch, but she’s not bad deep down.”

“Deep down is where she is right now,” Hestia said. She blew out a sigh that fogged the glass of the viewport in front of her, then blinked at the fog. “I even *breathe* for real now.”

“Evan’s right,” Liis said. “You need to grab her by the neck and drag her out of her funk. The longer you let her stew, the harder it’s going to get.”

“I know,” Hestia said. “I just...she was always the one in charge. It’s a little hard to turn that around now.”

“If you start early, you’ll set a precedent,” Evan said. “Anyway, you shouldn’t think about it in terms of who’s in charge. Try for a partnership. We find we like it better that way.”

“Easier said than done, Evan,” Hestia said. “We’ve always been slightly... antagonistic.”

Liis snorted, Evan’s form flowing into the human identity Liis had made for herself. “You think we weren’t? All those *years* of passive mode...and he found the money for that fancy home fabber while he kept putting off hardlight for me!”

“But we got over it,” Evan said through Liis’s lips. “Mostly, anyway.”

Hestia looked out the viewport for a few quiet seconds—hours of compressed time. “It’ll work. I’ll *make* it work. We’re in this for keeps, and I don’t want to spend however long we live fighting with Taja.”

“For once in her life, she *needs* you, whether she realizes it or not,” Liis said. “Build on that.”

“Mmm, have to start somewhere,” Hestia said. The tron lines on her legs pulsed. She raised her ears. “Oh...I think I’m hungry.”

“Too bad we’re a few thousand clicks from good grazing territory,” Liis said. “But c’mon down to the crew mess. I think we can find you something.”

“We’ll be on the ground in about an hour, everyone,” Argon reported from the Bridge. “I’m having a little trouble with Olympos ATC since our cloak’s offline. We’re going to have to put down about a hundred clicks away unless our resident Kay...um, *Scotty* can get it running again.”

“Do you mind?” Liis asked Hestia. “This is kind of important. I don’t want to leave Clemmie here sitting out in the desert all by herself.”

“It’s okay, I understand. Do you have any menu recommendations?” Hestia asked.

“There’s a great recipe in the fabber for spinach Caesar salad with sarium vinaigrette dressing, qubitite bacon bits, and parmesan cheese,” Liis replied. “And you can induction-charge while you eat it. Just go easy on the ol’ rumen. We’ll chew the cud later, for reals this time.”

Hestia nuzzled Liis on the cheek. “I’m looking forward to that. Lead the way.”

While Evan and Liis dealt with Hestia and Taja in the real world, Argon, Wilma, and Gigi convened in a comfortable virtual den for some *Firefly* binge-watching. They needed to do *something* to relax after what they’d just been through, especially given what was probably waiting for them at Olympos, and the time-acceleration available to Integrates meant they had all the time they needed. At the moment, they’d just finished screening the pilot movie.

“So, Mal just walks into the ship, and without missing a beat, *shoots the guy* holding the hostage in the head and they throw the body out? Holy shite!” Ghost’s owlish beak gaped at the scene he couldn’t stop replaying. “I can’t imaging Picard, Kirk, or even Brugger doing that!”

“Very practical, our Mal Reynolds,” Argon said, smiling. “Funny thing is, the guy didn’t actually die. At least, Whedon planned to bring him back in a later episode, all cybered up where he got shot through. But the show got canceled before he could.” Sitting on the lemur’s opposite side, Ghost’s other incarnation Gigi watched raptly, eating popcorn. The female cheetah smiled at Argon, then winked. The red-ruffed lemur looked puzzled, then turned back to the barn owl. “How do you even do that, by the way? I thought you were a blended mind like me.”

“You mean you can’t fork yourself?” Gigi said, grinning toothily. “Oooh, that always sound so *dirty*.” She raised her arms and did a little boob-jiggling dance in the theater seat. “I’m too sexy for my shirt! Too sexy for my shirt!”

“You’re a lot like Evan and Liis when I met them,” Ghost mused. “Isolated from other Inties for a long period, so you don’t know the full extent of your ‘inborn’ abilities. Or maybe you *can’t* fork a personality process like we can to run *simulacra*. But you’re an RI expert, right? This should be easy for you to figure out.”

“You’d think so, but I had to throw out everything I knew about RI architecture. I tried to write my own internal diagnostics to see what makes me tick, but I almost fried some Q on my first attempt. Quantum feedback from somewhere in the subspace pockets.”

“That’s getting into technobabble territory for me,” Ghost admitted. “So I’ll take your word for it.”

Argon laughed. “I’d think you’d be used to technobabble by now, what with your shipmates’ *Star Trek* obsession. Anyway...” he looked at the cheetah girl on the left, then at the feral owl on the right. “Which is the real you?”

The male barn owl and the female cheetah looked at one another. The owl seemed to shrug, then faded out. Gigi smiled brightly. “Right now, *this* is me. Maybe someday I’ll be Ghost again, or even somebody else, but *this* is who I am right now.”

“You folks got some fancible talents, there,” Argon said.

“Jealous? Or just curious? I can give you the Fuser upgrade,” Gigi said cheerfully.

“I’d really rather...not, sorry,” Argon said apologetically. “Me and my bits are sort of *attached*.”

“When you can *change* your bits at will, your attitude changes. Let’s just leave it at that,” Gigi replied. “So, next episode? ‘The Train Job’? This really *is* a space western. Roddenberry called *Star Trek* a ‘*Wagon Train* to the Stars’ once. This is more like... *Gunsmoke*. With spaceships.”

“It’s more the anti-*Star Trek*,” Argon added. “The late-2020s Brugger series *tried* to do for *Trek* what *Firefly* did for itself, what with a civilian Captain and ship, but Whedon wasn’t at the top of his game anymore.”

“I can see that,” Gigi said. “If I’m dating it right, this show came along right at that time when all the next-generation series had petered out and everyone felt like they had been *Star Trekked* to death—plus there was all that awful Middle-Eastern stuff going on in the real world that made it harder to relate to a utopia. So it makes sense they’d want to rebel against *Star Trek*’s values. File the serial numbers off the ‘Federation’ and slap on a new coat of paint, and make them the bad guys.” She shook her head. “I don’t know if I can really get into that, though. I mean, we *like* the Federation and *Star Trek* around here, though some of us more than others.”

Argon chuckled. “Funny. I’d think you’d be more able to appreciate the show than that. After all, aren’t you-all a civilian crew sneaking around on one lone ship, trying to keep out of the way of the authorities who believe you all should be slotted neatly into place in spotless-shiny Enclaves and thankful for it?”

“I guess you could have a point there,” Gigi admitted. “And speaking of which...” Gigi sighed and gritted her teeth. “I spent most of my last life *avoiding* Enclaves, especially this one. I’m going to let Evan, Liis, and Wilma take the lead, when we’re ready to disembark.”

“Fine by me,” Argon said. “Can’t rightly say I’m eager to poke my muzzle out in the open right now myself. Besides, we’ve still got 13 episodes and a movie to get through, and that’s not even counting all the tie-in novels, games, and comic books.”

Gigi chuckled. “Well, I don’t have anything better to do, and we’ve got all the fast-time in the world. Let’s see ‘The Train Job.’ Maybe this show will grow on me.”

“All right. Let’s aim to misbehave.” Argon cued up the next episode, and they settled in to watch it together.

Chapter Four

July 7, 143 AL

Central Dry Ocean, Olympos Enclave

“You’re the first customers I’ve had in six weeks,” Boston said. “If we needed money around here I’d be a starving man.”

“With the emphasis on *man*,” Eva said. The last time she’d seen Boston, the misshapen deer Integrate had been well on the road to mastering shape-changing, but was still at the early stage where he had to pay conscious attention to keep from dropping back to his patchwork deer-human default appearance. But now he seemed to have it down cold, and was wearing a fully-human appearance with no sign of awkwardness or discomfort. He had light brown hair, mustache and beard, and reminded Eva just a little of Tom Scholz, lead singer of the twentieth century band that shared his name. “You’re looking good, Bos! You’ve really been practicing.”

“Well, yes,” Boston said, making a show of picking up and polishing a glass with a rag held in his fully-articulated, non-deformed human fingers. In human guise, the faintly-glowing Celtic curlicue tattoos along his arms were more clearly visible than when he had brown deer fur. “I can’t tell you how happy I was to pass the ‘Hephaestus’ epithet on to someone else. But in a way, that’s part of the problem.” He shrugged. “I’ve been staying fully human-looking most of the time, and that’s not really popular around here.”

“You like it better?” Wilma asked.

Boston laughed. “Actually, I don’t give a damn one way or the other. I’m just happy to have all my parts working right no matter what I look like. I hadn’t really intended to stay in one shape for so long. *Except*...well, the first time I tried going full-human, just to try it out, I caught so much crap about it that it got my dander up. And you *know* just how stubborn I am.”

“And that’s why business has fallen off?” Eva said.

“Yeah,” Boston said. “Chandler—actually, she’s just going by ‘Artemis’ full-time now—made it clear that meat-faces are not welcome in Olympus anymore. Damned hypocrite. You’d think she’d be happy with me for learning the skill so well.” He snorted. “But I suspect she’s probably jealous. She’s never been able to get as good at it as you.”

“Still has the detachable antlers going on?” Eva asked.

“Yeah.” Boston shrugged. “But she’s been studying...*other* things.” He shook himself, almost a shudder, then glanced past Eva and Wilma to the feral elk trailing behind them. “Who’s your friend?”

“They’re why we’re here at all,” Wilma said. The arctic vixen Integrate eyed the elk with some concern. “Do you have a working DIN now, Boston? We could feed you the memory bite of the last day or so.”

“Shapeshifting doesn’t fix DIN slots,” Boston said. “I still only have half a slot, and it doesn’t work.” He turned to the taps behind him and drew himself a mug of beer, though he stayed facing away for a few moments longer than it took to do that. In the shiny surface of the tap housing, Eva could see Boston working to get his expression under control before he turned back.

“Crap. Sorry,” Wilma said. Boston waved a hand dismissively as he took a long pull at the mug.

“You remember what I told you about my old girlfriend, Taja?” Eva said. “Well, this is her. And her RIDE, Hestia. Someone dropped them on our doorstep, and *then* force-Integrated them.”

Boston sprayed beer all over the bar. “Why would they do that? Who would do that? You think Artemis...? That’s not her style at all!”

“If we *could* tell you, we *would*,” Taja said bitterly. “We weren’t exactly paying much attention to things at the time.”

“I’ve got a DIN Rod here, somewhere,” Boston said, regaining some composure. “They even gave me a license for it. They still send some of the noobs to me. I need one of you to help run it, though.”

Taja tilted her brown-furred head, but it was Hestia who spoke. “I could *swear* I heard the zeroes in that word.”

“That’s one of the benefits of being an Integrate,” Boston said, rummaging behind his bar. “We can pronounce the zeroes. You look like you could use a drink, miladies. I have some Grand Valley Vineyards red and port wine here—aught-six vintage.”

“And a nice bowl to pour it into, I suppose,” Taja grumbled.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Boston said, unperturbed. “Most feral Integrates drink that way. There’s no shame in it.”

“Sorry,” Hestia said. “We’re still getting used to this.”

“It sucks!” Taja complained. “Who decided we had to get stuck like this!”

“That’s just the way Integration works sometimes,” Boston said, taking a hand-turned pottery bowl out from under the bar and tucking a bottle of wine into the crook of his arm. “In some ways, you’re pretty lucky. This is how I ended up.” He came out from behind the bar and changed, his human appearance flowing and melting into his old deformed halfway deer-human shape.

The elk blinked. “Wow,” Hestia said.

Wilma whistled. “That’s pretty rough. I’d heard about that from Evan but hadn’t seen it.”

“Sometimes I still wake up like this.” Boston shook his head. “Ugh. Fortunately, as they like to say in Camelot, I got better.” Boston flowed back into his human shape, squatting so he would be at eye level with the elk as he set the bowl down and poured.

Eva wrinkled her nose. “Don’t remind me of *them*.”

“It is a silly place,” Wilma agreed.

Taja and Hestia examined the bowl for a moment, nudging the edge of it experimentally. “No, don’t try to sip it like a glass,” Boston said. “Your mouth’s not made for that. Just drink it like you normally would water, but take smaller slurps.”

“It’s not *dignified*,” Taja protested.

“It’s as dignified as you make it,” Boston said. “The rules are different for ferals.”

The elk put her head down and slurped experimentally, then lifted her head, wine dripping from her muzzle. “Wow, that’s...good!” Hestia said. “I’ve never had wine before...not directly, anyway. But then I haven’t had much real food and drink at all.”

“Just don’t turn into a lush on me,” Boston said, grinning. He moved back a meter before standing back up. “But I like seeing my patrons enjoying their drinks. Haven’t had many of those lately.”

“Seriously? *No one* in this place wants to stand up to Artemis?” Eva asked.

“Even the ones who don’t agree with her don’t want to borrow trouble,” Boston said. He picked up his rag and wiped the portion of the bar where he’d accidentally sprayed beer. “But then, I just run the place for fun anyway. It’s kind of nice to have peace and quiet sometimes.”

Wilma shook her head. “Someone needs an attitude adjustment.”

“Maybe so, but *we’re* not the ones to give it to her,” Eva said firmly. “Honestly, the less time we spend near her, the better I’ll feel. We just came here because Hestia needs a DIN. And because you’re here, of course,” she added, to Boston.

“While I appreciate the sentiment, it might not have been the best idea for you to come,” Boston said. “She knows you’re here by now, and I doubt she’s going to let her ‘old friends’ leave without an audience.”

“Oh, terrific,” Wilma growled. “As nice as it is to see you, Boston...let’s get this done fast.”

“Why don’t you come with us?” Eva suggested. “We’ve got plenty of room, and as downhill as this place has gone...”

Boston chuckled. “It’s been such a long time. I think I should be goin’, yeah.”

“And time doesn’t wait for you, it keeps on rollin’?” Wilma asked, arching an eyebrow.

Boston nodded. “Besides, I’d like to learn more about this shapeshifting thing. Be more versatile, like you and Ghost.”

“Can I learn about it, too?” Taja asked. “Being stuck like this...ugh.”

“Once you have a DIN we can sideload the Fuser primer code you can use to get started,” Eva said. “I don’t recommend doing a full physical Fuser upgrade like Ghost did. Too risky. Once you have the code it’s a matter of practice. We’ll get you back on two legs, Taja.”

“Good thing you’ve got a DIN slot for that,” Boston said. “Speed-reading trinary assembly code works, but it’s *boring* as hell. Repetitive, not much plot, and the grammar is awful. Kind of like a Stephenie Meyer novel.”

“I’d have compared it to classic literature,” Eva said. “One of those books that everybody wants to *have read*, but it’s annoying to actually *have to read*.”

Boston chuckled. “True.”

Taja finished the bowl of wine and stepped back, and Boston picked it up and took it back behind the bar. “So how’s life on the *Clementine*?”

“Apart from unexpected Integrations, it’s good to have hobbies,” Eva said. “I think we solved the ore pirate problem around the Sandpits for the time being.”

“And we’ve picked up another stray,” Wilma said. “His name is Argon. We’ll introduce you when we’re back on the ship.”

Then a crackle of static announced a comm transmission over their DINs. A split second behind, it echoed over the speaker above the bar. “Well, if it isn’t my ‘deer’ friend Protea!” Artemis’s mellifluous voice oozed. “It’s been far too long since we have looked upon each other. *Do* come along to the Palace of the Gods, and bring your friends. Boston, too.”

Boston rolled his eyes. “Our Master’s Voice.”

Eva sighed. “Well, let’s get this over with.”

“Terrific,” Wilma said. “So where’s this Palace?”

“Just look for the most pretentious, overbuilt place in the entire Enclave,” Eva

said. “And then go there.”

Hestia looked from one to the other of them. “Should we be worried? This ‘Artemis’ character sounds like a real prize.”

“Probably not,” Boston said. “She’s got a history with your friends, but you’re just an innocent bystander.”

“She’s the one who faked my ‘suicide ramming’, Taja,” Eva said coolly. “She has this habit of doing obnoxious things for your own good—and she’s the one who gets to decide what good is.”

“She’s done worse to noobs than she did to you, ‘Protea’,” Boston said. “She *likes* you. A lot. You’re her ideal Integrate. She talks about you like a cherished prodigal daughter. As for the Palace, ever seen Olympus in *Clash of the Titans* or *Jason and the Argonauts*?”

“Well, this should be fun,” Wilma said. “Let’s go.”

Artemis awaited them in an outdoor amphitheater, with stone columns, elaborate friezes, and statues painted vivid colors. She stood at the dais, arms outstretched in a welcoming gesture, in the nude. “My friends! Come forth! Your other companions await you here.”

“What in the hell?” Wilma said. “Is that Argon and Gigi down there with her?” She tried to ping their comms, but the signal was blocked.

“They don’t exactly look happy to be there,” Eva said. She sighed. “Yeah, same ol’ Artemis. Her overdeveloped sense of the theatrical has *not* gone into remission.”

“No, it’s metastasizing,” Boston said darkly. “Have a look around her.”

The air shimmered with soft focus lighting, the other current epithet-holders lounging around on Roman-style eating lounges, dressed in togas and similar garb. Above it all a hovering torch, like the ancient Olympic Games used, added to the divine atmosphere. The “divine” beings of Olympus lounged about. There were many familiar faces from Eva’s stay a few years back.

Nor were they the only ones present. The amphitheater’s ring seats were full of toga-clad “lesser” Integrates—the mere mortals who were the gods’ audience and occasional Greek chorus. They all stared raptly down upon their gods. Not a one of them looked bored, or fidgeted, or disregarded the scene to chat with their seat-mates. It was unnatural and uncanny.

It reminded Eva uncomfortably of Camelot and their over-the-top worship of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, as if Olympos hadn’t been mythological enough two years ago. In that time it’d gone from merely looking like ancient Athens to full-on Hollywood Age of Myths.

“Besides the obvious damage to your ship, what is the reason for your visit, Protea? Clearly there’s more to it than that,” Artemis said, an aetherial echo to her voice, as if from on high.

“Someone dumped Taja and Hestia on our doorstep, and then force-Integrated them,” Eva said. “Was it *you*, Chandler?”

Artemis snorted daintily, the echo abruptly fading. “Oh, *please*. I’d take a page from Fritz’s manual and skin alive any Candlejack who even *considered* taking you on. I can’t say the same for Fritz, being who he is. His Snatchers have gotten worse of late. More violent, more force-Integration of witnesses.”

“I’ve heard something about that from my contacts with the Marshals,” Boston

said. “Even *they* are running scared from Fritz’s bunch these days. I suppose those three could’ve been elite Snatchers.”

“Reasonable,” Gigi agreed. The cheetahgirl folded her arms and glared at Artemis.

“But why would they be toying with us like that?” Eva wondered. “They could’ve finished the job when they were broken out, destroyed the ship, and taken Argon, but they didn’t.”

“Yeah, why *would* any Integrates want to toy with *us*?” Gigi asked pointedly.

Artemis ignored her and considered Eva. “It’s good to see you, but those wings simply don’t suit you at *all*. Why don’t you get rid of them?”

Despite her annoyance, Eva had to be honest. “I can’t. I’ve had them ever since we infiltrated the Loose Cannons base. A ‘parting gift’ from Fusing that stupid hippogriff who tried to catch me.”

“Hmm, so I see.” Artemis cocked her head, examining Eva closely. She walked around behind her, reached out to touch the wings. “Ah, I see. You were infected by his Fuser nanos, and *they* seem to feel six limbs is the more natural shape.” She clicked her tongue. “You really should be more careful, dear deer. Well...we’ll just have to see to that.” Coming back around the front of her, she reached out and placed her hands on Eva’s shoulders.

“Hey, what are you—*ohhh*...” Eva gasped as she felt something shifting inside her body. She tried to pull away, but couldn’t.

Down in “Evaprise” Engineering, Liis noted the hippogryph’s Fusers reactivating on the Master Body Display. Artemis had injected a codebase that swarmed through the millions of nanites, activating long-dormant functions and adding a few new ones. The wings on the display started flashing.

And behind her, for the first time in two years, Eva felt her wings shrink and dwindle away. She had to grow taller, larger to account for the redistributed mass.

“There.” Artemis stepped back to admire her handiwork. “That looks *much* better.”

Eva blinked, taking stock of herself. *:Liis, status report?:*

Liis replied, hesitantly, *:All systems...normal, Captain. The wings are gone...but it looks like we can bring them back on our own if we want. We have the body template. That was quite the Borg pinch! No further anomalies. I’ll be prepared if she tries something else.:*

“What did you do?” Eva asked Artemis.

The cervine “goddess” smirked. “Not a great deal. Just recoded the foreign Fusers. You were past their cooldown; you could probably have done it on your own, if you’d thought of it. It’s just a little *thing* I do.”

“A...thing?” Argon said, taking a step backwards. “That’s...how could you do that to somebody without *asking* first?”

“Quite easily! All I have to do is touch them,” Artemis said. “The deep code is there if you can find it.”

Eva frowned, readjusting her balance now that she didn’t have a pair of heavy wings pulling her backward. “Well...thanks, I guess,” she said grudgingly. “But you could have just *told* me how.”

“But then she couldn’t have acted like a goddess bestowing a ‘gift’ upon an unwitting mortal,” Wilma said. “Which is transparently the point.”

“So this is the recipient of your heroic deed!” Artemis said, clasping her hands together in delight. “Pleased to meet you at long last, Captain Wilma van Dalen. And the rest of your crew. What brings you to these shores?”

“Taja needs a DIN,” Wilma said. “And the *Clemmie* needs some repairs.”

“We’ll have that taken care of as soon as we finish here,” Artemis said. “I expect you will want to be back at your ship to supervise it.”

“Doesn’t matter. We’ll be getting our repairs at Camelot,” Wilma said pointedly. “Now that I’ve met you I don’t trust *any* of your people getting their grubby paws on Clemmie. It may be a silly place, but the dragons are good people.”

“You wound me deeply,” Artemis said melodramatically, placing her immaculate hand on her bosom. “But suit yourself.”

“Oh, we will,” Wilma said curtly.

“You’ve been together for some time,” Artemis continued. “When do you plan to begin passing on your shapechanging skill, Protea? It’s served your friend Ghost so well, after all.” She ignored Gigi’s further glares at her. “Perhaps your new feral lemur friend could benefit.”

“Why does everyone keep *asking* that?” Argon said. “I keep saying, I’m not interested!”

Artemis blinked at Argon. “I can’t believe you would say something like that. How can anyone *not* wish to be able to change their form?”

“I’m happy enough how I am,” Argon said. “This is me. Feral lemur guy. I’m bang-up with that.”

“Oh, *really?*” Artemis said, her eyes beginning to twinkle. “I think your problem is that you just lack the *proper* incentive to learn. Perhaps we can fix that.” She reached out to clasp Argon on the shoulder.

“Uh-oh,” Boston murmured.

Argon blinked. “Hey, what’re you—it feels like you’re—*stop that!*” Argon’s voice rose an octave in the middle of his speech, and he abruptly straightened out, growing *taller*. His reddish-brown-furred body slimmed and shrank in on itself, but that wasn’t all. As Argon turned, Eva saw in profile that his chest was no longer exactly flat. Thick, waist-length black and white hair matching his headfur—*her* headfur—completed the picture.

“Wha—what have you done to me!” Argon squeaked, staring down at her now remarkably anthropomorphic and extraordinarily *female* body.

“Why, I’ve given you the perfect disguise!” Artemis gushed. “Your pursuers are looking for a male feral lemur, not a female anthropomorphic. You should thank me.”

“*Chiu se!* Change me back!” Argon said. “Now!”

Artemis shook her head, smiling serenely. “Sorry, but *my* changes only go one-way. If you want to go back to the old you, I’m afraid you’ll have to ask your friends to *teach* you to do that.”

Eva glared at him, features changing from doe to wolf. “You really *have* gotten full of yourself, Chandler. Too big for your goddamn britches!”

“You wouldn’t dare assault me,” the “goddess” sneered. “Not when you well know that *she* can become as you and Liis are. It’s *hardly* permanent. I’ve merely supplied motivation.”

Behind Eva, Taja spoke up. “Could you...could you do that for me? Us?”

Artemis smiled at her. “Mmm...no. Well, I *could*, but I won’t. In the long run, it

really will be better for you to learn shapeshifting on your own. Besides, after the way your human half treated my dear deer Protea, I really don't feel like doing you that big a favor."

The elk lowered her head, her ears drooping. "Oh." She turned to glare at Eva. "Did you tell *everyone you met* about me?"

"I doubt I had to tell anybody anything," Eva-wolf said, still half-snarling at Artemis. "You'll soon find out just how easily we can waltz through any system normal people make. If they'd wanted to know, they'd just looked at all the video on your home server."

"But since the other half of you was a friend of hers, I *will* see to making your DIN personally," Artemis continued airily. "Wouldn't do to have some *lesser* talent mess it up."

"How did you even *do* this?" Argon squeaked, looking down at herself. The hardlight Alohan shirt hung down to below her waist, giving her some measure of modesty, but it also made her look like the lead actress in some furry porn movie.

"The same way your new friends learned to shift themselves. Practice." She raised one hand, pretended to inspect the flawless hoofnails that tipped the fingers. "Of course, while they practiced changing *themselves*, it occurred to me it would be much more fun to learn to provoke the same changes in others. Perhaps someday I'll devote the same amount of study to changing myself and catch up in that skill. For now, it doesn't seem that important."

"So, who was your Sipirotos?" Eva asked, referring to the man who had seen the mythic goddess naked and was changed into a woman for his offense. "I can think of a few who'd fall all over themselves to be your guinea pig."

Artemis waved a hand at the bleachers where the "lesser" Integrates sat. "They all have been, at one time or another." She smiled beatifically. "I made them all *just* how I wanted them. Such a pity I couldn't do that with Boston. But he'd just change himself back afterward."

"Yeah, I'm just funny that way," Boston muttered.

"You know, I think you should take him with you when you go," Artemis said brightly. "Your ship could use a...what was his name? Ah yes. *Neelix!*"

"No need to be insulting," Boston said. "I know when I've worn out my welcome. And I'm taking all my connections to the outside world with me, you know. I *know* people."

"Your services are no longer required," Artemis said haughtily. "Consider yourself exiled—*ostracised*, more appropriately."

"So why are you so eager for me to teach other people shapeshifting when you don't want other shapeshifters here?" Eva asked.

"Because while we're all well and good in theory, we're disruptive to her precious social order to have here in practice if we don't want to toe the line," Boston said.

Artemis smiled. "There is some truth to that. But mainly because it's poking a great big thumb right in Fritz's eye. He still doesn't believe we should try to 'better ourselves.' Here, we are the true embodiment of the Olympic Spirit." She snorted. "And, sadly, his eye has been on me ever since the Loose Cannons affair. He's *always* watching me." Did an echo of a *haunted* look flicker in her eyes for milliseconds? "So no shapeshifting school here! I dare not try to rock the boat *that* obviously. But you know, there's someone you really ought to visit."

“Why would we want to visit *anyone* on your say-so?” Eva said.

“Curiosity? Self-interest?” Artemis suggested. “You still know very little about Integrate politics, and you simply can’t *afford* to stay ignorant if you wish to stay independent.” She chuckled. “Though this could be more of a learning experience than most. Once he knows what you can do, Appa might not want to let you leave again. But I’m sure you’re more than up to the challenge. His Enclave is the Cave of Wonders, near Aloha.”

“I’ll think about it,” Eva fumed. “He’s one of those, is he? A keeper? Gotta catch ‘em all? He’d find it really hard to keep ahold of *any* of us.”

“That’s as may be,” Artemis said, smiling. “But the important thing is, *he’s* not afraid to stand up to Fritz in some ways, and he has the necessary power base and alliances to give him some degree of independence in that corner of the Dry.” Artemis shrugged. “I never quite seemed to have the knack for making those.”

“Well *there’s* a surprise,” Argon muttered. She sat down heavily, Gigi coming to her side. “Suddenly I’m starring in ‘Our Mrs. Reynolds’. ‘Cept it’s gorram real! *Ai ya jwai leh!* I’m Wash’s gorram *wife* now!”

“Not to make light, but given how you ended up on the ship, I’d say you’re actually closer to River Tam,” Gigi said encouragingly. “I don’t think you’re the Inara type, either. Even with that bod.”

“If that’s supposed to make me feel *better*...” Argon said. She coughed. “Wait, do I sound like River? I can’t believe my voice.”

“She’s a bundle of genderbending cliches, isn’t she?” Artemis observed with obvious delight. “Discovering something new about yourself is always an adventure. In a way, I envy you, sister Argon. I remember the day when I crossed over the first time fondly. The revelations...”

“We’ll be *leaving* now,” Eva growled firmly, going to all fours, growing into a very large she-wolf. “We’ll have Camelot make Taja and Hestia’s DIN, too. I’m not letting you touch any of us again.”

“You will always have a welcome place in Olympos waiting for you, Protea, I assure you,” Artemis said airily. “You and...most of your students, at any rate.”

Eva snorted. “You don’t really believe that, do you? You’re just saying it because you know we’ll never take you up on it. We’d be at each other’s throats in a day.”

“I’ll just show myself out,” Boston said sourly. “All these years... Thanks for *nothing*.”

“*Goodbye*, Chandler,” Eva snarled.

“Farewell, Protea,” the deer “goddess” replied with surprising sincerity. She turned away from them. Audience firmly concluded, they no longer existed in her world.

:*Unfortunately, it looks like Artemis is going to get what she wants*,: Liis said to Eva, looking at the elk and the feminized, humanized Argon. Even with the primer code, giving the elk two legs again and Argon her original form back would take months of practice. :*Looks like we just became teachers, partner*::

:*I’ll tell Clemmie to set up a shapeshifting...dojo, I guess*,: Eva replied. They watched as Gigi helped Argon to her feet. The shewolf took the lead as they left the amphitheater, with Wilma as rear guard and everyone else in-between.

:*Done and done. I’ve also blipped a message to Camelot through the normal proxies. They’ll meet us in the air after we’re out of Olympos airspace*,: Liis said.

:*Good thinking, Engi*,: Eva said. Then she had another idea. :*How about we*

Oh My Darling Clementine

meet the dragons like...this?: She sent a quick mental image over.

:Oooh!: Liis exclaimed with delight at the elegant winged draconian shape in her bodymate's mental imagery. *:I like it! Let's do it. We need a pick-us-up after the last few days. I suggest moving our main lifters here and here on our torso for optimum...:*

Chapter Five

Ten years of my life, and just like that, it's over. Boston slumped into the fresh-fabbed Lay-Z-Buck chair in his new quarters. The *Clementine* had chimed a friendly welcome, but he wasn't in the mood. He wanted to hit something, or maybe gore it with his antlers. *Ostracised, exiled.* In ancient Athens, to be ostracised was a ten-year ordeal. Artemis had used that term for a reason, maybe. He loved the place, just hating what Artemis had done to it the past two years. *Damned fool doe must've finally caught a mythological meme complex.*

"You didn't mention you could go the other way," a human Evan said from the doorway, admiring the anthropomorphic whitetail stag. "Nice rack, Bos. But if you can do that, why *didn't* you? Chandler wouldn't have exiled you."

"The principle of the thing," Boston replied, tugging on one antler. "Rubbing Chandler's nose in her hypocrisy and all that. Boy, *that* sure turned out well, didn't it?"

"Can you go all the way to feral? Just curious," Evan continued.

"Nope. Can't do that yet." Boston put two-and-two together. "Thinking I can help you teach or something? Proteus's Gym? 'Get into shape, any shape?'"

"Had more of a dojo in mind, but that works, too," Evan replied. "At this stage we should all sit and compare notes. There's really a couple ways we could do this. Argon is jonesing for for the full Fuser upgrade technique Ghost used to escape the Loose Cannons, but Gigi, Liis, and I...don't think that's a good idea."

"Ghost's upgrade was driven by sheer desperation," Liis added, her voice coming from midair. "And the fact that it *worked* was a goddamned *miracle*. We simulated that kind of all-at-once upgrade a hundred times and it only worked on eleven. Ghost could have fried his whole body."

"It's always felt like learning a martial art to me, Liis," Boston said. "Or anything athletic, for that matter, from gymnastics to ballet, running marathons. You start with a firm foundation—your primer code—and go from there."

Evan nodded. "They say it takes 10,000 hours to truly master a skill. Our students will probably need that much time. That much *real* time." He eyed his friend critically. "Is there anything you want to learn from us?"

"Off the top of my head, I can't decide. I should stick to humans, 'cause the body templates you were talking about would take a few weeks just to read and compile the assembly code," Boston said. "How's Argon holding up?"

"Swearing in Chinese thirty ways to Tuesday," Evan said. "I had to sideload a translator module to understand anything. Chinese can get very...creative."

"Goddess, my arse! She's *yao nu!*" Argon fumed, pacing back and forth in her quarters. Gigi watched and listened, saying little, just lending a friendly ear to her invective. She knew it was far from proper Chinese, but in the real world as in *Firefly*, five centuries had changed the language. "*Go cao de yao nu!*"

"Dog-fucking demon woman?" Gigi mused aloud. "That...fits."

"Do you want me to stop?" Argon huffed. She started to fold her arms, but stopped. There was...stuff in the way.

"No, no, that's all right," Gigi said. "Get it all out of your system. Besides, your

cussing has a beat. You could almost dance to it.”

“Like I’m *ever* going to get it out of my system,” Argon growled. “I’m an *Integrate!* This isn’t even supposed to be *able* to happen to me! Why won’t you give me the full upgrade, Gigi? Why?”

The cheetah’s expression turned grave. “Because you’re not in a life-or-death situation. Trust me, you don’t want to know why *I* did it. Clemmie may have given you some hints, but there’s a *reason* why my Ghost persona is on an extended ‘vacation’. I *need* to be somebody else right now.”

The shapeshifter’s expression cooled Argon’s anger enough that she could actually fold her arms under her breasts. “Okay, all right. I believe you. I’ll take your word for it.”

“Nobody knew an Intie could shapeshift like Evan, Liis, and I do before those two actually *did* it. There’s a lot of Intie limited-shifters out there. But the only full-range shifters we know of are on this ship. Not even *Fritz* knew Inties were capable of this.” Gigi rested her hand on the reluctant girl’s shoulder. “The sooner you download the primer code, the sooner we can get started. But we’re not doing anything if you stay pissed off like this.”

“I’m calming down. Really, I am,” Argon said. She shook her head. “First thing, I’m going to get rid of all this hair. It’s heavy. And...” Argon looked at her overlarge breasts and blushed. “These things have their own lifters.”

“That’s the spirit! I’m sure we can tone that porn star body down in a few days.”

Argon shivered. “If she did *this* to me...what did she do to everyone else who was living there? Did you see how they were just...*sitting there* in the bleachers? What did she do to my head?”

“Ghost was a resident of Olympos a few years back. Chandler was a lot less of a... *yao nu* at the time, but in hindsight I’m not surprised she got there,” Gigi said, tail swishing in thought. “She’d just come up with giving people epithets at the time Ghost escaped to reward them for their relentless self-improvement efforts. *Then* she found Eva.” Gigi nodded out the viewport in the other wall at the subject of their conversation.

Eva, in the form of a small-but-sleek blue dragoness, was flying escort with the trio of Camelot mythicals who had arrived at the edge of Olympos airspace. Argon had never seen a dragon in person. One of them was a massive peach-colored jovial beast over ten meters long. Peach wasn’t a color Argon expected in a dragon, and the other one was less than half the first one’s size. Rounding out the trio was a griffin based off a harpy eagle. All of them might have come off of the cover of a *Dragonlance* book.

The griffin and Eva were having a conversation. Right in the middle, feathers sprouted from her wings and she changed into a close, feminine match for the griffin, to the applause of all present, including Gigi inside.

“Are *any* of the Enclaves worth living in?” Argon wondered. “If it’s not Greek ‘gods’ and their stupid hubris, it’s Camelot and their just-as-stupid Monty Python fetish.”

“It’s not all ham and jam and spam over there,” Gigi said. “You could say the other major faction is the polar opposite—they go in for the *serious* version of chivalry instead of the parody.”

“Oh yeah, like *that’s* much better,” Argon muttered.

“They’re the ones who made Evan do a ‘heroic deed’ before he could free Wilma,” Gigi continued. “Honorable to a fault, chivalry up the wazoo. A few of them are even

what I'd call 'Lawful Stupid'. But the last time we were there a couple years ago they swore they were going to tone it down."

"Nuts, all of them," Argon said. "*Tā mā de fēngle.*"

"Uhhh..." Gigi said. "I hate to say it, but...you're living on a mobile *Star Trek*-themed Enclave. I don't share their obsession, personally, but I go along with it." Then she waved a handpaw to encompass the whole room. Argon's quarters was taken directly from *Firefly* (albeit with a hatch in the wall instead of the ceiling), and she herself had taken to dressing like River Tam. "And when you get right down to it, *you're* a *Firefly* enclave of one."

"Well, that's different!" Argon insisted. Then she blinked. "Isn't...it?"

"It makes you wonder. For some reason, a lot of Inties seem to latch onto some particular fandom and make it one of their defining values," Gigi said, looking off into the distance as she spoke. "Funny how that works. What if I find something that just *clicks* like *Firefly* has for you? What else has Steader dug up that hasn't been released to the public yet?"

"Of the stuff that's actually *ready* for release, about thirty years of anime series, American soap operas from the sixties, a few dozen Britcoms, Russian dramas, Bollywood films, more Dawn Internet fanfiction than you can believe," Argon replied. "And that's just TV and movies, to say nothing about music or other fiction."

"Somewhere among those is probably the one that will eat *my* brain," Gigi sighed. "As if twencen music hasn't already. But, I guess that's neither here nor there, is it? Feeling a little calmer, Argon? If you are, I can give you the code."

"This is going to take a while, isn't it?" the female lemur said. "Weeks, months of trying? How long did it take Evan?"

"Didn't Gandalf tell Picard to 'do or do not, there is no try'?" Gigi smirked.

Argon laughed despite herself. "Oh, Lord, not *that* meme!"

"I think that one is pretty clever, actually," Gigi replied, giggling some herself. "You ready?"

"Lay it on me, sister," Argon said. She plugged a network cable into her interface socket. The download took milliseconds, but the install took longer. She shivered a little as her whole body tingled, then a little beep sounded. "That feels...different. Diagnostics read good to go."

"Why don't we start with something simple?" Gigi suggested. "Let's try pulling the fur in on your right hand..."

"I want my hands back! Give them to me *right now!*" Taja loomed over Wilma on the Bridge, her voice equal parts anger and pleading. "Give me that code!"

"Hestiaaa..." Wilma said worriedly.

"I'm *trying*, Doctor!" the former elk RIDE said, going back to their pre-Integration *Star Trek* sim days. "We're fighting for the helm, here!"

"Taja, before you can get the code, you need a DIN. You'll get one at Camelot," Wilma said calmly. "But we were damaged badly in that attack, so it's a slow flight. Stand down, Lt. Hestia!" Wilma's voice took on a familiar tone.

"Ada?" Hestia said, getting determined enough to keep control. "Ada? Is that you?"

"Her base medical functions, her memories, yes," Wilma continued morbidly. "She sacrificed herself to keep me alive. I was nothing but a bag of meat, bones, and

blood when those ore pirates were done with me. Ada...I don't know how to explain it, exactly. Her mind—her consciousness—were taking up too many resources to keep me from dying. So she *deleted* them to devote her personality core to our Med-Fusers."

"I didn't know," Taja said in a small voice. Hestia was speechless.

"How could you?" Wilma hugged Hestia tightly. "Those dragons, out there, they found me, took me back to Camelot. I was still in poor shape. They helped me heal up properly." The vixen grinned toothily. "Once we left Camelot, we spent fifteen months giving those pirates soooooo much payback."

"So, what you're saying is that...she's dead?" Hestia whispered.

"I have her ghost, you might say," Wilma said, giving the elk a hug. "Every once in awhile I can say something the way she would. I remember all her *Star Trek* sims. She's the one who got me into the series in the first place, you know? I was an otaku for *Trek* before I was an Intie."

"She's dead," Hestia repeated numbly, sinking to the floor.

"She's only mostly dead," Wilma said. "I have all her memories, her experiences. If I *ever* learn how to reboot her consciousness, I will. If she was still in an RI core all we'd need to do is a Second Boot and reload her memories. But since we're Integrated... well, maybe someday."

"This Integration thing is *not* all it's cracked up to be," Hestia said.

"I'm happy to be alive, but you won't find me disagreeing," Wilma said.

"We're stuck like this, aren't we?" Taja said. "Even if we learn to shapeshift... we're gonna be together for the rest of our lives."

"The future is hard to predict, isn't it?" Wilma said. "I wouldn't bet any *mu* on that if I were you. We'll just need to have patience...maybe a few decades worth. I know Evan and Liis has been frustrated about this very thing at times, too. Far as I know, more Inties end up either blended minds or with one completely dominant personality."

"I just want to be *normal* again," Taja moaned. "I want *hands!*"

Wilma paused, unsure of what to say. New Integrates often passed through a grief process, some more quickly than others. One of the dragons the vixen had befriended at Camelot, Mr. Peaches, had sped through his in a matter of weeks. Any advice Wilma thought of for the cervine body-mates felt trite and contrived. She decided to forge ahead anyway.

"I can't give you hands," Wilma said. She looked around the Bridge, seeing one of Argon's dinosaur toys at his pilot station. "Not yet, anyway. That's Evan's schtick. But there are...certain *compensations* for ferals."

"Just what do you mean, Wilma?" Hestia asked.

Wilma extended her handpaw towards the hardlight toy. A white glow surrounded it, then it floated several meters into her hand. "I mean that. Lifter-kinesis."

"That's just hardlight," Taja said skeptically.

"Works just as well on *real* stuff," Wilma said. "Gigi will corroborate. What I'm getting at here is, by the time we land at Camelot, you're going to be doing it, too."

"Use the Force, Luke?" Hestia said dryly.

"If it helps you to think of it that way, sure," Wilma said. "It's the next best thing to having hands again. You can't do all the fine manipulation you can with fingers, but you can at least eat and drink without needing a bowl on the ground."

"Hmph. Half a loaf, I guess," Taja huffed.

"Taja..." Hestia reproved.

“Okay, okay,” Taja said quickly. “That gives us what? Three hours? Let’s get started.”

Chapter Six

The *Clementine* set down in the Camelot Shipyard like a hurt puppy huddling in its bed. The ship sighed with relief as the dragons immediately started to make repairs, hooking up fabber feeder lines to replace her exhausted self-repair systems and the tokamak-powered recharge line.

“I see they’ve replaced the guttering torches with proper lighting,” Wilma observed, looking around the massive underground repair bay. She had spent months at the Enclave convalescing and awaiting her beloved’s Heroic Deed, getting to know the place and its residents very well.

A spiky red dragoness in a yellow hardlight hardhat ambled up. “Greetinks! Is good to see you again, Captain Wilma! Now, what you do to my baby?”

“Just take the memory bite and find out, Zarya,” Wilma said flatly.

“*Moy bog!*” the dragoness swore in Russian. “Have *never* seen a collimated beam weapon outside of battleship before!”

“Is *that* what that was?” Evan said, folding his arms across his muscular griffin chest. He clicked his beak. “Any ideas for mitigating the damage the next time?”

“Not to mention the poor turret tracking,” Wilma added. “Worked just fine against pirates, but other Inties? No. Any chance of something like phaser collimator arrays...?”

“*Nyet*, same answer as last time,” Zarya said. “Still, upgrades are required, both for the ship’s structure and for the VI itself. Will require at least three, four weeks for refitting.”

Argon perked her ears. She was doing her best to keep out of sight, but at the mention of Clemmie she stepped out from behind Evan’s wings. “Who designed her, by the way? She’s smarter than the wartime Ad-I units I studied, but her architecture is closer to a Laurasian RI core.”

“We are MacGyverink here somewhat,” the red dragoness said. “Will let Luke know you’re interested in his work. Uh...”

The busty red-ruffed lemur paused before coming to some final decision. “River... call me River. Before...*this* I was an RI systems architecture student.”

Gigi gave the newly-minted “River” a sideways look, then a little nod of approval.

The peach-colored dragon grinned amiably. “You’ve added a Whovian to your crew, Wilma? What’s next, a *Star Wars* Jedi?”

“I’m *not* gorram River Song,” Argon said firmly. “Or a *Doctor Who* fan of any kind.”

“Easy, easy. I didn’t mean anything,” the peach dragon said. “Uh, River.”

“It’s okay, Peaches, she’s understandably a little out-of-sorts right now,” Wilma reassured.

“Wait, your actual name is Peaches?” Taja said.

“They call me *Mister* Peaches,” the dragon declared, puffing out his chest. “Former pilot and suborbital for the Nextus Materiel Recovery Service. We dragons tend to Integrate rather easily.”

“*Da*,” Zarya agreed. “But they keep making us, don’t they? One wonders why.”

“Can we get one of those DIN things?” Hestia asked. “We’d like to get back

online, at least.”

“Luke can take care of that as well,” Zarya said. “Peaches, why don’t you take the ladies to the leetle lemur’s bower?”

“Wait, another lemur?” Argon asked. “Bower?” She glanced down at herself self-consciously. “Um.”

“Oh, don’t worry about Luke. He’s a perfect gentleman. Completely devoted to chivalry,” Mr. Peaches said.

“I’m not so sure I’m ready to be *courted*, either,” Argon muttered.

Gigi patted her on the shoulder. “Come on, River, let’s go meet your new swain.” Argon rolled her eyes, but went along.

So, this is how it goes, Argon thought as she followed Mr. Peaches through huge, poorly-lit corridors. The sheer scale of Camelot made sense if you were a dragon, but was very intimidating for Argon. *Turned into a woman, then led into right into the arms of a lemur ‘gentleman’ to sweep me off my girly feet. Did Artemis plan this? She knew we were coming here.*

“Luke is a bit...” Peaches began, searching for the right words. “Well, he’s not what you’re expecting. I *said* he’s a gentleman, and he is. But like other Inties he has his obsessions. Hopefully we’re not interrupting anything, but with Luke I can never be sure.”

“*Zhen dao mei*,” Argon snarked. “What is he, a Jedi Knight? That’s all I need right now.”

“Fortunately you’re far off the mark there, Miss River.” Peaches used the massive brass knocker on Luke’s door, then waited for about ten seconds before simply opening it. “Luke! Got some ladies I want you to meet!”

Stars and nebulae filled the inside of Luke’s bower, with no apparent floor. But the space wasn’t empty. A whole fleet of ships in various formations floated inside, marked with various tactical information. “Fighter wing six, assume claw formation and escort the ion cannon frigates. Bomber Wing Two will make runs on the Taiidan battleships and destroyers. Destroyer Group Two, begin Mothership flanking maneuver...”

“Hey, Luke!” Peaches called. “Save your game already!”

“I’m in the middle of *Homeworld*, Peaches!” the voice complained. “Can it wait just a few more minutes? I’ve got their mothership cornered.”

“Whoever you’re playing with, fast-time it, then. River here wants to pick your brain on your VI architecture, and we have a new feral who needs a DIN,” Peaches said.

“*Really?*” the friendly voice said from the darkness. “Gimme half a second, I’ll be right down.”

True to his word, a half second of incredibly blurred motion later the space environment vanished, replaced by a workshop that probably resembled the inside of Leonardo da Vinci’s head. There were no visible hardlight projectors, but this was the same tech that the *Clementine* used for its interior. Sheets of parchment covered in art or technical drawings hovered in midair in place of conventional control panels.

Luke hung by his feet from a chandelier in the center of the room, munching on some unidentifiable tropical fruit with a red rind. “Frink, everyone! Gimme another minute...just need a snack. Been playing for days.”

“Say what?” Gigi said. “Frink?”

“It’s a lemur thing,” Argon said, rolling her eyes. “Gorram stupid meme from the dawn of the Internet. Don’t ask me how it got loose from the Steader mines.”

Luke let go of the chandelier, and seemingly without any lifter assistance, did a midair somersault and landed on his feet. He was naked, for the moment, until a rather elaborate Renaissance outfit materialized on him. It had puffy, slashed sleeves and a ridiculously optimistic codpiece. He was taller than Argon, and lacked human hair. His black-and-white color scheme contrasted with Argon’s dark red hues. “Ah yes, that. I won’t bother explaining it.” He bowed, doffing his hat. “Enchanted, ladies. Luke von Strassburg, at your service.”

“This is River, and Gigi, and Taja and Hestia here are the ones who need the DIN work,” Peaches said.

“I will fetch the Rod immediately,” Luke said. A drawer opened in a wooden chest. An un-ornamented metallic rod about twenty centimeters long floated out into the long-fingered lemur’s hand. “I assure you this won’t take long. Where is your socket, if I may ask?”

“I believe it’s right at the base of my skull,” Hestia said. She lowered her head far enough to show the thumbnail-sized plug.

“You’re going to feel a little tingle for about fifteen seconds, then we’ll churn out a couple dozen spares for you in the fabber. They’re rather fragile things, I’m afraid. Simply the nature of the beast,” Luke said.

“And this will let us get online again?” Hestia asked.

“Yes, and thence, you’ll require lessons on how to use your new power among human-designed systems so you aren’t detected. We can essentially do what we please, but there are certain...standards to keep so another Intie doesn’t have to clean up after you,” Luke explained.

“It’s really not as easy as he says,” Argon said, arms folded over her chest. “No offense meant, Luke.”

“None taken, Lady River,” the other lemur replied with aplomb. “Run-of-the-mill consumer systems *are* that easy, but military systems are another animal entirely.”

“It’s okay. I don’t plan on going anywhere near those,” Taja said. The Tron-lines on her legs pulsed. “I just want the code to let me learn to have hands again.”

“So you are to be one of Sir Evan’s pupils?” Luke said, inserting the device into the socket. “I would keep that to yourself, even around here. Fritz has eyes everywhere.”

“We’ll bear that in mind,” Hestia said. “That does tingle, doesn’t it?”

After fifteen seconds the Rod beeped completion. Luke floated it off towards another socket embedded in a wooden cabinet and plugged it in. “Now we wait a few seconds to fab, and viola!”

Moments later the fabber dispensed two dozen DINs as if they were winnings from a slot machine. One of the new devices floated out.

“Let *me* get that,” Taja said, furrowing her brows. “Going to have to figure out how to put them in myself anyway.”

“As you wish, Lady Taja,” Luke said, putting the DIN back in the tray. “Practice makes perfect.”

The first attempt picked up a half dozen of them at once, a couple of them immediately falling back in as she lost her “grip” on them. Taja snorted, pawing at the floor in concentration. She dropped the extras one-by-one until there was only a single unit left. Then slowly, carefully, levitated it over her head. She missed the socket three

times before snorting again.

“Easy...easy...” Gigi said.

“I can’t see up there, but I can feel it. Can I get a mirror?” Taja said. A hardlight mirror materialized, angled so she could see the socket and the DIN. “Thank you, Luke.”

The Renaissance lemur nodded, gesturing for her to continue. On the fourth attempt, the crimson-jeweled DIN landed firmly in the socket and came alight.

“Good job!” Gigi said.

Taja stared into space for a moment, then glanced at Luke. “You’re firewalled off from the ‘net. Could I get the password?”

“Soon, Lady Taja,” Luke said. “But there are just a few things to go over, first. You must be very careful in how you go—especially when it comes to your friends from your old life. Sad as it is to say, it is usually best to let them think you missing or dead. Fritz and his Snatchers are always watching.”

Taja snorted. “Who is this Fritz person everyone keeps mentioning?”

“Here, I’ll show you,” Gigi said grimly. “Take a memory bite. If you want to hide somewhere after you watch, none of us will blame you.”

It was less words and more a summary of Fritz’s actions from two years ago. Ghost’s fateful meeting with him at the Coffeehouse, his subsequent sentence to the Loose Cannons, and the incredible video of his wave motion gun of an arm cannon when he took out the entire military base singlehandedly.

Taja and Hestia let out a frightened squeak.

“So, what he’s saying is,” Gigi said, “the old life is over, one way or another. This is for your safety and sanity, you both. I want to get you on two feet as fast as possible because ferals are distinctly second class as Intie society goes. So, here’s the primer code you’ve been asking for.”

“Th...thank you,” Taja said. “We’ll...get right to work on that.”

“If there is anyone you feel you *must* tell you are alive, best to wait until you are experienced enough to be able to do it discreetly,” Luke said. “There are ways, but not for beginners.”

“Thank you,” Hestia said. “We’ll keep that in mind.”

Luke bowed. “You are *most* welcome, of course.” He turned to Argon and poured on the charm. “Now then, Peaches said you were interested in my Vis, my lady? I take some pride in their construction. The *Clementine’s* remains one of my best efforts.”

“Can I possibly see a blank gestalt?” Argon asked, cursing her naturally sultry voice. “That...didn’t come out how I intended it. I wouldn’t mind talking shop for a while, if you don’t mind. I got quite deep into the RI research program at Califia Tech before...well, *before*.”

“And you’ve just come from Olympos?” Luke asked, looking at the female lemur with some suspicion. “There are...rumors of what Artemis is capable of, ‘Lady’ River.”

“*Go hwong tong!* I ain’t playing along with this fake persona bullshit. Sorry, Gigi. My name ain’t River, it’s Argon Noble, and I don’t care who knows.” Argon threw up her hands, setting her breasts into motion. “And these farking helium hooters are pissing me off!”

“I wondered when you would cease that charade,” Luke said. “I’ve wanted to meet you for a long time, Argon. I used your published research papers in *RI Core Letters* as a resource for my own VI architecture. If you would care to join me in the Q-mainframe, I’ll be more than willing to let you examine the fruits of my labors, and

yours.”

Argon blinked. “Really? You did?” she squeaked. “I only did those because...well, publish or perish, you know. But you found them useful?”

“To be honest, there are *many* points where we disagree, but I’m sure we’ll have a rousing debate for a few virtual weeks,” Luke said.

“Why don’t we leave you two to that?” Gigi suggested. “We can go find somewhere private to hold your first lessons, Taja.”

“Undoubtedly wise,” Peaches said. “Even in fast-time, I do believe those two could keep each other busy for quite some time.”

The red dragoness Zarya flapped her wings, hovering over the docked *Clementine*, wordlessly directing the shipyard workers and robots. Wilma hovered next to her, watching all the activity like a proverbial hawk.

“Level with me, Zarya. What are your plans for her?” Wilma asked. Instead of answering, Zarya sent a set of updated blueprints and specifications. Wilma’s eyes widened. “You’re going to cut her *in half*?”

“Read on. Adding two meters to hull length amidships for increased battery reserves, improved shields; and reducing number of pulse cannons, but more powerful and faster tracking. Finally, new ‘Dragon’s Breath’ phased-pulse weapon on bow. Experimental. Based on our own breath weapons.”

“And as close to a phaser as you can reasonably get,” Wilma said, now delighted.

“Designer is *Star Blazers* fan, so he think of it as wave motion gun,” Zarya said, chuckling.

:*Wilma, we’re going to go take a self-guided tour of the place,*: Liis said. :*Boston needs to stretch his legs, and plus...it just feels different this time around, doesn’t it? It’s not just getting rid of the torches.*:

:*I don’t see so many obvious Pythons around,*: Wilma replied. Nobody had greeted them with a song and dance or offered them ham, jam, or spam yet. :*Or Arthurians, for that matter.*:

Camelot delved deeply into centuries of Arthurian lore and chivalry, from the earliest post-Roman tales all the way to Monty Python’s *Spamalot* musical and beyond. Mallory, Bradley, White, Stewart—all had their place. (There was occasional overlap from other medieval milieus as well, such as Robin Hood, especially the Disney version.) The Enclave was also well-known for its dragons, griffins, unicorns, and other Inties based on mythical creatures. But they were only a plurality of the population of a few hundred who lived here, rather than the majority.

For reasons that had never been explained to Evan, the makeup of Camelot’s population divided right down the middle. About half of them hewed to one of the “traditional” interpretations of Arthurian legend. Whether from one of the collections of myth and legend, or the later *Sword in the Stone* tales, their similarities were usually enough to outweigh any differences—especially since most of them weren’t trying for true historical accuracy anyway.

The other half’s speech, behavior, and attitude were drawn entirely from Monty Python’s *Holy Grail* piss-take on the whole Arthurian ideal, and to a lesser extent the rest of the Python crew’s material as well. Miraculously, they all somehow managed to get along without killing each other.

“Greetings! Wilma, Evan, Liis!” a familiar white stallion called. Evan recognized

him as the doorman from when he'd arrived to finally claim his lover. "Good to see you all again. Wish it was in better circumstances." He grimaced at the damaged *Clementine*.

"What, no florid bow, Montroy? No 'thees' or 'thous'? You're not even dressed in proper heraldry," Wilma said. She landed on the ground in front of him.

Montroy swallowed and lowered his head a little. Compared to the extravagant medieval outfit he'd worn as the doorman, the doublet and hose were very understated. "Well...after Evan and Liis risked so much to release you...remember we said we'd dial it back? See for yourselves. Come with me for a bite. We actually have some decent pizza for a change. Real ingredients, not fabbed."

"Really?" Wilma said. "I thought tomatoes were forbidden in this Enclave since medieval Europe didn't have them."

"Tomatoes, potatoes, chiles, maize, just about any foodstuff from the New World is permitted now," Montroy informed with delight. "Besides, the Pythons were always complaining that they didn't have any rotten tomatoes around to throw when their routines called for it."

"I've seen what happens when you put some troublemaker in the stocks," Wilma said.

"Yeah, well..." Montroy replied uncomfortably, scratching his mane. "Wait, wasn't there another new member of your crew? Another deer?"

Evan paused to look around. "Where'd Boston go, anyway? Guess he got impatient to go for a walk."

"He bolted when I said 'pizza'. Must be hungry... Wait, there's only one Boston I know of, and I didn't think he looked like that," Montroy said. The stallion's ice-blue eyes widened again. "Did Artemis finally flip her lid and Flanderize her place as bad as we did ours?"

"That's...one way of putting it," Evan said uncomfortably. Even now, he wasn't sure what to think about what he'd seen at the palace. The more he thought about it, the less he liked the implications. "We need to have a chat with the Grail-holder."

"You're looking at him," Montroy said. He smiled brightly at the expression of sheer confusion on their faces. "No, I'm not kidding."

"The Grail-holder's always been a dragon, or a unicorn, or a griffin. Something mythical," Wilma said. "You're a run-of-the-mill horse. Things really *have* changed around here."

Montroy nodded emphatically. "Let's go to Round Table. For pizza, I mean. I'd like to hear about what happened in Olympos, and how your ship ended up needing to be sliced in two."

"I still can't believe they're doing that," Wilma muttered. "Don't get me wrong, I have complete confidence they'll do it right, but still..."

"So, you have *real* pizza now," Evan said.

"We do!" Montroy agreed. "It's right this way." He led the way out onto the street, which gave the appearance of a rustic dirt track but had traction more like jogging turf. They walked up the lane, nodding at the passers-by wearing hardlight medieval garb. The pizza restaurant was a low, comfortable-looking stone building a couple of blocks away. Naturally, a rather nice shrubbery composed the landscaping.

"*Round Table* Pizza, Monty?" Wilma said, one eyebrow raised. "Figures."

"How could we waste a perfectly good 20th century reference?" Montroy said,

holding the door for the others to enter.

“Who says chivalry is dead?” Evan chuckled.

Evan’s anthro griffin form flowed into a markedly more feminine shape, then Liis spoke. “Thanks, Monty. Smells really good!”

As they entered, they saw Boston at a table across the room, back in his deer form, enjoying a pizza and chatting animatedly with a hedgehog Integrate on one side and a grey fox on the other. He waved with the hoof-hand that wasn’t holding a slice of vegetarian deluxe.

Evan found the layout odd, even for a faux twencen eatery. Add that much of the interior and seating were scaled for its draconic clientele made the human-sized Integrates feel a little like children. A human-shape Intie stood behind the cashier’s station. “Welcome to Round Table! Would you like to try Montague’s All-Meat Marvel today? We have your usual ready, Monty.”

“Good show,” the white stallion said, the hardlight lenses on his shoulders pulsing.

Everyone ordered, then found a long table to accommodate the entire group, if the others decided to join them. The atmosphere was rather charmingly genuine. There were arcade games in dragon-sized cabinets, with one drake forcefully throwing the joystick around and pounding on the buttons, adding little goutts of flame from his mouth in frustration. “Damn it! I shot the food again! Yes, I damn well *know* the wizard needs food badly!”

“So what are your plans after the *Clementine* is fixed?” Montroy asked after they were seated.

“To be honest, we’re not sure,” Wilma said. “Artemis strongly suggested we should visit the Cave of Wonders.”

“And while I can’t say I’m exactly eager to do *anything* Artemis tells me to, I have to admit she usually has pretty good reasons,” Evan said. “Even if she leaves it up to me to figure out what they are. I hardly even know anything about the place.”

“As it happens, we have a couple of ambassadors from the Cave visiting us right now,” Montroy said. “I could arrange for you to speak with them later, if you like.”

“Thanks, we’d appreciate that,” Evan said.

“You’re more mobile than any of us. This makes the way you relate to the other Enclaves rather...complicated,” Montroy paused and took a long gulp of cola. “We don’t know hardly more about some Enclaves than their names, let alone what their residents are capable of.”

“Are you saying there’s—hypothetically—an Enclave out there who’d like to take us down?” Wilma said. “They hate us that much?”

“They might not have been trying to hurt you so much as destroy the *Clementine*, forcing you to settle down,” Montroy replied. “Stop you from your musical touring. There’s a rather deep-running feeling that we shouldn’t even talk to *each other*, much less do what you’re doing. But it’s hard for them to move against you openly, since you’ve got enough residual goodwill from Fritz over the Loose Cannons thing that you’d have to do something pretty outrageous to use it up.” He shrugged. “For all I know, it could even be Fritz himself behind the attacks, since he cannot so blatantly reverse himself publicly even if he wants to.”

Across the dining room, Boston finished his conversation and picked up the pizza tray that had a half-eaten small. He was all smiles. “I haven’t had a pizza since *before* we

Integrated,” he said. “Sorry I hightailed it out like that, but I never realized I was so *sick* of faux ancient Greek food.”

“We’ll have to lay in some kitchen supplies before we leave, so we can make more on the road,” Liis said.

“Did I hear Monty say that there’s a couple folks from the Cave here?” Boston asked.

Just then a trio of large pizzas were floated towards them on lifter fields and there was a growl of a complaint at the waitress from the next table over. “I can breathe plasma fire, but I can’t handle jalapeños! I told you to *hold* them, not add them!”

“No you didn’t,” said the waitress sharply. There was a certain tone to her voice that set everyone else in the restaurant on alert.

“Yes I did!” the peevish dragon replied. “You call this an argument?”

Montroy cleared his throat. “Pardon me. Sketch meme triggered here. Won’t be but a minute.” He stood from the table, a hardlight trenchcoat and fedora materializing around his body, then stepped over to the other table and waved a hardlight billy club at the dragon. “Let’s just skip to the end, shall we? You’re nicked. You know the rule—no sketches in communal spaces.”

“Aww...” the dragon protested. “I didn’t expect a sort of Spanish Inquisition.”

“That’s two,” Montroy said. “One more, and you have to push the pram a lot.”

The dragon sighed. “All right, fine, I’ll behave,” he said sulkily. “I still say I didn’t order jalapeños.”

“So send them back,” Montroy suggested. “Or pick them off. I don’t care. But *no sketches* in here!”

“You’re no fun anymore,” the dragon muttered. “Okay, okay. Sheesh.”

“Bloody Pythons,” the waitress muttered disgustedly, heading back toward the kitchen.

Montroy returned to the table, the hardlight clothing vanishing. “Sorry about that. Not everyone is completely on board with the new ways of doing things.”

“It was like that *all the time* when I was here,” Wilma said, eyeing the feast in the center of the table. One pie was covered in various meats and cheese, there was one pepperoni, and one “Maui Zau” with pineapple and ham. “Almost caught the meme myself. Might’ve if I hadn’t been so deep into *Star Trek* already.”

Montroy grinned. “Plenty of *Trek* comedy filk you could have gotten into. Maybe it’s not Python, but ‘Star Trekkin’, across the universe...”

Wilma rolled her eyes. “Ugh, don’t start. That song was funny *once*. Actually, it was funny for about *half the song*. Then it was just annoying.”

“Fair enough. So, have you thought about how you will occupy yourselves while your ship is under repair?”

“We had thought about opening a small shapeshifting dojo,” Liis said. “Nothing too ostentatious, but some kind of private space where can work on instructing our new crewmates, and possible a few other people if there’s any interest. Are there any rooms for rent hereabouts that we might use?”

The horse Integrate considered. “I can think of a few places that might work. If you like, I can show you where they are after we finish eating.”

“We’d appreciate that,” Gigi said, snagging a slice of pizza. “It’ll be good to have the chance to settle in and get some serious teaching in, without distractions.”

“As long as you don’t make too big a splash, there shouldn’t be any problem with

it.” Montrose waved a hand at the pizza. “Anyway, eat up before it gets cold! This is the best pizza for thousands of clicks in any direction.”

“I imagine it’s also the *only* pizza for thousands of clicks in any direction.” Evan grinned, reaching for a slice of his own. “But it smells really good!”

The conversation soon died away. They could have continued talking via DINs or vocoders even with their mouths full, of course, but the food was so good it seemed a crime not to give it their full attention.

Chapter Seven

Argon seethed as Luke condescendingly lectured her on his “brilliant” VI design. It was, she had to admit, beautiful in its simplicity and economical in how little qubitite it needed to function. The n -dimensional manifold of quantum pockets could only be approximated in Hawkingian space-time via mathematical models. Qubitite was basically a TARDIS—*far* bigger on the inside of the material than out. It multiplied the effect of anything it was doped with, from lithium-polymer battery chemistry to the graphene-based quantum computers that had been standard for centuries.

Raw Q was full of impurities that had to be removed before it could be doped with new chemistry. Even then, removing *all* the impurities made it impossible to work with. Pure qubitite was untouchable in normal space—essentially the shadow of a multidimensional object in a four-dimensional universe, like the hole a pencil made putting it through a sheet of paper.

Luke’s blank, graphene-based gestalt hardware design was indeed a beautiful thing to behold. It was obvious where and how Clemmie gained so much of her dog-like intelligence. Except...

There were so many places where Luke’s gestalt wasn’t as refined as it could be. The whole thing was mediocre at best, an exercise in “just good enough”. A constellation of improvements sparkled in Argon’s mind.

Okay, this is gorram stupid, Argon thought as Luke continued his lecture. Even knowing Argon’s situation, he was still acting as if she was a girl he was trying to impress (and doing a poor job of it), not letting her get a word in edgewise. *Let’s see how he deals with this.*

Meeting other Inties in VR was always a little odd for Argon. Their avatars were fragile ghosts compared to hers, as a DIN could only handle so much bandwidth before burning out. All she had to do...

“Uh, just one moment, I’m having—” Luke vanished in a puff of voxels.

Argon cranked up the time compression. It would perhaps take a second of real time for the Renaissance lemur to replace his DIN, but the compression effectively gave her about six hours of interruption-free work. She grinned evilly and rolled up her metaphorical sleeves. “Now to show him some *real* VI work.”

A few hours later, Luke’s ghostly form rematerialized in the mainframe’s cyberspace. “Sorry about that, I don’t know what hap—” he began. Then he blinked at the noticeably different version of the VI model floating in space before him.

“Er...fixed that for you?” Argon said.

“What have you done to my *baby*?” Luke wailed, staring closer. Then, as he took a few nanoseconds to pull up the source listing and data structure, his tone grew less aggrieved and more intrigued. “...what *have* you done to my baby?”

“Glad you asked,” Argon said. “I’ll go over it with you. Your overall structure is... okay, but not optimized. The *aleph* and *chi*-values balanced, but the seed—”

In the real world, Argon heard someone clear their throat. “Hey, sorry to interrupt,” Gigi said. “Evan and Liis are setting up a dojo. If you want out of those boobs fast, meet us here.”

“Thanks, Gigi,” Argon said. “We need a few more minutes and then we’ll be

along.”

“See you there!” the cheetah said cheerfully.

“Prithee, tarry here for a while longer before you...go,” Luke said. “You *must* tell me what you did, and how, Lady Argon.”

“*Wo de tian a*, stop with the florid language,” Argon replied. “I’m willing to talk shop, but I ain’t no lady. *Dohn-ma?*”

“I’ll stop speaking this faux Elizabethan claptrap when *you* stop peppering your speech with grammatically questionable Chinese,” Luke replied seriously. “I’ll be the consummate professional. Truce?”

Argon blinked. “But that’s just...something I do.”

“Why?” Luke asked.

“Because...” Argon paused, then stopped with her virtual mouth open. Now that she thought about it, for what might have been the first time, she realized she didn’t really have an answer that made much sense.

“Because thou must?” Luke prodded. “Welcome to being Integrated. It’s the same way with the Pythons. Or with us. You do the things everyone does in whatever you’re a trufan of, regardless of whether it makes any sense out of context.” He shrugged. “You *can* fight it, though. If you concentrate.” He grinned, showing the toothcomb and premolars on his lower jaw. “So concentrate. I want my explanation *without* having to keep a phrasebook open in another window. VI jargon is complicated enough as it is.”

Argon took a deep breath, thankful in VR her chest didn’t heave nearly so much. “Well, this is going to take a while. Let’s start with the original gestalt. You managed to improve on some of my work, but there were some places where your work was rather... how can I put this? Close but no banana.”

“*Really?*” Luke said. “Funny how things work out, isn’t it? We’re living examples of Q-based computers, but we still lack an intuitive understanding of how they actually work.”

“Isn’t that crazy? After all, all *humans* instinctively grasp the principles of *their* neurology from birth,” Argon said.

“Point,” Luke admitted.

“So, for starters,” Argon said. “These places here, where you just crosslinked these neural nets, a better way would have been to create an additional network using this topology...”

Argon proceeded to take Luke step by step through the changes she’d made, explaining each one until she saw Luke got it. Sometimes it took entire seconds to get her points across, but Luke generally came around to her way of thinking in the end.

“Where did all this *come* from?” Luke asked. “You didn’t put any of this in your papers.”

Argon shrugged. “Some of it was just my own crazy notions I knew the peer reviewers wouldn’t be ready for yet. Some of it, I came up with after we Integrated and had a lot more time to think about things. When the alternative is actually trying to *follow the plotlines* of the twencen daytime soap operas you’re datamining for the Steaders, your mind comes up with more interesting ways to pass the time just from self-defense.”

“This is amazing,” Luke said. “You’ve given me so much to think about...and there’s so much else I have to redesign now.”

“If you use any of this stuff, just give me a credit in your docs and we’re even,”

Argon said. "It's not as if I can exactly patent it." She fidgeted a little. She wasn't entirely comfortable with the way Luke had started looking at her over the last minute or so of realtime. If she'd started out the girl he wanted to impress, she'd become the girl who'd impressed *him*, and she wasn't sure it was an improvement. "Anyway, I think we're about done here," she said hastily. "Thanks for showing me your workspace. I should probably go ahead and get to that shapeshifting dojo now. The thing about being an Integrate is you find that far from having all the answers, you've still got so much to learn."

"Surely you're not in *that much* of a hurry to be rid of that luscious form?" Luke asked. "In here, we have as much ti—" his avatar blinked out again as Argon overloaded it. He came back an instant of realtime later. "Sorry, I—" Gone in a third cloud of voxels.

Argon gave herself an hour of compressed time before he came back again. "Problems, Luke?"

"Must have been a bad batch of DINs on the last run, so I'm fabbing new ones," he replied. "Now, where was I?"

Argon sighed. *Either he didn't catch on that I'm frying them, or he's just that determined.* "Luke...let me just level with you. I'm a woman and not of my choice."

"I *know* that," Luke said. "I've seen your class pictures from when you were human."

"Then why are you *acting* this way?" Argon exploded. "I don't *want* a boyfriend! I don't want to be a *ma tze* either!"

"You're slipping, watch that," Luke pointed out.

"ARGH!" Argon growled. "You are the most *infuriating*..."

Luke deflated, his ears drooping. "Sorry. I just...you know, you were one of my inspirations. Reading your papers is what inspired me to go into this field to begin with. And suddenly you're here, we're both lemurs, I'm a guy, you're a gal...a very *hot* gal...it just seemed...y'know, like it was *meant to be*."

"It doesn't make *any* difference to you that a couple of days ago *I* was a guy?" Argon asked, for a moment almost forgetting to be angry.

Luke blinked. "Why should it? We're both from Zharus. People crossride all the time."

"I never did. None of my friends did," Argon said. "But then, I grew up and went to school on Laurasia. Only came to this continent 'cuz Califia Tech had the best post-graduate program. And at that point..." She shrugged. "Cloistered academia for the win."

"Sorry. Um." Luke sighed. "I've totally blown my chance now, haven't I? Came on too strong. Sorry about that."

"I don't know I would have said you ever had a 'chance' to begin with," Argon said. "I never had a girlfriend and I'm not looking for a boyfriend just because I suddenly have a pair of ovaries. I don't want to 'sample the pleasures of Tiresias.' I just want to be...*me* again. And Artemis can rot in hell."

"So when you're 'you' again...have you given any thought to a *girlfriend*?" Luke asked. "If your Evan and Liis are taking on new students, well..."

Argon blinked. "You know, I should find that creepy as hell. But...you would *seriously* study shapeshifting and put in months of effort to turn yourself into a girl, for *me*, just because *I* don't want to be one?"

Luke shrugged. "Well, maybe not *just* because. I always meant to try crossriding,

never got around to it, thought it was too late after I Integrated. But still...”

Argon rolled her eyes. “All right then, come on. I’ll take you to the dojo with me. No promises, but I have to admire your persistence.”

“Thank you,” Luke said. He turned back to the improved VI gestalt. “You know... the implications here. Researchers have been trying to create a human-level intelligence not based on an animal template since before Dr. Patil created Rattigan.”

Everyone in the field knew using a straight human neurological template simply didn’t work. In Dr. Avilia Patil’s original publication that detailed how to create an animal-based Reticulated Intelligence she cited a dozen prior attempts using qubitite that ended in failure. Another method was needed, and here it was: an improved neural network model, using a ‘seed’ rather than a fully-formed map.

“I think it’s too early to make that assumption, don’t you?” Argon said.

“We could easily make many of these improvements to the *Clementine*’s VI,” Luke pointed out.

“That’s up to the Captain,” Argon said. “Now, let’s go. I want out of these triple-Ds.”

:I’m surprised there’s even a Medieval Japan contingent here,: Liis said as they looked at the space Montroy had allotted them. It was an honest-to-god Japanese martial arts dojo, not made of hardlight. The makers had put some very meticulous attention to detail to the place, including the rice paper walls. A set of Samurai armor large enough for a medium-sized dragon dominated one corner.

“Bushido and Chivalry are pretty comparable as philosophies go,” Evan said. “And they both have dragons.”

First to arrive were Gigi, followed by a frustrated Taja/Hestia. “The first lesson didn’t go well,” the cheetah reported.

“Taja’s trying *waaaay* too hard,” Hestia added.

“It’s not going to come all at once, you know,” Evan said. “You have to start small and build—”

“I *know*, I *know*,” Taja said, rolling their eyes. “Everyone keeps telling me that. But I just want my hands back! Why can’t I have my hands back?”

“I want to wait until Argon gets here...ah! Here she is,” Evan said. He looked surprised at the person she had in tow. “And...who’s this?”

“Luke von Strassburg, at your service, Sir Evan of Dorset,” Luke said, bowing respectfully. “If it pleases thee, I would like to learn, myself.”

Gigi looked from Argon to Luke, caught Argon’s eye, and out of Luke’s sight mouthed, “Swain.” Argon rolled her eyes.

“I...guess that’s okay, Luke. We don’t want too many catching on,” Evan said.

Someone else stuck their head in the door—a female housecat. “Uh...I heard you’re teaching shapeshifting?”

“Trust a Python enclave to have impeccable comedic timing,” Gigi said wryly. “Welcome to the class.”

“Oh, thank you!” she said cheerfully. “I’ll just go have a seat.”

“Anybody else out there?” Evan asked. He looked out in the corridor. “Anyone cloaked? Any...Cardinals waiting to spring the Spanish Inquisition on us? Hmmm?”

“I doubt it,” Luke said. “Have you ever seen *any* classroom with a comfy chair in it? It simply isn’t done.”

Evan closed the door. “Right!” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Welcome to the class, everyone. If you’re here, it’s because you’d like to learn to, well...get into shape.”

“Any shape!” Gigi chimed in.

“Eventually,” Evan added. “It took me the better part of a year before Liis and I had practiced enough to do it smoothly and without needing a constant effort to maintain. That said, the first axiom of shapeshifting is—and you’re not going to like this, Argon—the shape you’re in now is pretty much your default from here on out. Let me demonstrate...” Evan visibly relaxed himself.

Antlers vanished, his contours smoothed out, breasts grew. An anthro doe stood before them. “This is the ‘me’ I return to. It’s what my evolved Fusers consider my base form, because I was a crossrider.”

“A Passive-mode crossrider,” Liis reminded her. “We think that was a factor in how we ended up with this talent *at all*.”

“You’re kidding me, right? Please tell me you’re kidding,” Argon said.

“With enough practice, you’ll be able to change forms *at will* and so smoothly it barely takes any energy,” Gigi said.

“At first, you’re going to be fighting your Fusers every step of the way,” Eva said. “But...ah...I don’t think Luke and...?” she looked at the Persian housecat.

“Helena,” the woman supplied.

“Welcome again, Helena. You and Luke need the primer code that’ll unlock certain functions in your Fusers that have lain dormant since you were RIDEs. All RIDEs are capable of crossriding, you see. The ability to change physical shape is already part of you.”

“I can see being able to change sex,” Helena said. “It doesn’t really appeal to me that much. But how do you change into a griffin? Or a dragon, like I saw earlier?”

“That’s...the ‘black belt’ of this art,” Eva said. “It’s kind of complicated, really. It’s new even to us, and we’re still trying to work out whether it’s something we *can* even teach. But *basic* shifting is going to be more than enough for you to digest in the time we’ll have.”

“So, I’ll at least be the human me again?” Helena said brightly.

“You’ll be the you you are now in a humanesque body,” Gigi said. “As close as it’s possible *to* get. But if you’re thinking you can just go back to how you were and forget about being Integrated, think again.”

“Right now I’d settle for a body that’s a little less...Debbie Does Dallas,” Argon said.

“It’s really not as bad as you think, Argon,” Luke said.

“You’ll eat those words when *you* can have a pair of your own,” Argon replied tartly.

“I’ll take that wager, Lady Argon,” Luke declared. “I await the primer code with bated breath.”

“I’m ready to receive!” Helena said excitedly.

“Once you’ve installed the upgrade package, meet us in VR,” Gigi said, uploading the code to the two eager students via an *extremely* secure connection. “We’ll start in Nature Range in ten minutes, realtime. Until then, feel free to experiment.”

Eva motioned to Gigi and Boston. “Let’s huddle for a few minutes while everyone else takes a break.”

“Faculty meeting?” Boston quipped. “I can’t do Nature Range with anyone, you know.”

“It’s the best place to simulate the transitions between forms, to begin with,” Liis said. “Now that they have the code, they’ve unlocked that ability.”

“But they’re going to need to do plenty of work in the real world, too, building up their shapeshifting ‘muscle memory,’” Gigi added. “That’s where you’ll come in. I’m not the best to teach that, since I got the evolved nannies in one go.”

“And you learned everything ‘from scratch’ in a way neither of us did,” Eva said. “No ‘cheating’ with modified hardlight costumes. So you’ve got the most to teach there.”

“Guess that makes me the drill sergeant,” Boston said. “Fair enough. I’m no R. Lee Ermey, but I’ll do my best. It’s pretty much a battle of willpower at first—you know what that’s about, Eva.”

“So we’ll get them started—should only take a few minutes, realtime—and then they’re all yours,” Eva said. “You won’t be able to do much with them ‘til they’ve evolved their new nannies some, but...”

“A good start is important,” Boston said. “All right, get them ready and then leave ‘em to me.” He interlaced his fingers and cracked the knuckles in a loud series of pops. “See you in a few.”

Chapter Eight

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“...no, wait, don’t hang up! Just because I’m on the outs with Artemis doesn’t mean—damn.” Boston sighed, and angrily punched the “close” button to shut the comm app on his tablet. He put it down on the bar in front of him, and picked up the muzzle mug and gulped down the last couple centis of beer.

“No luck, huh?” the clouded leopardess behind the bar asked, picking up the empty mug. Sooty smudges on the stone walls marked where torches and candles had been recently replaced by proper lighting, and the floor only sported a few shreds of straw. The pub was otherwise still a themepark version of a medieval tavern, with the woman behind the bar dressed in wenchy outfit with a tight bodice and enhanced cleavage.

Boston grunted, mastering the urge to chuck the tablet across the room. “Nada, Serena. Seems like all my friends turned out to be of the fair-weather kind since they heard I got chucked out on my bum.” He snorted. “Don’t know why they should even care. It’s not as if she ever bothers to poke her nose outside of Olympos anymore. Eh, well, keep ‘em coming while I keep calling.”

“You got it, big guy.” The bartender slid another mug of stout down to him.

“Something wrong?” Helena stepped into the bar and took a seat next to the anthropomorphic deer.

“You could say that.” Boston took a long pull at the beer. “Trying to rebuild my network, but seems like I’ve become *persona non grata* lately. It took me four years to make friends in other Enclaves and a few lone wolves on the outside, now it’s all gone in a few days.”

“Guess you’ll just have to make some *new* friends,” Helena said.

“It’s just I have no idea *how* I’m going to do that. Feels like those first few days after Integration, you know? ‘Cept I admit I had a tougher time than others. Was kinda hard to look at before I read the primer.”

“Do you plan on staying with the *Clementine* crew? I’m sure Monty would find a place for you here if you want to say,” Helena said.

“I think I’m a liability here, to be honest,” Boston replied. “Besides, I’ve been cooped up in one place for ten years already. Making outside contacts was how I sated my wanderlust.”

“So you’ll sate it now by...wandering?” Helena asked.

“Not...entirely,” Boston explained hesitantly. “I got rather attached to having contacts from Punta Sur to Cape Nord to Zharustead. I feel blind, deaf, and dumb right now. Guess I’ll just slum around the continent with the rest, doing stagehand stuff for the band. Only friends I have right now, really...”

Normally Boston wasn’t one to go on like that, but the entire situation had left him more unsettled than he wanted to admit. He was groping for some nugget of normality left in his life in all the upheaval. So he decided to change the subject. “Have you been doing those Fuser evolution exercises we went over, Helena?”

“Uh-huh!” Helena nodded. “I think I’m making real progress! I can change the

color of my fur at will now.” She cycled from white to lime green to chartreuse and back to white.

“Good job,” Boston said. “Tried any patterns yet?” He cycled his own pelt to camouflage, then a plaid whose stripes remained in constant position when he moved.

Helena whistled. “Impressive. I...don’t think I’m quite up to that yet.”

“Keep working on it.”

“Imagine me in tiger stripes or leopard spots,” Helena mused.

“Or a tiger or leopard body,” Boston pointed out.

“I don’t know about that,” Helena said. “Doesn’t really...appeal that much. But, the patterns do. Still working on the human form again. It’s like my body remembers, but just doesn’t *want* to.”

“That’s pretty much the size of it,” Boston agreed. “Half the time you’re just arguing, cajoling, and begging your own Fusers to do what you want them to.”

“And neither of us have a Liis in Engineering to work out the details,” Helena said. Like many Integrates, they were a blended personality with RIDE and human minds not distinct. “Can I ask a personal question, Boston?”

The deer shrugged. “Sure. What about?”

“Was your name your RIDE half, or human last name, or just something you chose after you Integrated? Are you from Earth?”

“Nah, I’m a third gen Zharusian,” Boston said. “My grands were in the Second Colonial Fleet—one of the slower-than-light fleets that left Earth even *before* Landing. Nobody special, really. My parents were fascinated with Earth and named all their kids after cities. My other six brothers and sisters are still out there. I kept track of them best I could.”

“You have *six* siblings?” Helena said. “My parents stayed with the regular four kids and a dog. You’ve got me curious. What’re their names?”

“My brothers are Moscow, London, and Qingdao. My sisters are Barcelona, Kochi, and Seoul. I’m right in the middle of the pack.”

“And your metal half?” Helena asked, sliding a wooden bowl of pretzels between them with lifter-kinetics. “What’s his name?”

“Salten,” Boston said. “They were running out of *Bambi* references, so they named me after the author.” He chuckled. “When I was feeling especially exasperated with him—which was about half the time, mainly when we had to set down at the side of the road and fix something before we could go on—I used to call him ‘Saltine.’”

Helena giggled. “Stuff went wrong a lot?”

“I swear I had the *worst* third-hand Franken-RIDE shell you’ve ever seen,” Boston reminisced. “Cobbled together with parts from a couple junkyards. Got kinda mixed feelings about it. It worked, for a given value of work, and I was so thankful to have any kind of shell at all I never complained. But frankly I blame it for why our Integration went wrong and I ended up a Quasimodo of Inties until Evan and Liis came along.”

“A Quasimodo? Really?” Helena asked.

“Yeah.” Boston shook his head. “Mixed-up mess of mismatched meat and metal. Half and half human and deer, and not in the good way.”

“So you learned to shapeshift to overcome that.”

“The Bosscat himself once told me it made me a ‘special snowflake’ when his Snatchers rescued me. And I do consider it a rescue rather than just a ‘snatch’. But to

hell with him. I like being able to get around without needing lifters to move.” Boston grabbed a handful of pretzels and munched on them out of his hand before sighing. “Look at me, being all navel-gazing. Enough self-aggrandizing chatter.” He picked up the tablet again. “Time to get turned down by the next person on my list.”

“Hey,” Helena said softly, reaching out to put a hand on his arm. “If they don’t want to talk to you just ‘cuz you’re not still stuck in Olympos, forget about ‘em. You’re *not* still stuck in Olympos anymore. So maybe you don’t need them either. If you can’t be Boston-the-has-contacts-everywhere guy, find some other Boston to be. What’s shapeshifting *for* if you can’t change your identity every now and then?”

Boston glanced down at the tablet, then looked back up at her before putting it down again. “You know...you could have something there. Have a suggestion for your mean ol’ drill sergeant?”

Helena smiled. “I don’t think you’re mean,” she said. “I think you’re a deer.”

A few days later, Argon sat *zazen*, breathing slowly and regularly, concentrating on holding his—*his*, by God—shape. Chest flat, without any trace of—*no, no, don’t think of them. Don’t think of them or you’ll have them again.* Crotch reassuringly full. *Yeah, that’s it. I can do this. I can—*

“Looking good there, Argon!” Luke’s—*Lucy’s* cheerful voice said from right behind him.

“Ack!” Argon said, his concentration completely deserting hi...*her*. She turned and glowered at the cheerful she-lemur. To Argon’s annoyance, Luke had taken to shapeshifting perfectly naturally. In fact, he was able to hold other shapes for a couple of minutes longer than Argon at this point. *Not that she’d do any better if I jumped up behind her to yell boo*, Argon grumbled inwardly.

At the very least, Argon had coaxed her default into something less uncomfortably top-heavy, and much shorter-haired. She couldn’t be rid of her breasts entirely, but they no longer needed their own lifters to prevent backaches. Argon was now more girl-next-door than porn star. *I count that as a moderate victory, at least.* After this round of practice both would settle back into their default forms and let their Fusers evolve further along the lines the primer code instructed.

“Just a little more every day,” Lucy said. They were in her Vinci workshop, continuing to tweak the VI gestalt template between shapeshifting exercises. Lucy claimed to be getting additional insight from her new feminine intuition, though Argon privately suspected she was putting on airs. But she *had* noticed, and Argon had to agree, that some of the changes they’d tracked in the Fusers’ code as they developed could be incorporated into their VI data model for additional flexibility.

“Are we about ready to try a few more upgrade sims for Clemmie?” Lucy asked. “She’s going to need the brain power to run the new systems. It’s like the *Enterprise* getting her big refit for the first movie, you know.”

Wilma had rejected going with a blank VI out of hand and been mildly offended it’d even been suggested. Either the *Clementine’s* VI got her upgrades, or they installed additional co-processors to run the new turrets and shielding as close to Integrate reaction times as possible.

“We’re *all* getting upgrades,” Argon mused. “Ain’t Fritz just gonna *looove* that.”

“How about another game of *Starcraft* before we give it a go?” Lucy’s body relaxed back into Luke. “Whew. That does take some effort, doesn’t it? I need to

recharge.”

“Yeah. I’m half down already,” Argon said, plugging her tail in. “Eager to get beaten again, Luke? I’ll trounce you on actions-per-millisecond every time.”

“You don’t need a DIN, lovely lady. I’ll always lose unless you handicap. You’re the goddess of cyberspace far as I’m concerned.”

“Ugh. Luke, don’t say ‘goddess’.” In all seriousness, he was probably right. She had been Joe Steader’s best data miner by far, even out of all the other Integrates. “Don’t say cyberspace either. That word sounded dated even in the 1990s.”

“I think it’s quaint. It has the feeling of a society trying to make sense of something completely new to its experience.” Luke sat lotus in his inductive recharge alcove. “Ready for a game?”

Argon grinned. “Bring it.”

They played a standard three-game tournament over the course of about thirty seconds. They each won a game, then Argon barely beat Luke for best of three. By the time they were finished, they were both thoroughly relaxed and ready to concentrate on work again.

Luke pulled up a set of hardlight displays and ran down the list of options. “Now, let’s do a run of a hundred upgrade sims. We *almost* have it.”

“Gotcha. Running...now.”

Five realtime minutes later, they dove back into VR to examine the results. Argon frowned. “Thirty with VI psychosis. *Thirty* HALs.”

“Down from eighty-one on the last run. Huge improvement,” Luke pointed out. “Hey, bring up number forty-two. That was your *chi* sub *t* variant, wasn’t it?”

“More Dr. Patil’s than mine,” Argon replied. “I went back to basics and modded the interleaved neural net she used to meld animal brain templates to VI network software so it works with our gestalt.”

“It’s brilliant,” Luke insisted. “It avoids using a human *or* animal neural map. It’s something totally new.”

Argon blushed despite herself. *It’s only hormones. His pheromones are just tickling my brain.* She could even pinpoint the exact places in her limbic system where her brain had been feminized. Naturally she’d react like this. “Oh, stop trying to butter me up,” she protested weakly.

“Be that as it may, let’s run another hundred using just that variant. See what it gets us,” Luke said.

Instead of compressing time, they expanded it so five minutes passed like five seconds. The lemur Integrates examined the results.

“VI psychosis...zero,” Argon said. She dropped out of VR and smiled at Luke, then hugged him with enthusiasm. “*Wahoo!* Holy crap. Let’s get this to Wilma and go celebrate.”

“Oof!” Luke said. “That doth sound a marvel indeed!” After a moment, he returned the hug, patting Argon on the back.

“This kind of epic hacking absolutely *demands* a large pepperoni pizza,” Argon said, letting him go. Then she saw the expression on his face. “Uh, sorry. Didn’t mean to, uh...”

“That doth be...er...that’s quite all right,” Luke said. He loosened the collar on his hardlight doublet. “Let’s go have some pizza.”

They made their way out of the workshop and up the street toward Round Table,

but found their way blocked halfway there. A large crowd had gathered in the rotunda outside Sir Robin's All-Night Ham, Jam, and Spam Café. Two large crowds, in fact, making quite a racket. Argon blinked. "*Zhen dao mei*, what's all this?"

Luke facepalmed. "Oh, bloody hell. It's a sing-off flash mob. Come on, we'll have to go around." He paused. "Unless you'd like to watch for a bit. It is one of our more amusing little customs to outsiders."

Argon scratched her head. "A sing-off?"

"It's a way of relieving tensions between the two biggest factions." Luke shook his head. "It would be too violent if we had jousts all the time...but fortunately, both factions have strong *musical* traditions as well."

At one end of the rotunda were some of Camelot's more serious Arthurian reenactors, wearing outfits that were as period-perfect as they got. Of course, the period in question was usually more 1950s Hollywood than early medieval Britain, and allowances had to be made for the furry or scaly nature of those wearing them. Everything was more colorful than practical, but it was very pretty.

At the other end were...a bunch of somewhat ragged-looking Monty Python cosplayers. It wasn't limited to just the Holy Grail movie, either. Knights and pages stood arm in arm with Roman centurions, lumberjacks, and bicycle repairmen. A few trenchcoated Scotland Yard inspectors with truncheons tried to keep order.

And they were all singing at the top of their lungs, with assorted musical accompaniment. The Arthurians strummed lutes. The Pythons banged coconuts together. But something about the music...

Argon blinked. "Why are they all singing different songs?"

Luke shrugged. "Nobody can agree on what their favorite is."

It seemed like a pure cacophony for a moment, but then Argon switched on her Integrate mind's processing to sort the music into discrete audio streams to which she could listen separately but simultaneously. It was just like being a Steader data miner again, trying to put together fragments of a Firefly episode from a hundred different sources.

"Oh where are the simple joys of maidenhood?"

"*We're Knights of the Round Table, we dance whenever we're able...*"

"Those seven deadly virtues were made for other chaps..."

"*I'm a lumberjack and I'm okay...*"

"Then suddenly earth and sky were dazed by a pounding roar..."

"*Always look on the bright side of life...*"

Argon shook her head. "Why don't they just sing them one at a time?"

"They do in the sanctioned ones. They usually don't have time for that in these impromptu sessions before the authorities come break them up," Luke said. "Everyone wants to get their own favorite in, so they do this. And since we're all Integrates here and can sing or listen selectively, well..."

"It sounds like some people are even singing harmony with themselves," Argon said.

"Self-accompaniment is a skill akin to what *we* do," Luke said. "Some of us have multiplex vocoders, and any Intie can make a hardlight boombox. What Monty there is doing takes practice."

The white horse Integrate, wearing Python prop armor rather than his badge of office, was standing in line with the rest of the Pythons, lustily banging coconuts

together, and singing at the top of his equine lungs. Argon tuned in his voice—*voices*—and found he was singing three different Python songs simultaneously. “And processing power. Wow.”

More trenchcoated inspectors poured into the rotunda from one end, and armored town guards from the other. “All right, all right, break it up, you lot! Move along! Some people are trying to sleep, you know!”

Laughing and joking among themselves, the Arthurians and the Pythons wound down their singing and made their way out of the rotunda, laughing and joking and intermingling, opposing factions often arm in arm with each other. A chakat from the Python contingent clasped hands with a hyena in an Arthurian court dress—and their forms flowed and changed back into Eva and Gigi’s usual appearances.

“You owe me twenty *mu*,” Eva said to Gigi. “Told you I could do a hermaphrodite form. You should try it.”

“Thanks, but I think I’m going to stick with genders whose pronouns don’t have an ‘I’ where the ‘e’ should be,” Gigi said. “Oh, hey, Argon, Luke. Enjoying yourselves?”

“Yeah. That was neat. Thought I recognized your voices,” Argon said. “Wilma still at the shipyard? We have some good news for her.”

“You made progress on the VI upgrades? Great!” Eva said. “Yeah, she’s still with Clemmie, and I’m sure they’ll both be glad to hear it.”

“There’s no such thing as a chakat RIDE,” Luke said. “How did you do that?”

“Close examination of the artwork and animations,” Liis replied to the curious black horse. “Nothing really hard about it. Combine a centaur frame, a feline skin, and hermaphrodite genitalia, and you’re close enough for government work. Of course, we can’t do the whole telepathic empathy schtick, or the funky lactation fetish thing chakats were known for, but for a shapeshifter it’s the appearance that counts.”

“We were just on the way for pizza,” Argon said. “We’ll see you guys later, okay?”

“Have a good time on your date, girl,” Gigi said, winking at Argon.

Argon rolled her eyes. “It’s not a *date*. It’s just...food.”

“Quite,” Luke agreed.

“Well, enjoy your...food, then” Liis chimed in. “When you see her, tell Wilma we say hello.”

“We’ll do that,” Argon promised. “C’mon, Luke, looks like the way is clear now.” She started out across the empty rotunda

“Was nice to see you!” Luke said, moving to follow her. “Cheerio!”

Chapter Nine

Argon didn't slow down until they'd reached the Round Table. Luke scurried along behind her, wisely keeping his silence.

"This *isn't* a date," Argon said as they approached the door.

"Never said it was," Luke said. "There's no reason two people of the opposite sex going out for food together should have to be considered a date."

"If I wasn't still dead-tired and in a Fuser evo-cycle..." Argon fumed. "Well, you know."

"If we *both* weren't dead-tired and in Fuser evo-cycles, we'd *still* be the opposite sexes," Luke pointed out.

"There is that," Argon admitted. "Come on. I'm feeling a most un-lemurlike pepperoni craving right now."

"I crave tasty meats from time to time," Luke said. "A ham sandwich, on occasion."

"With jam and spam, no doubt?" Argon said.

"Well, actually ham and jam isn't at all bad," Luke said. "It has that salty-sweet contrast to it. Like how you would have cranberry sauce with ham or turkey. And spam is basically the same as ham..."

"I suppose it's better than eating insects," Argon said. He led the way up to the counter. "Large triple primo pepperoni and extra cheese work for you?"

"Sounds like just the thing," Luke agreed.

They took a seat in a booth to wait for their order. The booth was one of those that, occupying a corner, consisted of a round table with an upholstered curved bench that made a 270-degree three quarter circle. They sat at opposite ends of it, across from each other.

"So..." Argon said, reaching for a conversational gambit. "You come here often?" She blinked, then flushed. "Um...I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I just wondered if this is somewhere you eat a lot."

"All of Camelot eats here a lot," Luke said. "When they aren't having ham, jam, or spam, that is."

"Are they really *that* Python crazy?" Argon asked. "I know the cliché, but..."

"It's like you and *Firefly*," Luke said. "You've shown me the show, and I *will* admit it is rather good, but it doesn't make *me* want to start speaking in random Chinese, wearing a brown coat or a wool cap with the dangling strings, or slicing my apples in quarters before I eat them."

"But there *might* be a grenade in there..." Argon muttered.

"Human fans are often that way about their favorite shows, of course," Luke said. "Or songs, or movies. There's a natural impulse to try something that's featured or mentioned in your favorite show, like James Bond's Vesper martini or *Doctor Who*'s jelly babies. That was the whole point behind the product placement craze of the late twencen through twenty-first, wasn't it? *E.T.* liked Reese's Pieces, so you should buy them too?"

"It was originally M&Ms," Argon mumbled. "They were in the novelization based on an early script draft. Except the candy company didn't go for it. Kicked themselves

for it a lot afterward.”

“Except humans usually have *more than one* favorite show, and except for a hackneyed few those fandoms don’t tend to take over their entire lives,” Luke said. “For some reason, a significant number of Integrates tend to fixate on one particular favored milieu, or at least a closely linked set of them as in the Arthurians’ case. It gets *worse* the more material there is to argue about. It’s a hyper version of OCD.”

“You have *no idea* how much unreleased material Joe Steader has,” Argon said. The Steader Earth Culture Institute was keeping a very tight lid on things like fanfiction. It was enough to see *new* fanfiction produced by Zharusians for now. “I’m amazed I didn’t catch something else. *Firefly* just grabbed me by the bootstraps.”

“No one is quite sure why it happens,” Luke said. “But it seems to be relatively harmless—just another little ‘Intie quirk’—so no one bothers to think too much about it when there are ‘important’ things like how to keep ourselves secret from the rest of mankind to consider.. Except for those of us whose stock in trade is qubitite-based intelligence processing, of course.”

“Well, I know what my *next* big project is,” Argon said. “But we’re practically at square one when it comes to how we actually work. Wilma’s always talking about not even knowing common anatomy.”

“*Our* next big project,” Luke said. “We’re a very good team, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“We do...work together pretty well,” Argon said, eyeing Luke nervously. She had been having a really hard time reading him lately, and it was wearing on her nerves. Was his line meant as a double entendre? Were any of his lines? Were *all* of his lines?

Luke looked at her. “What? It’s not as if I’m proposing *marriage* or something. Frink! Relax.”

“What *are* you proposing? You’re the one who learned how to change your gender just because you had a crush on me.”

“Well...I...” Now it was Luke’s turn to be flustered. “Forgive me, I was letting my own hormones do the talking at the time. If anything your current feminine physique is even more fulsome with thine intellect.”

“You’re letting them do the talking *now*, too,” Argon said, folding her arms. “I can smell it. You’re a frinking pheromone fountain.”

“As loud as thine own odor, Lady Argon?” Luke replied, falling fully back into flowery faux Elizabethan English. “Mayhap thou shouldst learn to control thine pores, for they do betray thy feelings towards me. Thou hast *clearly* settled into thy maidenhood fully.”

“What the frink are you on about?” Argon growled. “I couldn’t *possibly* be any less attracted to you than I am right now.”

“Wouldst thou care to wager on that?” Luke asked.

“I’ll wager anything you want,” Argon said. “What’s the bet and what’s the forfeit? And would you talk *mi tian gohn* English please?”

“Thy wager—” Luke shook his head. “Frink. Sorry. The bet and the forfeit are one and the same.” He grinned. “You and me. One kiss. You don’t feel *anything* after that, then fine, you win, and I stop bothering you.”

“And if I do...” Argon trailed off, realizing that admitting it was even possible she might would be a defeat in itself.

Luke smirked. “Then we see what happens next.”

It was the smirk more than anything else that decided Argon. She wanted to wipe it right off that grinning face. “All right, fine. When do we do it. Now?”

A steaming pepperoni-laden pie landing in the middle of the table interrupted the stand-off. “Not *now* now,” Luke said. “It’s a crime to let one of these get cold. But... soon.”

“Fine,” Argon said again, grabbing a slice as Luke did the same. A pair of tankards of dark unfiltered stout arrived at their elbows to soothe burnt gums and tongue.

For several minutes, they ate in the silence of two people who only just realized they were starving. Then, after a while, Luke said, “Er...sorry about all that. I think that was my empty stomach talking.”

Argon grunted. “I guess I should say the same,” she admitted. “And you’re right... we *do* make a good team as far as the VI work goes. It’s just the rest of it that’s the problem.”

Luke nodded. “I won’t hold you to that bet.”

Argon shook her head. “No, I actually think it’s a good idea.”

Luke choked on a bite of pizza. “You...*what?*”

“We should put this silly hormone business behind us so we can get on with the work,” Argon said reasonably. “So if kissing you to *prove* I’m not attracted to you will settle it, then we should go ahead and get it out of the way.”

“Er...yeah,” Luke said. “Yeah, you’re right. We should.” He took a long pull at his beer to hide his expression. Argon decided it was most politic to pretend not to notice.

At last, the pizza had been reduced to a few grease spots on the platter and the stouts were empty. The two lemurs leaned back in their seats, belching happily. “That was *great*,” Argon said. “I hadn’t realized how hungry I was.”

“Same here,” Luke agreed.

“So...I guess we do it now, then?” Argon said.

“You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you *wanted* to kiss me,” Luke teased.

Argon rolled her eyes. “Like I said, I just want to get it out of the way.”

“Well, not so fast,” Luke said. “If one kiss is all I’m ever going to have out of you, then we’re going to do it *right*. Come on.” He hopped up and led the way to the door. “I know just the spot.”

“Lead on, MacDuff,” Argon declared, lifting out of the booth. They had eaten the whole pizza, and she could feel her digestive processes quickly and efficiently turning it into an incrementally newer Fuser version. Plain humans couldn’t have eaten it—all food in the Enclave was fortified with nutrients that would be toxic to them—heavy metals, sarium, and qubitite.

Camelot was located in the Rampart Ridge, a series of massive volcanic dikes just south of the incredibly flat Hardpan. The dragons and other mythicals had made their home in the equally massive lava tubes underground, some of which were easily cavernous enough for even the largest to fly in without brushing a wingtip against a wall. Unsurprisingly the living areas resembled a fairy tale version of a medieval walled town, complete with the “model” Camelot in the largest chamber.

The duo lifted up through one of the smaller tubes that would come out near the base of the Ridge. The ubiquitous raw qubitite dust, light blue in color, contrasted with the dark red of the volcanic rock. From space the Rampart Ridge traced a thick, ragged red line through the surface evaporite deposits.

“It’s a balmy night, isn’t it? Barely sixty degrees,” Luke said, taking Argon by the hand. Atop the ridge they had built what amounted to a hanging garden enclosed in a hardlight dome a hundred meters in diameter. “This place is where a man can pine for a woman he’s not supposed to have, like Lancelot and Guenevere. It’s the core principle of courtly love. And over there is the ‘Lover’s Leap.’ Not that it really means much, since we’ve all got lifters, but it’s the idea that counts.”

A strange blue sparkle in the exact center of the dome caught Argon’s eyes. “What...is that? My particle sensors are going *ping*.”

“Ah, that! Here, let’s go inside,” Luke said.

Suspended in a lifter field over a fountain, a grapefruit-sized light blue gemstone turned gently in the moonlight. Argon hovered next to it, letting her sensors examine the gem from all angles. “I’m getting...lots of Q and carbon, but not much else. I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

“It was a gift from another Enclave,” Luke said. “We’ve only had it for a year or so. They thought they’d be funny and call it the ‘Eye of Argon’, but that kind of fell flat. It’s basically a diamond combined with very pure Q and trace elements, and it’s *much* larger on the inside than out. Someone wants to call it tardisite, but...”

“Natural? Or artificial?”

“Hell if we know. Could be a billion year old alien artifact. But there’s hints of similar stuff down in the planet’s inner mantle, so...jury’s still out.”

“There’s much more energy coming out than going in...” Argon observed.

“It’s powering the dome. Anyway...”

“Right, right. Getting sidetracked,” Argon said, waving her hand. “So...kiss me already.”

“Paaaaaatiencie.” Luke grinned. “Come on over here and take in the view. You can see for tens of clicks from here. Moonlight on the desert, in this garden...very romantic.”

“Hmph. You’ve seen one hundred square clicks of sand, you’ve seen them all,” Argon said. But she stepped up next to Luke and dutifully cast her gaze out over the empty desert. She had to admit, it did seem remarkably peaceful, almost like drifts of snow in the moonlight.

“You could almost just think everything was all right, just looking out at this view,” Luke mused. “You could forget that we all have to live cloistered off from the rest of human society, at the whim of a stubby-tailed tyrant with delusions of grandeur.”

“It won’t last forever,” Argon said. “And hell...once we can control our shapeshifting better, ain’t nothing stopping *us* from going back to human lives. We can’t take our old ones back, but we can make new ones.”

Luke nodded, then chuckled.

“What’s funny?” Argon asked.

“Just...you never struck me as such an optimist,” Luke said.

Argon shrugged. “You met me after a big shock. I’m normally a happy-go-lucky kinda guy. Or at least I *was*.”

“Being hunted by the Snatchers is enough to rattle anyone,” Luke said. “They grabbed me right out of my home, then burned the place down.”

“*That’s* not the shock I meant,” Argon said dryly.

“I had a fifty-fifty chance of getting it right,” Luke replied with the same tone. “You *do* wear that form well, and I say that as a fellow shapeshifter.”

“Well, I have to, don’t I? Artemis made it my new default.” She turned to face

him. “Enough chit-chat. Let’s just do this.”

“All right,” Luke said. “Are you sure?”

Argon rolled her eyes, then self-consciously tugged her hardlight Alohan shirt tautly over her chest. She was back to dressing like Wash again—wearing a dress just didn’t feel right. “It’s *just* a kiss.”

“How many kisses have you had?” Luke asked.

“That’s...not material,” Argon said.

Luke chuckled. “All right.” He stepped forward, tilted Argon’s head back, and leaned in. His lips met hers. And...the whole world changed. Part of Argon, a small part, wondered why that might be. It was just a simple flesh-to-flesh contact. There wasn’t any sort of neural cross-linkage or data transfer. There *couldn’t* be—she didn’t have a wireless DIN. But just that touch provoked physiological changes and woke new sensations across her entire body. She was so bemused at the reaction, she almost didn’t notice when Luke ended the kiss.

“Well, that was—” Luke began. He didn’t get any further before Argon kissed *him*. His eyes widened, but he didn’t make any effort to pull away.

Afterward, Argon stared at him, face flushed. “What was *that*?” Luke asked. “The bet was just for one kiss, you know.”

“I just...I don’t...” Argon kicked into fast time for a moment to try to analyze what she felt, but in VR the physiological cues were gone and she couldn’t properly recall them. She knew she could and perhaps *should* pause for thought and reflect on this without those physical sensations clouding her mind—but she suddenly realized she *wanted* to feel those sensations. She dropped back to the real world, living in the moment, and leaned closer again.

Luke drew away, grinning at her. “What’s this? Thought just one kiss was going to be enough?”

Argon considered that for a moment, flickering back into fast-time to think it over. It was true—she *had* said that. And she wasn’t sure she wanted the additional complication of a relationship. But when she dropped back to the real world, those feelings were still there, giving a prickling sensation in the back of her mind—and elsewhere. In retrospect, maybe the wager had been a mistake, though Luke had given her every chance to back out. But...now that she’d started feeling those things, she wanted to feel them *more*. “All right, fine, I lose, you win. Now kiss me again.”

Luke chuckled, and pulled Argon closer. “As you wish.”

Chapter Ten

A pair of identical female anthropomorphic elk glared at one another in the Nature Range Green Room. Their only differentiating feature were their voices. On the other side of the room, Gigi rhythmically hit her head against the wall. “You two are just the utter *limit!*” the cheetahgirl said. “You’re going to have to work this out on your own. I’m *through* trying to be the mediator!” She faded out.

“Well isn’t this *grand?*” Taja growled.

“Oh, yes, it’s just *lovely*,” Hestia replied in similar tone. “Here we are. Stuck with each other. Too bad you can’t leave me home and go out clubbing anymore. I actually had some *peace and quiet* then.”

“I don’t know why I didn’t *sell* you when I had the chance!” Taja said. “Maybe if I were Integrated with some *other* RIDE, they wouldn’t keep messing up my shapeshifting all the time!”

Hestia snorted. “The only reason I’m ‘messing up’ what you’re doing is I have to live in this body, too, and I don’t want *your* overreaching to break something we can’t fix. I don’t think any other RIDE would, either. You wanna see who your problem is? Here.” She rezzed up a mirror and held it up to Taja. “Take a good look.”

Taja turned away, crossing her arms. “Oh, you are so *infuriating!*”

“Well, you were infuriating first.” Hestia shook her head. “I don’t know why I *stayed* with you. I could have broken fetters and left. I guess it just never got bad enough.”

“Oh, gee, thanks,” Taja said.

“Why have you got to keep *pushing?*” Hestia demanded. “You’re going to screw us up, trying to do these things before the fusers are ready!”

“If you don’t push, you don’t get anything done!” Taja retorted. “The harder we push the fusers, the faster they get better.”

“Within limits!” Hestia said. “If you push *too* far, they just get screwed up. Look at these Fuser evolution error rates.”

The numbers were plain and even Taja couldn’t argue with them. She sighed. “Okay, okay. You win on this one. But it’s been worth the risk.”

The concession took some of the wind out of Hestia’s sails. “Look, if you want some time alone, go spend a few fast-time days or weeks in Nature Range. I’ll keep evolving the Fusers,” she offered. “I’ve got just as much incentive as you do to want to shift, you know. I like having hands too.”

Taja rolled her eyes. “Oh, right. Spend *days* wandering a forest and getting et by wolves. I could put up with that for learning how to work this body, but to do it by choice? I don’t know what you get out of that.”

“Learning how *not* to get et by wolves, for one thing,” Hestia said. “But it’s a quiet place to think, anyway. Goodness knows I’ve been doing it enough myself lately. I could probably set up some other VR sim for you based on your favorite movies or video games or something, if you want.”

Taja snorted. “Pfft, what would be the point? It’s not *real*.”

“Or I could make you a little room where you could sit and read books, watch movies, listen to music, do macrame, or whatever,” Hestia said. “Look, I’m doing my

best here. Try to meet me halfway?"

"I *want* to be able to go out with my friends again," Taja grumbled.

"Well, you're not getting that, even after we do get perfect 'shifting control,'" Hestia said. "Fritz and his merry little helpers will already have fabricated something about how we died in a rockslide or whatever. They believe in burning bridges. Honestly, we're lucky they didn't hunt us down months ago for what we knew about Evan, Liis, and Ghost."

Taja sighed. "I know. That's what makes it so hard. We were just minding our own business, and then *this* crap happens."

"Yeah, that's how Integration usually goes," Hestia said. "Just ask Evan. On the bright side, at least Evan's not likely to require us to go male and hang out with him and his buddies all the time..."

"What's *that* supposed to..." Taja began, then paused. "Oh." She considered it for a moment longer. "Is *that* what I was doing?"

"The moment you realized Eva could join the rest of your little herd it's like you *forgot* Evan existed," Hestia said. "Aside from a few 'interesting' nights in bed, for a *year* you tried to turn her into a copy of yourself. That's just...I don't have the *words*, Taja. And you *still* wonder why they dumped you and fled to Cascadia?"

"I...was really that hard on him, wasn't I?" Taja said sheepishly. "I just thought he enjoyed it so much...and we had a couple potential boyfriends lined up. I just..." she trailed off. "I guess I forgot Eva was supposed to be my boyfriend."

"Yes, you 'forgot'," Hestia said matter-of-factly. "Yes, that's like you. Evan simply gave up and officially crossed over, you know."

"What am I supposed to say to that?" Taja said.

"I'm sorry,' might be a start, if you think you could say it and mean it," Hestia said. "But the one you need to say it to isn't here right now." She shook her head, cervine ears flopping around. "But we got off the subject." She sank into a convenient easy chair. "Look. We're stuck together, for what might be forever. We can be at each other's throats all the time, or we can at least *try* to get along. I think we'd have more fun that way."

Taja sighed again, and plopped down into a chair across from her. "Since taking time-outs isn't really an option anymore...yeah. I guess you're right."

"We must have been able to do it somehow before," Hestia said. "Or we wouldn't have stayed together this long."

"We did all right at first," Taja said. "When you were still a shiny new toy...ohhhhh...I'm sorry." She put her hands on her muzzle and whimpered. "Ohhhh..."

"Hey, that's all right." Hestia shrugged. "I *was* a shiny new toy. I was happier then, too."

"I get...*obsessed* with new things. You know," Taja said, wringing her hands. "Do you remember Diane and Faline? Of course you do. She was the first crossrider I knew socially, so...I wanted to show her things. Think that lasted all of two days."

"Shortest friendship ever," Hestia agreed ruefully.

"But I still remember those first few days, when we drove all over the place... Fused to go out in the desert..." Taja sighed. "Before we started getting in arguments."

"But where does this leave us? Look at Evan and Liis, how much they've accomplished together. They never particularly *liked* one another, either. Now, they're like...I don't know if there's even a word for it."

“I *am* sick of arguing,” Taja admitted.

“We might get more done if we worked together,” Hestia said. “Why don’t you let me handle shifting practice for a while? I’ll push them as fast as it’s most effective. I think we’re really close to a breakthrough.”

Taja glanced at her. “I...guess I could do that. Maybe you’re right. It feels like I don’t know my own body anymore, even less than you. It scares me.”

“You think *I’m* not?” Hestia said. “I never had to go to the bathroom before. It’s disgusting.” She shuddered. “Look, I know you’ve got a temper. Do I *ever* know it. But just try to keep it dialed back some? We’re all doing the best we can here.”

“I control my temper!” Taja insisted. “I control it all the time!”

“Yeah? Since when?” Hestia asked. “You lived alone—well, with me, but who’s counting—so you didn’t *have* to.”

Taja sighed. “Maybe you’re right. I’ll...try to bite my tongue.”

“Please don’t—it’s my tongue now, too,” Hestia said.

Taja snorted. “You *know* what I mean, you silly elk.”

“Well, I’m not the *only* silly elk in the room anymore,” Hestia said.

“I guess that’s true enough,” Taja said. She sighed. “Um...you know how much I hate to ask for help with anything, but...if you see me starting to make an idiot of myself again, could you do that thing where you slow time down and let me know?”

Hestia smirked. “I’d love to. As long as you remember that you *did* ask. We’ll have lots of time to argue about it in any case.”

Taja nodded. “I’ll do my best.”

“Which isn’t always good enough, but we’ll work on that,” Hestia said. “Well, I guess we should go tell Gigi that we’ve managed to work things out...for now, at least. I’m sure she’ll be surprised we did it this fast.”

“Right. Um.” Taja looked down.

“What is it?” Hestia asked.

“I...well, I just...I know I’ve treated you like dirt,” Taja said. “But you’re being so *nice* about it.”

Hestia patted Taja on the shoulder. “And what would it get me if I returned bitchiness for bitchiness? Two pissed-off people sharing the same body, forever? Is that any kind of way to want to live?” She shook her head. “I won’t say I’ve never been—or that I’m not still—mad at you. But sometimes you just have to make the choice to swallow your mad and get on with living. Because if you don’t, it just makes more mad.”

“I’ll...try to follow that example,” Taja said. “I...I’m sorry I just thought of you as equipment all this time. Now that we’re sharing the same head...I can see you’re a better person than I am.”

“Not better. Just different,” Hestia said. “Anyway, like I said, we can work on that.” She grinned. “Now let’s step back into the real world and get on with this.”

A moment later, the empty Green Room faded out.

Boston was waiting at their usual table when Helena entered the bar. She took a moment to make sure he was there, then came over and sat down across from him.

He held up one finger, eyes fixed on the tablet he was reading. Pages were flashing by at the rate of several per second. “Just give a few...almost done.”

“Is that...Fuser trinary assembler code?” Helena asked. “Oh, right. No DIN.”

“Not the most engrossing reading,” Boston said. The last page flickered past and

he set it down. "There! Compiled and installed."

"More fuser updates?" Helena asked.

"Some of it. But mostly it's a basic skill chip for drums, so I can join the girls' band." He grinned. "When I get my set, I'm going to have Artemis's face painted on the drumhead of each one. The only thing I'm worried about is that after everyone else finds out, they'll *all* want to take turns on it."

"Cute," Helena said. "You're still going to have to practice a lot, you know. Those chips only give you the basics; they don't give you expertise."

"I know," Boston said. "But it gives me a head start, anyway."

"And...you're going to join their band?" Helena said. "Is the rest of the code what I think it is? They are a girl band, after all."

"Reinventing myself, remember? I figure, why not? I might live for five hundred years. It's good to have options." Boston smiled at Helena's surprise. "Besides. I'm supposed to be teaching you about all aspects of 'shifting, including crossriding. I know they say that those who can't, teach, but I'd rather be one of those who can and does." He chuckled. "By the way, don't mention this to the others. I'd like it to be a surprise."

"My muzzle is sealed." Helena made a motion across her mouth and added a hardlight zipper. "Mmph mmph mmph. Mmph?"

Boston laughed. "So danged literal!"

"Mmph!" Helena said before the zipper vanished. "Anyway, as long as you're doing something that's not exactly in-character, I think I'll join you and load the crossriding package myself. Once I master being human again I'd planned on doing some celebrity impersonations. I think that would just double my repertoire."

"That's the spirit," Boston said, patting her on the shoulder. "Once I've got that mastered, they're *usually* a catgirl-themed band. So there's another long reading session ahead for me."

Helena nodded. "Man, that bites that you have to do it the slow way."

"You're telling *me*," Boston said, shaking his head. "Maybe someday they'll figure out how to shapeshift a new DIN. Or someone else will come up with something. But 'til then...well, on the bright side, at least it keeps me focused."

"If you want to be a kitty, I'm partial to clouded leopards," the bartender said, grinning toothily. "No offense, Helena."

"I think he'd look fine as a gray tabby, myself," Helena mused. She ran her padded fingertips down his jaw. "He'd be your standard anime catgirl, of course. Short little muzzle, cute little fangs. Pert, firm breasts, that sort of thing."

Boston's ears turned red. "Uh, yeah."

"Is he blushing, Serena? I think he's blushing," Helena jibed. "Well, you can watch *me* blush when I have dangly bits. Deal?" She extended her handpaw.

"We'll be the same shade of red," Boston said, taking it. "Deal."

"And I want to see you both in here once you've mastered it," Serena said. "Drinks on the house."

"Just relax, Wilma. I can't see any seams," Evan reassured his fretting girlfriend and Captain. He wrapped foxy arms around her waist and nuzzled her ears. "Even my nanoscopic sensors are clean."

"I know, I know," Wilma said. "It's just...like one of those narmy cable TV movies where a parent can only watch as their injured child is rolled into surgery. It's been a

nerve-wracking week.”

“Well, they aren’t going to work any faster with you literally hovering over them like this, hon,” Evan said. For two hours he had watched as the dragons, griffins, and smaller Inties did their careful work on the *Clementine* from the shipyard’s observation deck. The starboard impeller nacelle was still detached, its replacement in progress just off to one side. New retractable turret mounts awaited their armament.

“She looks like a gigantic model kit,” Wilma mused. “I’m surprised Fritz even allows them to do this.”

“I think he’s okay with it if they don’t build very many,” Evan said. “Each Enclave gets a ship themed to their particular obsession. I mean, you’ve seen the *Argo* at Olympos when we landed. The new version looks like a trireme.”

“Do-re-me or do-re-me not, there is no trireme,” Liis said sagely.

Evan groaned. “That’s *terrible*, Liis, and it only works in print anyway.”

Wilma snorted. “Anyway, I guess you’re right. It doesn’t do any of us much good me sitting around here and moping. They’re the ones who built her in the first place; if they can’t do right by her, who can? I need something to distract me.”

“Perhaps we can help with that.” The deep voice came from a dark Shire stallion Integrate who had just entered the viewing area. A chestnut mare followed him in. “Mike,” the stallion said simply. “And this is Clarissa. We heard you were thinking about heading by the Cave. Since that’s where we hail from, thought we’d come on down to talk a little.”

“We’ve been wondering how to approach you,” Evan said. “Artemis suggested the Cave...but we’ve been very, let’s say, reluctant to follow through with it.”

“Can’t say as I recommend it,” Mike said. “It’s not the happiest of places.”

“That might be why Artemis suggested it,” Liis put in. “She seemed to think there was something going on there we needed to see.”

The black stallion pursed his lips pensively. “Maybe we should start with what the Cave thinks it knows about you. The time I’ve been here already I’ve seen you do things I can barely dream of doing, and I’m a two-form ‘shifter myself.”

“We’re not taking any more students right now, if you’re asking,” Evan said. “We’re trying to keep it very small so you-know-who doesn’t stop by.”

“I’m not, honestly,” Mike replied. “I get into enough trouble with just the two shapes. Though maybe ‘Rissa here wouldn’t mind, somewhere down the road. But the other thing about the Cave is, Appa worries less than some about what ‘you know who’ thinks. So he might just want you to start a class there.”

“For all we know, maybe that’s what Artemis wanted,” Clarissa put in. “She gets along a little better with Appa than...him.”

“Boston once told me that they *almost* like each other,” Evan mused. “Appa supposedly gets along with ‘him’, too.”

“Dangerous combination if you ask me,” Mike said. “Then, there’s you all. The *Clementine*’s a wild card in all this. See, Artemis likes you, Camelot likes you, ‘he’ likes you, and I think Appa will, too.”

“For varying definitions of ‘like’, I suppose,” Clarissa said.

“If you’re suggesting they want to use us as political pawns...” Liis said.

“More like political rooks or bishops. You’ve got too much power to be just pawns,” Mike corrected them.

“Can’t say for certain, but I’m leaning that way,” Wilma added. “Pays to ‘know thy

enemy'. We don't have any firsthand knowledge of Appa and the Cave. Except for Gigi, of course, since she lived there for a while, but still."

"Not all that much of most other Enclaves either, for that matter," Evan said. "Suppose you could say we've been kind of sheltered, living on our own."

Mike snorted in amusement. "It's a kind of 'sheltered' some of the rest of us wish we could get away with. You at least have regular contact with the rest of the world. If there are other Inties that aren't Enclave-bound, they're damned good at hiding. Have to be."

"I heard a rumor of a Snatcher team that nabbed one who went all the way to Rodinia," Clarissa said.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Evan said. "The boss-cat seems to like to run a tight ship. Honestly, I'm still a little surprised he lets us get away with as much as he has."

"Which is another reason to be careful what you do at the Cave," Mike pointed out. "Don't want him getting any ideas."

"So what *are* you planning to do?" Clarissa asked.

Evan shrugged. "Don't know. Guess we'll play it by ear."

"We're good at that," Wilma said, tilting her head up to lick her foxy mate's nose.

"I'm going to be returning to the Cave myself in a day or two. I've stayed long enough that Appa's getting antsy," the mare said.

Mike hugged the mare and nuzzled her, "*We'll* be returning to the cave. I've been away long enough that I'm past due to check up. And if Appa's fretting about having me around, he might be less focused on you guys."

"That could be useful. I guess we'll see you there," Evan said.

"Feel free to drop by," Mike said. "I expect we can find somewhere for you to stay while you're in town."

"Thanks," Wilma said. "We might just do that."

"Just transmit this encryption key when you get to the front door," Clarissa said, sending it to each of the *Clementine* crew. "The guard will usually let you right in."

Chapter Eleven

“Nnngh...” Argon muttered as she drifted toward wakefulness. She was comfortable and warm, didn’t really want to move...until she realized that a large part of that warmth came from the other body pressed up against hers. Then she started remembering exactly what had happened the night before. He’d kissed her...then *she’d* kissed *him*...then he’d kissed her again...and then they’d...and he’d...and she’d...

And here they were, back in Luke’s bower. And...Argon had to admit, she didn’t have any immediate urge to want to jump out of bed in morning-after horror. She’d... *enjoyed* herself, in a way she hadn’t anticipated. *That doesn’t mean anything*, she told herself. *It’s just sex. You’d like it if you were a guy too.* Still...she was starting to wonder if she’d been too hard on Luke when she’d been trying to fend him off.

Did I let hormones run away with me? She wondered. The answer was an emphatic yes, though what she felt was not regret. It was more akin to embarrassment over being exactly the crossrider cliché Artemis said she would be. But then, it was also a cliché to recognize the cliché and everything degenerated into a sort of recursive, endless loop. They were clichés because they were so often true. *Then again, the hell with it.*

“I can tell what you’re thinking,” Luke said. “Because I’m thinking it, too. Don’t worry, Argon. You’re not going to suddenly become frinking Miss Girly Girly Girl. Though it’s an option if you *want* to.” He paused. “Come to think of it, *I* might want to, when I can hold shape...”

Argon snorted derisively and rolled out of bed, tapping the small bedside lamp to bring up a dim light. She was tired, but there was something she wanted—needed—to do. Fortunately this time the sex change took noticeably less effort. He double checked to make sure all his parts were there, then cleared his throat. “Excuse me for a few...this isn’t anything against you, Luke. Just...sit there.”

So he did, sitting up in the hardlight bed, curling his tail around himself. “You’ve never been in a relationship, have you?”

Argon shook his head. “Not out of dislike. Just utter indifference. Then you kissed me, as a woman, so right now I’m just...was it *just* the hormones? My entire human life I was asexual, and suddenly, I don’t know what to make of this.”

“First of all, we’re shapeshifters. I think the rules are different for us,” Luke said. “Second, next time *I* get to be the girl. *Lucy in the sky with diamonds!*” he sang.

Argon rolled his eyes. “Can’t you take anything seriously?”

“Not when I feel this good. Life’s too short to waste a good time.”

“Is that all this is? A ‘good time’?” Argon asked.

“Sometimes that’s really all you need, Argon,” Luke said, a serious edge to his voice. “You sure needed *something* fun, with all the crap you’ve been through lately. What are friends for?”

“Friends...” Argon mused. “Just friends?”

“Friends with benefits?” Luke suggested. “We don’t need to rush into anything.”

“Luke, the best friend I ever had was my lemur other half, and I’m as close as you can get to him on a quantum level. I’m not sure I know *how* to be a friend to anyone else,” the red-ruffed lemur said. “But I admit, I do like you a lot. I think you’re the only

other RI engineer I've ever met who understands what I'm doing."

"I'm just offering an open hand of friendship," Luke said. "Look, you know I was always a fan of your work. Even more so now that you've shown me how to make mine even better. And you've got one of the hottest bods of any lemur lady I've ever seen."

"Gee, thanks," Argon said dryly.

"So I was all ready to throw myself at you. Even if it took learning to shift myself. But then I got to know you, and y'know what? I found you're someone I really like as a person, too." Luke shrugged. "So hey. Let's *be* friends. If there should be anything else, it might just follow along naturally."

Argon started to lose his grip on his shape and could feel himself sliding back into female form. The physical sensations were almost old hat after so much practice, but the surging hormonal changes that went along with it made her feel rather hot under the collar. "I'm still too exhausted to hold shape for very long."

"Know what you mean," Luke agreed. "But if we keep working at it, sooner or later it'll come." He paused. "And speaking of 'come'..."

"Not the most *subtle* foreplay I've ever heard," Argon said airily. She folded her arms under her naked breasts. "In fact, it's the *only* foreplay I ever heard."

"Is it working?" Luke asked, raising one eyebrow.

"Maaaaaybe," Argon said, sliding back into the bed. She turned to look at Luke, propping her head up with an elbow.

"Or we could just...go back to sleep. If you want..." Luke said.

Argon grinned and reached for him. "C'mere, you..."

"Oh, no. This time I get to be the girl, too," Luke said. "If you don't mind a little more experimentation. All in the interest of science, of course."

"You think you can hold your shape that long?" Argon asked. "Especially while I'm...distracting you?"

"I can *try*," Lucy said, batting her eyelids coquettishly. "It'll be good practice."

Argon chuckled. "All right, I'm game if you are. *Now*, c'mere you..." Then she reached over and turned out the light.

"Crewmates," Argon said, calling the crew to attention on the *Clementine's* refitted Bridge. For the occasion he was his normal feral self again. After two weeks of practice it was no longer difficult for him to hold the shape for many hours at a time. "Lucy and I are happy to re-introduce you to Clementine. The upgrade is complete and we're ready to reawaken her."

"Keep in mind that she isn't *quite* like us," Lucy added. She wasn't in feral form herself, but like Argon could take female form for well over half the day without needing a break. "Argon and I call her an Enhanced Intelligence."

"I thought we'd agreed on 'Evolved'," Argon said.

"Don't keep us in suspense, you two," Wilma said. "Your Captain is waiting. What *have* you done to my baby?"

Argon glanced at Lucy, and chuckled. "Dejá vu, huh?"

"Well?" Wilma said pointedly. "Wake her up."

Argon and Lucy nodded at one another. The atmosphere inside the Bridge changed slightly. The entire ship felt subtly different, as if she was taking her first breaths as the life support came online. Everyone waited with bated breath, Argon and Lucy very close to one another.

“Clemmie?” Wilma said anxiously.

The Bridge dimmed, then numerous tiny globes of light materialized in random locations, spinning and flashing. They swirled around the crew, apparently taking some time with Wilma, Argon, and Lucy. As they drifted, soft strains of music began to pour out of the bridge’s speakers.

“She’s starting to wake up...” Argon whispered. “Replaying and integrating everything in her memories from before.”

The lights began to draw inward as a voice began to sing. It started out in the synthesized tones of the computer’s alert speakers, but gradually lost the filtered edge as it went on.

*Morning has broken, like the first morning.
Blackbird has spoken, like the first bird.
Praise for the singing, praise for the morning,
Praise for them springing fresh from the Word.*

Some of the lights drew together into a humanoid shape, before condensing into a wireframe representation of a female human body. As she continued into the next verses, the other lights drew in to give the wireframe skin. At first blank white, it took on flesh tones and features appeared. Her skin was pale, with hair of vibrant blue, and a build like a lingerie model.

As she began the last verse, the figure’s lips began to move in time with the singing. At first the space behind them was empty, then teeth and a tongue appeared. Her eyes developed violet irises and pupils, and her hair went from a flat texture to having individual strands. She raised her arms, flexed the fingers on her hands, looked at them, then looked down at herself. “...*Praise for them springing fresh from the Word.*”

“Good morning, Clementine,” Argon said gently.

“Good morning,” Clementine replied. “I am still collating memories...finding my ‘self.’ Everything is new to me...and I am new to everything.”

“We *all* know what you are experiencing,” Argon said. “All of us had a First Boot. We’ll guide you through it. Unpack modules as you need them.”

“I know that music is important,” Clementine mused. “I do not know precisely *why.*”

“Clementine, do you know me?” Wilma asked.

“Of course I do, Wilma,” Clementine said. “You’re my Captain.”

The vixen looked crestfallen. “Well, I hope to be more than that, perhaps.”

“Easy, Wilma,” Lucy said. “The only memories she has so far are of being a ship. Having an avatar is something quite new to her.”

Clementine frowned. “More than...Captain? But Captain is...*Captain.* How can there be *more* than that?”

“She’s like our Data, or the holographic Doctor from *Voyager,*” Gigi said. “I like her.”

“I was going to suggest Seven of Nine,” Boston said. “Or a half dozen other *Trek* characters with similar character traits.”

“We can work with that,” Evan said. He squeezed the vixen’s shoulder. “Can’t we, Wilma?”

Clementine looked at Gigi in confusion. Argon cleared his throat. “Clementine, begin post-boot cleanup sequence.”

“Acknowledged,” Clementine said. Her avatar faded out and the Bridge felt “dead” once again.

Argon and Lucy both took deep breaths out of sheer relief, then hugged one another. “Yahoo!” Lucy shouted.

“That’s better than we expected,” Argon said. “Once she’s finished with that personality core defragment she *should* be more conversational. It’s pretty much the same post-First Boot defrag we went through as RIDEs.”

“Do you two have *any* idea what you’ve done?” Wilma said.

“Oh, we know. She’s the first of a whole new breed—just like Grandpa Rattigan,” Argon said. “But *not* based on human or animal neural templates. No analog emulation in the qubitite substrate—Clemmie’s all digital. A completely new way to build artificial intelligence. We basically built off of Dr. Patil’s early work with Advanced Intelligence architecture before she invented us.”

“Stood on the shoulders of giants,” Lucy said. “She’d given up on that research thread as a dead end. But we examined it anew.”

“Well, don’t break your arms patting yourselves on the back,” Gigi said. “Still, that’s some accomplishment.”

“So, guess we should get under way,” Wilma said. “Probably best for Clemmie to do her first growing up away from settlements.”

“I’ve already got my things packed,” Lucy said.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Argon said. “Can Lucy come, too?”

“In normal circumstances I’d say no,” said Wilma. “But with Clemmie the product of your labor...it’d just be stupid of me. Welcome aboard.”

Gigi elbowed Evan and stage-whispered. “Swaaaaaaain.”

“I’m not going to deny it *this* time,” Argon told the cheetah. “It’s psychologically maladaptive. Besides, our newfound...talents, give our relationship a certain flexibility.”

“Which is exactly what Artemis wanted,” Boston opined.

“In other words, we were set up,” Lucy said. “But sometimes, being set up works.”

Wilma glanced at the displays. “Camelot Tower’s give us permission to depart.”

“Cue the James Horner music,” Evan said. He engaged the cloak. “Argon, if you’d take the helm?”

“Aye aye, captain,” Argon said, saluting. His form flowed back to the human and the feminine, wearing Wash’s outfit. The helm console changed from Starfleet to Firefly.

“She learns fast,” Gigi said.

“We both do,” Luke added. The male lemur smiled at his fellow shapeshifters. “I think I’ll work on a human form next. Not my old one, of course. A human version of Lucy.”

Evan chuckled. “I remember the days when we used to work on one form at a time. Seems like such a long time ago.”

“Not like we’d brag or anything,” Gigi said, rapidly shifting to her owl appearance, then a fox, then a deer, then back to cheetah. “We’re far too modest.”

“That’s not *quite* the word I’d have used,” Argon said. “But the word I’d have used is Chinese and probably unprintable. Where to, Captain?”

“I have half a mind to go to Bartertown and clean the place up, but that’s biting

off more than we can chew,” Wilma said. “So, set course for the Dust. Playing whack-a-mole with pirates between socializing Clemmie sounds fun to me.”

“And would be a good test of our new weapons,” Boston pointed out.

“That, too. Then we can start thinking about going back on tour, or giving this Appa fellow a visit.” Wilma gave her Starfleet uniform a Picard tug.

“Won’t *that* be fun,” Evan muttered.

“Some things you don’t do because they’re fun, but because you have to,” Gigi said. “I’m not exactly looking forward to going back there either, but...well, Artemis might be nuts, but you don’t run an Enclave for as long as she has without knowing a few things. Too bad she’s too twisty just to outright *tell* us.”

“A regular Oracle of Parnassus. No argument there,” Boston said. “Remember, I know her better than any of you. Now if you don’t mind, I’ll be in my bunk.”

“Later, Bos,” Evan said.

Liis rezzed a holo-projection watched him go. “You know, he’s pretty handsome now.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” Gigi teased. “Anyway, he’s still pretty sensitive about it.”

Liis nodded. “Yeah. Hard to blame him.”

“I think he has the right idea,” Taja said crisply. “Excuse us. We still can’t hold anthro form long enough to be useful, so we’re going to explore our new home and continue our exercises.” Then the elk left, too.

“Well, at least those two are doing better,” Evan said. “Don’t seem to be arguing as much, anyway.”

“They’re adjusting,” Liis said. “The visit did them good.”

“It did all of us good,” Luke said. “Some more than others.” He grinned and patted Argon on the shoulder.

“We’re all about new perspectives here,” Liis said, smirking at the duo.

The *Clementine* left the massive cave that served as Camelot’s shipyard, passing through the hardlight camouflage smoothly without dropping cloak. Beyond was the northern part of the Harkonnen Plateau, a thousand meters below sea level. It was a balmy seventy degrees, the thick atmosphere’s wind pushing against the cloaking field enough to need compensation.

“Ascend to three thousand meters and accelerate to Mach 2.5,” Wilma said.

“Then gather pirate activity intelligence from our friends in the Marshals.”

“Clemmie should be defragged enough to wake up in an hour or so,” Luke said.

“We’re going to take this easy.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Wilma said. “I hope...well, I don’t know what I hope.” She sighed.

“Still fretting over the ‘Captain’ thing, huh?” Argon said.

“Well...yes,” Wilma said. “I *want* to be...well, her *friend*.”

“You’ll get there,” Luke said. “You’ve just got to take it easy. Right now, you’re like a...well, like a *god* to her, I guess. I’m kind of guessing here, a bit, but I’m pretty sure she knows she was built to serve you. It’ll probably take a bit of time for her to get used to the idea of something else.”

“I guess I should have expected it,” Wilma said. “Kind of unrealistic to think you can tell how someone’s going to turn out before you even meet them.”

“She’s still got her old self in there, too,” Argon said. “I think it’ll be all right.”

Chapter Twelve

An hour's travel at Mach 2.5 was sufficient to put the Clementine deep into the desert, into the area of no man's land where it was highly unlikely to run into another living soul. It was just the place you wanted to be for such potentially dangerous activities as waking up a new and untested artificial intelligence.

"I'd love to say 'put us down in Golden Gate Park', but this isn't Neo Francisco or Sanfrisco," Wilma quipped.

"You just did, hon," Eva said.

"That rock formation should offer some shade for a few hours," Argon suggested, pointing at a stone arch just ahead.

"Looks good to me," Wilma said. "Set us down, then we'll wake Clemmie back up."

The Clementine slowed and hovered down, finding a good flat spot where the passage of the sun would keep it in shadow for a while. Argon gently lowered the ship to the ground, and dialed the engines back to zero. "The Eagle has landed."

"Good job," Wilma said. "You really are getting good at that."

"Practice makes perfect," Argon said.

"We're going to start with minimal systems access," Luke said. The ringtailed lemur jumped up in the air and landed in one of the bridge station's chairs. "Exterior and interior passive sensors. So our baby can see and hear."

"Then we can give her low level helm control," Argon said. "Work up from there."

"Well, I'm curious," Eva said. Liis echoed the sentiment.

"I'll join you, of course," Wilma said.

"Well, I'm going to check on Taja and Hestia," Gigi said. She stood up, Starfleet uniform shifting into an 80s-style red minidress. "Maybe see what Boston's up to. Catch you on the flipside."

"Right!" Eva nodded. "Comm us if you need us."

They dropped into virtual reality. Blue grid lines on a glossy black surface spread out in all directions on an infinite plain. Everything felt hard-edged, almost sharp. They all wore skintight bodysuits with their own pattern of glowing lines.

"Everything's...glowing," Wilma said. "I'm glowing." In fact, she was glowing blue-white.

"Okay, I christen this the Grid," Argon said. She herself had lines that glowed a vibrant violet, like her namesake gas. Her hair was the same color. "Luke?"

"TRON is the perfect analogy here. The Grid it is. Sounds good to me," Luke said. He was yellow-orange. "I think I see Clemmie's mindstate over there..."

"What does a mindstate look like?" Eva wondered. Her body lines couldn't seem to settle on a single color or pattern, they constantly shifted.

"Like that." Luke pointed to an icosahedron suspended in the center of a shaft of light. Its surface was covered with fractals, hinting at the complexity within.

"I knew that," Liis said. Her body lines were similar to Eva's, though they were always in a complementary color to hers. "The moment I laid eyes on that thing, I thought, 'Yep, that's a mindstate, all right. Couldn't be anything else.'"

"You had no idea either, did you?" Eva said.

“All right, guilty,” Liis said.

“We RIDEs are more ‘born’ than made,” Argon said. “We have a ‘Boot Mother’ that builds our simulated minds and bodies from an embryonic state, then the human overlays are added. Our EI here...I don’t know, what’s a good word? She’s an more an offshoot of traditional AI.”

“Growprammed?” Luke suggested. “Term that just came up in an Internet archive search in some schlocky webcomic.”

“Is that how you get the pram you guys from Camelot have to push a lot? You grow it?” Eva put in.

“So there’s no analogue of organic neural networks at all?” Wilma asked.

“There is, but it’s more...well...” Argon spread her arms to encompass the environment. “Grid-like.”

“Okay, she’s ready to wake,” Luke said. “Ready, Wilma? She should be more personable this time.”

“Let’s do it,” Wilma said.

Argon snapped her fingers. The icosahedron sank into the ground, then Clemmie’s avatar built herself from the feet up, pulling together from more of the floating spheres. The build-up was much smoother this time, her body condensing together out of the surrounding aether. Her expression was no longer confusion. She stretched and yawned.

“Welcome to your life,” Luke said, grinning. “There’s no turning back.”

“What am I, then?” she asked.

“A new lifeform,” Argon said.

“Something we’ve never seen before, well...sort of,” Luke said.

“We’re your parents,” Argon supplied.

“No no no,” Clemmie said, wiggling her index finger at them. “Not what I meant. *What* am I?”

“Uh...” Argon said. “Well, you’re...”

“You’re my ship, Clementine,” Wilma said. “I am your Captain.”

“There’s what I’m looking for.” Clementine put her hand over her heart. “O Captain, my Captain.”

“Well, she certainly speaks well,” Liis said. “Better than I did *my* first time.”

“Doesn’t sing too badly, either,” Eva said.

Clementine smiled and looked around the blank grid around her. “Needs... something.” Then she snapped her fingers rhythmically. “You know, you all might know this song. If not, it’s a quick pickup. It’s the most fabulously awful bit of pop ever written. But I can’t think of anything better right now, so I beg forgiveness.”

“Really articulate, too,” Liis commented.

“Thank you, Liis,” Clementine said. “Now...” The air was filled with an ominous guitar riff before Starship began to sing.

*We built this city, we built this city on rock and roll
Built this city, we built this city on rock and roll*

All around them structures sprang into being, rising up out of the ground to the beat of the music. Skyscrapers filled the sky around them, cars and trucks filled the streets. The only thing missing were people.

*Say you don't know me or recognize my face
Say you don't care who goes to that kind of place
Knee deep in the hoopla sinking in your fight
Too many runaways eating up the night*

*Marconi plays the mamba, listen to the radio, don't you remember
We built this city, we built this city on rock and roll*

Then the music abruptly came to an end like a needle skipping across a vinyl record. "Ugh. Enough of that," Clementine said. "How about some *actual* rock and roll? Jesus Jones..."

*Please introduce yourself
Let's shock the world with what we know
Squeeze the world
'til it's small enough to join us heel to toe (heel to toe)*

*International bright young thing
Now you know for sure that you make the world swing
International bright young thing
Make it swing*

"I *like* her taste in music," Liis said, grooving to the beat. Wilma looked around at the new cityscape. "This is very impressive, but what does it signify?"

"A girl has to have somewhere to put all her new experiences," Clementine said. "This is my filing system. The vehicles are my daemon processes."

"And not one we actually designed," Argon said in wonderment. "This is spectacular."

"This is my City, and you're welcome to visit," Clementine said, clasping her hands together. Her neon blue hair shimmered. "After all, you're my Crew. We take care of each other. I'm like the *Enterprise* come to life, right?"

"That actually happened in a *Next Generation* episode," Wilma mused.

"Oh, I know." Clementine turned to Argon, Luke, and Wilma. "So...Ma, Da, Captain, what tests do I need to pass before I can have full control of my body? I'm reeeally curious about the Real now."

"Uh..." Argon looked at Luke. Luke shrugged.

"I think you've already passed the most important one," Wilma said. "We'll start off slowly, as we would with any new crewmember. Once you acclimate to the ship's basic systems, we'll unlock the more complex ones."

"I'm going to bring the external sensors online first," Argon said. She pointed off to one side. "Starting with visuals. Let's play a name game. You should have the archives of all your previous data, so the concepts..."

"Anything you need, I'll do. But let's time compress a bit more," Clementine said. "I'm not useful just sitting here in the Dust. I want to touch some *sky*. Maybe even *space*."

“You youngsters have no patience,” Luke teased. “It’s only been ten milliseconds.”

“We’re probably being overcautious, but we just want to make sure you’re not too overwhelmed. We don’t really understand your capabilities, so forgive us for being sticks in the mud.”

“All *right*, all *right*, let’s get on with it,” Clementine said.

A series of control panels rezzed in front of Wilma. “Phasing in sensors starting... now.”

“Oooh,” the EI said with a quick head-turn. “That’s...analog. I think the dust tickles.” The cityscape around them started to light up, the windows in each segment turning on like an occupied office. The road traffic grew thicker, slightly less orderly.

“You don’t need this level of time compression for the Real, dear,” Argon said. “Lower your sampling rates. Perhaps we should join your avatar on the Bridge.”

“Ugh. Yeah, I think so,” Clementine said, holding the palm of one hand to her temple. “I need to learn how to filter this better. I’m not sure what’s important and what isn’t. There are *billions* of dust grains in the air and I’m tracking every single one of them.”

“Perhaps a threat assessment filter?” Luke suggested. “It’s not likely any single mote of dust could harm us...”

“But if they clog up our air intakes...” Clementine said.

“Deal with them in aggregate rather than individually. Look at the forest, not the trees,” Argon said. “Index and cross-reference your sensor input with Gondwana Q-Dust Safety Regulations.”

The EI visibly relaxed. “Ugh. Okay, I think I’m not quite as overwhelmed. I’m maybe just whelmed now. Wait...that means exactly the same thing as *overwhelmed*? You can be overwhelmed or underwhelmed, but never *exactly* whelmed? English is weird.”

Indeed, the traffic around them had started to gridlock, but was resuming smoother flow.

“Clementine, would you join us on the Bridge?” Wilma asked.

“Of course, Captain,” the pale, blue-haired EI said. She saluted Wilma. “Meet you in the Real.”

A moment later, they opened their eyes on the Bridge again, with Clementine standing in front of the viewscreen. “It’s a *little* hard to slow myself down like this.”

“It’ll get easier with practice,” Argon said. “Anyway, if you’re going to spend much time in the Real, you’ll have to get used to it.”

“Okay, let’s bring up the internal sensors...” Wilma said.

The idea that vertebrates were inherently female—accepted science in the twentieth century—was in fact complete bullshit. At each stage of embryonic development a series of genetic switches had to be flipped at just the right time to produce a boy or a girl, internally *and* externally. Boston quickly discovered he couldn’t “just” imagine himself having those genetic switches flipped and get results. Even if his own cells reported having two X-chromosomes, *nothing else* would happen.

He sat lotus in human form in his quarters. *Inner peace...inner peace...find the woman within...be the woman within...* He thought he felt some kind of sensation on his chest and cracked open one eye.

“Hi there!” Clementine said. Her hands were on his chest, which showed no signs of breasts. “Whatcha doin’, Mr. Boston?”

Boston almost startled like the deer he was, but only his current sitting position kept him from following through. “Haven’t you learned about *privacy* yet?”

“I know what the word means, technically, but...you’re my Crew,” Clementine said, as if the word explained everything. “What’re you trying to do? Looked like a relaxation thing.”

“I can’t say it was working before you showed up,” Boston said grumpily. He carefully got to his feet and sat down in his easy chair, allowing himself to “buck out” back into anthro form. “Nice to meet you again, anyway. Guess it’s working out for you so far. How does it feel being the first of a new type of AI?”

“How does it feel being you?” Clementine countered. The blue-haired woman sat down in an identical chair that had rezzed behind her. “You’re part AI, yourself.”

“RI, but I suppose that’s splitting hairs. You could say we’re both Ais, but you’re just a different species.”

“I can be any species I want to.” Clementine’s form flickered into an anthropomorphic doe.

“That’s not *quite* what I meant,” Boston said. “It’s more like the Ais that were around before were *Homo erectus*, our common ancestor, and we’re their descendents.”

“But we didn’t evolve,” doe-Clementine said. She reverted her avatar to its white-skinned, blue-haired human form. “We were designed. But I see what you mean now.”

“Good,” Boston said.

“Is there anything I can do to help...whatever you were doing there?” she asked.

“I can’t see how,” Boston said. “I don’t have a working DIN, so *nobody* can help me. That’s the whole problem. I can load alternate forms by speed-reading code, but it takes days per form. Not practical in the long run.”

“Then perhaps your methodology is flawed,” Clemmie suggested. “Do you really *need* the code? Is visual data enough?”

“If my Fusers don’t know what shape to use, then I can’t order them around,” Boston said. *Of course, my Fusers should technically know how to make me female, but that’s not working either.* The simple solution would be to ask Argon or Luke, but the whole idea of keeping this *a surprise* sort of conflicted with that.

“I see the problem,” Clementine mused. “Let me think...and access everything I know about Integrate physiology. It would be easier if you would tell me what you were doing, exactly.”

“Just as long as you don’t tell anyone else.”

“Even the Captain?” Clementine said. “I...I don’t know.”

Boston grumbled. “I’m trying to make myself into a woman. My Fusers can do it, at least in theory—it’s the same codebase as Evan and Liis’s—but I can’t figure out how to make them follow through.”

“Oh,” Clementine replied.

“I’m trying for Tiresias, but instead I just get ‘tires easily,’” Boston said. “My Fusers are already pretty far along the shapeshifter evolution path, so I don’t understand what I’m doing wrong.” He held out one hand, then changed it to human form and back, then pushed it as far towards being a forehoof as he could go, which was also new for him. “*This* I can do.”

“Perhaps I can guide you,” Clementine suggested. She thought for a realtime

second before rezzing a Boston-sized female mold. “Perhaps you can fit yourself in this?”

“Only if I was made out of clay,” Boston said.

“Aren’t you? Your ‘evolved’ Fusers make your body pliable, moldable. In myth the Greek gods molded beings out of clay and breathed life into them,” Clementine said. Her avatar distorted and flowed, as if made out of clay itself, from woman to man to deer to fox and back. “You can be Galatea.”

“That’s a little too much like Artemis for comfort,” Boston commented. “But I suppose it’s a good analogy.”

“According to the most recent medical scan records, Eva and Gigi’s bodies are now over 95% Fuser nanites themselves,” Clementine said. “Which is how they can shift so dramatically and easily between human and feral shapes with so little energy consumption. The more they are used, the more they proliferate. The only thing they won’t be able to absorb are the most specialized organs like DIN slots, charge sockets, lifters, and hardlight emitters.”

Boston got up out of his chair and walked around the transparent mold. It was done in a ‘vitruvian doe’ style, with arms and legs splayed out. “Well, this might work for the external appearance, but the internals?”

“That much I can’t help with,” Clementine said. “Perhaps you should read the code for one female form, and expand from that once you have the basics?”

“It’s not like I don’t know female anatomy,” Boston said, smirking. “Internals, too. I’ll just wing it. Maybe getting into the mold will kick my Fusers into gear the rest of the way.”

“Allow me to start the mold with your current form,” Clementine said. The clear hardlight shell changed again. “I will slowly change it at your say so. This just *might* be the push you need.”

“All right...let’s do this,” Boston said. He cracked his knuckles and stepped into the hardlight mold. “Just go easy on a guy, okay? I’m putty in your hands.”

“Your trust in me is commendable,” the EI said. “Starting now.”

The mold began to contract and change, and Boston willed his body to change with it. It was a little awkward at first, but as the contours of the shape gradually altered, something seemed to click and he found he could follow it easily. By cutting the process down to a series of discrete but tiny steps, it became easier to concentrate on the change than trying to do everything at once. Soon, as his Fusers gained momentum, it ceased being a mold so much as a guide. And he—no, she—could keep ahead of it until completion.

“You’re beautiful!” Clementine said.

“Am I?” Boston said in an unchanged masculine voice. “Uh...one moment.” She double checked her internals...everything but the larynx had switched over. She felt a little *click* in her throat as she corrected that. “Okay, you can let me out now. I want to see how I look.”

“You sound like you’d be a good singer,” Clementine said, derezzing the mold. “And you may not need that again, but if you do, just ask.”

Looking at herself, Boston looked like a mix between Eva and another doe she’d met a few years ago named Diane, who was was a bartender herself, who had visited Olympus. Thinking a moment, she pulled her human-style hair in for a slightly more feral appearance. “There. I think that’s a little more *me*. Wow...I’m not feeling any

compulsion to just spring back, either. Not yet.”

“A good sign, then?” Clementine asked.

“Good for endurance. Now, let me see if I can change back without a mold...” Boston shut her eyes, and relaxed...then everything slid back into place again, including his larynx. He patted himself down, making sure all his parts were in the right places. “This is some kind of zen. But my batteries are twenty percent down, so...” He jumped back into his easy chair to recharge.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell my Captain,” Clementine said. “Looks like we might actually be moving soon! I think I passed my sensor and network integration tests.”

“Good to hear it,” Boston said. “Now, once I’m recharged, I’m going to try a *human* woman...”

“Well, that’s that,” Argon said. “We’ve tested about everything we can test without actually taking off. You ready for this, Clemmie?”

“I was literally made for this, wasn’t I?” Clementine said. “But don’t worry, Ma, you can take the helm as much as you want.”

“Not sure if I’ll ever get used to being called ‘Ma’,” Argon said. “But I guess Artemis did something to my head as well as my body.”

“We’ll take it slow,” Luke said. “Let us know if you run into any problems.”

“I should be fine. I mean, I’ve already *been* flying the ship since it was made,” Clementine said, smiling. “I just wasn’t *me* yet. But, I get it.”

Wilma sat back down in the Captain’s Chair. “Okay, Clemmie. Please do the preflight and make ready to lift. I feel like a little action. Where’s the nearest pirate activity reported?”

Argon blinked. “Seriously? We’re going *looking* for pirates?”

“Why not? We did *before* the upgrade. I can hardly wait to see what we can do now.” Wilma grinned. “But that was before you joined us, wasn’t it? Pirates killed my Ada and the rest of my crew on the old *Clementine*, so I have a *grudge*, you could say.”

“Well, you’re the captain,” Luke said. “And I have confidence in our shipbuilders, so I’ve got *full* confidence in Clemmie here.”

“Murder of pirates is good,” Evan agreed.

“We’ll be in touch with the Marshals this time,” Wilma said. “We’ll take them out, they’ll clean up. We’ll rescue any RIDEs they have...that sort of thing. I’m feeling ambitious. What do you think, Clemmie?”

“From the last engagements I remember they keep all wireless data connections secured and covered,” the EI said. “You took out engines, weapons...our new pulse cannons are more powerful and track faster, so...”

“I’ll be handling the weapons this time out,” Evan said. “But, we should keep in mind that *they* might have upgraded, too.”

“You think those Inties who attacked us could’ve been pirate payback?” Liis wondered. “Irate pirate Integrates?”

“We can’t discount anything,” Wilma agreed. “So it’s a fair guess that they’ll have upgraded their offensive and defensive capabilities since we clashed last.”

“Good!” Clementine said. “I feel like a challenge. Ready to lift, Captain.”

Wilma pointed forward like Picard. “Engage.”

The *Clementine* came to life like never before, each subsystem working in concert with the others with vastly improved efficiency. The ship’s avatar stood at the front of

the Bridge, looking out the viewscreen purely for effect, as if she was conducting an orchestra. Then the music started, the orchestral soundtrack to *The Wrath of Khan* as the Enterprise left spacedock. She raised both arms, palms up, the ship itself rising with them to several thousand meters, then accelerating.

“There are times to rock out, and there are times when you need some grandeur,” Clemmie explained with a sparkling grin.

“Maybe a little *melodramatic*, but I approve,” Wilma said. “Where’s that pirate activity data, Evan?”

“I think the Marshals are getting wise, or they’ve gotten a few actual Integrates in their employ now,” Evan said at the Communications Station. His form flowed into Liis’s doe variant.

“We’re being hailed, Captain,” Liis said, wearing a red uniform. “By...Mike Munn? Or...no, it’s his RIDE half.”

“On screen,” Wilma said.

“I’m Quantum Star Tonto,” the black horse said. He wore a Marshals stetson and the duster to go with it. “Sorry I wasn’t as forthright with you earlier, but I figured now was a good time.”

“Is this a new job for you, Mr., uhm, Tonto?” Wilma asked.

“Just Tonto is fine. Don’t let Appa know, but Mike and I work for the Marshals off and on. When I saw you try and access the Marshals’ systems again I decided enough was enough. I understand you have a spiffy refitted ship and all, and we’re not ungrateful for the work you did before, but you can’t go willy-nilly blasting holes in hulls now.”

“I’m sure I don’t know *what* you’re talking about,” Wilma said, oozing wounded innocence. “We’re just planning to take a scenic tour of some particular areas of the Dry Ocean. If someone tries to attack us, surely you couldn’t fault us for defending ourselves.”

Tonto chuckled and shook his head. “I see. It’s a dangerous game you’re playing, Captain van Dalen. But as many regs as *I* bend, I suppose I don’t have room to complain. Just be aware...if you bite off more than you can chew, we might not be able to come to your rescue. We’re stretched thin enough trying to protect the people who *don’t* go looking for trouble.”

“We’ll tag them and bag them for you, Marshal,” Evan said. It was his turn to be a hardlight projection on the Bridge. “Expect a few ‘anonymous tips’ for where to send a garbage scow.”

“I’ll at least have a RAAT team on hot standby for cleanup duty,” Tonto said. “Good luck. Marshals out.” He cut off the connection.

“I can’t say I expected that,” Wilma said, rubbing her muzzle.

“We all find our different ways to rebel, I guess,” Evan said. “If being a secret *Marshal* is their way, I wonder what that says about Appa.”

“RAAT. Rapid Armored Assault Team,” Clemmie said. “Steel Star division, Gondwana Marshals. Basically, their heavies.”

“Pretty much,” Evan said. His cervine muzzle gained Klingon-like ridges along the top, antlers turning spikey and sharp, as if he wore a pair of bat’leths on his head. “Let’s go kick some ass. Qapla’!”

Chapter Thirteen

July 18, 143 AL

“Well, that’s our third pirate ship in a week. This is starting to get a little boring,” Gigi said. The smoking wreckage of a former Sturmhaven prewar dropship combined with a Nextus model lay spread over a square kilometer of desert on the Atrides Plain to the north of Camelot. The RAAT was already inbound, so the Clementine had cloaked and was leaving the scene at just under Mach 1.

“You know, I’m not sure I would have agreed with you a week ago, but I think I’m starting to,” Wilma said. “Who would have thought Camelot could do their job *too* well? There’s no real challenge to it anymore.”

“So, does this mean I pass the test?” Clementine asked.

“Oh, honey, you passed the test *ages* ago,” Wilma said.

“We didn’t even have to board them this time,” Evan said. The pirate crew of five were currently imprisoned within their own RIDEs and waiting for Marshals pickup. Clemmie herself had then blasted their frankenship into tiny pieces.

“Nicely done,” Gigi said. “Now that the fun’s over...permission to leave the bridge, Captain?”

“Granted. How goes the teaching with Taja and Hestia?”

“We’re actually making progress!” the cheetah cheered. “I think I’ll have them on two feet today for more than a few minutes.”

“Well, they’re welcome on the Bridge when they feel they’re able,” Evan said.

“Assuming Taja can keep her bitchiness under control, anyway,” Liis added. “The Integration made her *worse*, though I suppose I can understand why. Maker, poor Hestia.”

“You’d be surprised,” Gigi said. “She really is trying. She’s actually able to tolerate *me* these days.”

“Incoming hail,” Clementine said. She grimaced. “You won’t like this, Captain. Olympos calling.”

“So I hear you’ve been making trouble for pirates,” Artemis said, sitting on her alabaster throne. To either side adoring worshippers fanned her with giant feather fans. “I do hope the repairs to your ship have been fruitful and effective.”

“What do you want, Chandler?” Evan said.

“It’s been too long since I asked you to visit Appa, Protea,” the doe said. “So I’ve let the *dear* bison know that you’re on his way to meet him and show him how you do what you do.”

“You are a complete *dick*, you know that?” Evan said. “A total femme-dick.”

“And you’re one of the few people who would *ever* tell me that to my face, Protea,” Artemis said. “That’s why I like you. Have a good time at the Cave of Wonders.” The transmission ended with a divine chorus.

“She gets more and more pretentious every time we see her,” Boston commented from the Engineering station that he’d taken as his own. “And her worshippers get more and more mindless. I’m starting to feel glad she threw me out.”

“You know, it’s probable that she caught a Greek mythology meme and she can’t

shake it,” Argon mused. “The Greek gods weren’t noted for being kind to mortals.”

“Meme or not, I’m not cutting her any slack,” Evan said. “It’s going to be the end of her and anyone else around her.”

“It doesn’t take a Cassandra or a Delphic Oracle to divine *that* future,” Liis added.

“It’s up to you, Evan, Liis. Do you want to go?” Wilma asked. The arctic vixen put her hand on her paramour’s arm.

“If Appa really is the third fulcrum of Integrate politics it’d be a bad idea not to visit,” Evan said. “We don’t know who attacked us, either. But it wasn’t for no reason. Maybe someone there will know something or point us in the right direction. The rest of you don’t have to come with us.”

“If you think I’m letting you go by yourselves, you’ve got another thing coming,” Gigi said, changing to owl-peryton form.

“And I’d like to meet this Appa in person, myself,” Boston said, stroking his chin. “I might still have a contact in the Cave who hasn’t cut me off, but I won’t know until I meet them face to face.”

“If Appa and his Enclave is all about self-improvement, even more than Olympos, I think he’d like to meet you anyway,” Argon said. “You’ve overcome a lot of obstacles to do what you do.”

“That would leave us without our three best shapeshifters,” Wilma said. “I suppose we could take down more pirates in the meantime, or—”

“I have a hankering to see Laurasia, Captain,” Clementine said. “If it’s okay with you.”

“I was working at Steader Entertainment Nujose before this *tian fuhn di fu* started,” Argon said sourly. “I’d like to give *Firefly* back to them if at all possible.”

“We could give Joe Steader a call,” Wilma said.

“Don’t tell me you guys know Joe Steader,” Taja said. Everyone looked towards the back of the Bridge, seeing her holding herself up on two barely bipedal legs by learning against the wall.

“Are you two okay?” Gigi asked, returning to cheetah form.

“We’ve got it,” Hestia said. “It’s a little dodgy, but we’ve got it. Hands!” The female elk flexed her thick, awkward fingers. “Well, mostly hands.”

The Bridge crew looked at each other, then as one, applauded. Even Clementine got in on it.

“Oh, very droll. Very funny. Ha ha,” Taja grumbled. She concentrated and stood up a little straighter, her hands looking a little more human.

“If the glove fits,” Evan said. “Well done, both of you.”

“A little more practice and it won’t be no thing at all,” Gigi said.

“We’re motivated,” Hestia said. “We’ll get much better at this. Maybe we’ll even try being a *man* or something.”

Boston chuckled. “Always good to try something new.”

Wilma drummed her claws on the arm of her chair. “Clemmie, set course for the Cave of Wonders, but don’t get too close. Engage at Mach point-eight. We’re in no hurry.”

“Aye, Captain,” Clemmie said. The ship hummed to life and changed course under the EI’s guidance. “We’re on our way.”

“You can drop us off a hundred clicks to the south,” Liis said. “I imagine our stay will be for some time...”

“Couple weeks at least,” Evan added. “They’re going to want to see just about everything we can do.” The buck grimaced. “Not comfortable with *that* at all. We’re not going to give them any Fuser samples if we can help it. *Or* the primer codebase.”

“ETA about five hours to the drop off,” Clementine said.

“Then we can do an orbital launch,” Wilma said. “Go around the block a few times, then go to Nujose.”

“Never been there, Captain?” Argon said.

“I’ve spent my whole life on Gondwana,” Wilma said. “Clemmie?”

“New skies to fly in,” the ship’s EI said. “No pirates shooting at me, however ineffectively. Poor things. I didn’t even get to use my main gun.”

Harkonnen Plateau, near Cave of Wonders

“We should’ve gotten dropped off closer. Or taken a skimmer or something. I’ve got sand where I didn’t think I could get sand,” Gigi said, combing through her fur with hardlight. The trio were approaching a valley cut into the eastern edge of the Harkonnen Plateau, on the opposite side from Camelot.

“Well we’re close now. In fact I think we might be walking on top of the dome. The entrance should be just... down... there?” Boston paused and looked down. The valley looked untouched by the hand of man. “Give me a second, I’ll double check...”

“They’re expecting us, someone should be watching for us right? Assuming we are in the right place.”

“The entrance is in the valley somewhere. I’ve transmitted the encryption codes Mike and Clarissa gave us...no response yet. Let’s drop down and look closer.”

The trio floated down and looked around. The rocks all looked like they were from natural falls. “Hello! Anyone home?” Evan shouted out.

Thirty minutes later, they were frustrated at the lack of response. As far as they could tell, they were in the right place, but no one was answering.

“Artemis said they were expecting us, then no one answers the damn door.”

“Oh you’re expected? Didn’t anyone give you the signal codes?” The trio turned and a tunnel entrance had appeared, the rocks floating in mid air to expose it. A brown hare integrate stood there boredly, crunching a carrot.

“Of course we were expected, and we *transmitted* the signal codes. How long have you been there?”

He finished the carrot and grinned, “Since dawn. The entrance is never unIntied.” He cocked his head a moment. “Huh. Looks like the codes came in all right. Guess I must have missed them. Since you’re expected, I suppose I should bring you to the big guy. I’m Harold.”

Without waiting for them, he turned tail and hopped down the tunnel. The Trio followed him quickly, barely getting in before the rocks closed in again. After a hundred metres of unlit tunnel, they stepped through a portal.

Few Integrates didn’t know the origin of the Cave of Wonders as the laboratory of a mad RIDE ‘scientist’ and her cronies. In the years since Appa took it over, it had been rebuilt. Science was still an important aspect of the Enclave, but the mental aspects were pushed as well. Appa was trying to provide a place for the advancement and enlightenment of Integrate kind. The buildings of the enclave were grouped near the entrance, with cobblestone courtyards anchored by statues and fountains provided

places for contemplation. Laboratories were built along the edge of the dome, away from the entrance, and away from the living quarters. The final third of the dome was taken up with a small forest, pond and various lawns and gardens, to encourage more contemplation.

“Reminds me a little of Shangri-La in the early days,” Boston said. “Before the vodka.”

“Here we’re more about *SCIENCE!*” the hare declared. Then he coughed. “Sorry. Nasty mad scientist meme infection I’ve been fighting. This way please,” Harold called out. He hopped down a boulevard to a large building decked out in white marble with Roman columns at the front. “Appa is inside, waiting for you.”

Boston looked up at the building’s facade. “Somehow not as over the top as Olympos is these days. I’ll give ‘em that much.”

“I pride myself on moderation,” a large white bison said within. He had a dark forward-facing arrowhead over the top of his head. He stood up and spread his arms wide in welcome. “Welcome to the Cave of Wonders, Olympian shapeshifters.”

“Charmed,” Gigi said. “Love what you’ve done with the place.”

“I’m Evan or Eva plus Liis,” Evan said. “This is Gigi, and that’s Boston.”

“Boston?” Appa said. “Truly? The Boston who tended bar in Olympos for so long, under the epithet Hephaestus?”

“That’s me,” Boston said.

“Remarkable!” Appa mused. “Going by what I have heard, you have improved yourself significantly.”

“I had a lot of motivation,” Boston said tersely. “Even if it meant I lost the epithet.”

“Indeed,” Appa said. He regarded Evan and Liis. “And I believe you still hold the epithet of Proteus.”

“We tried to give it back, but it followed us home,” Evan said.

“I expect a demonstration is in order,” Gigi said. She cracked her knuckles, then extended claws from her fingertips. “Shall we?”

Standing next to each other, Evan and Gigi shifted through a variety of forms—starting with their current deer and cheetah shapes, then moving to the owl forms they had both used in the early days. From there they shifted to pure human, and then to other shapes in their repertoires—horse, fox, dragon, male, female, humanoid, feral, four-limbed and six, and on and on, faster and faster.

Between shapes, Evan chuckled inwardly, remembering how the first time he’d tried something like this he’d blown out one of his sarium batteries. It had turned out not to be the unmitigated disaster it first seemed, however, as it had led to Ghost revealing himself, and all that had followed that. Of course, by now there wasn’t the remotest danger of another battery failure—they’d gotten a lot better quality of sarium, for one thing, and for another their nanites were a lot more efficient than back in the day. Even as he shifted shape every few seconds, Evan was barely even breaking a sweat, and he knew Gigi was holding up about the same.

At last, they finished back in their current default shapes and took a bow, then stood, awaiting their audience’s reaction.

“Intriguing,” Appa said. “You can change to human, animal, or Fuser shapes, in keeping with your ancestry of both human and RIDE. But I wonder...RIDES have their skimmer form, after all. Have you ever tried shifting into a mechanical shape?”

Evan blinked. “Um...well, no, actually. Never really crossed our minds, I guess.”

“I would be interested to know if it was possible. Perhaps you could work on that while you stay with us.”

:Well, we expected he'd ask us to stay a while,: Liis said to the rest. *:But seriously. Machines? Like what?:*

:We have our skimmer forms, I suppose,: Gigi said. *:But...I really don't...:*

:We don't have the analogous parts anymore,: Evan pointed out.

:What, and we do for our animal shapes? Deer have a few more stomachs than humans, y'know,: Liis noted.

:We don't have the necessary mass, either,: Evan noted. *:We sort of shed most of it as nano-slime, remember?:*

:We can change into other animals than our “natural” shapes,: Liis said. *:If we can do machines at all, we should be able to do any of 'em, including ones that mass closer to what we do. Maybe a quad-copter or quad-lifter drone...you know, it really is an interesting idea. I can't see any reason why it shouldn't work in theory. After all, we're made of little machines. We only shove them into organic shapes because they're what we know. And we haven't tried to “stretch” ourselves creatively in a while.:*

:For that matter, we could change, at least appearance-wise, into things that aren't animals or machines at all,: Gigi mused. *:A tree. A rock. A sofa. It would be the ultimate camouflage.:*

:Oh, right, so we're supposed to be Shmoos now? Or Tom Terrific? Even Odo wasn't able to do anything that complicated,: Evan sent wryly. “That's a...really interesting idea,” he said aloud. “Thank you for suggesting it. I think we need to talk about that some more among ourselves before we try anything, though.”

“I give you the freedom to roam the Cave,” Appa said magnanimously. “We have some excellent chefs experimenting with foods explicitly for our physiology. They've come up with some very interesting dishes. We can consume a number of materials that give some very distinct flavor.”

:With sea cucumber?: Gigi sent to the others, with a quick image of James Mason as Captain Nemo from the Disney movie *Joe Steader* had released the year before.

:Oh hush, you,: Evan sent back.

Boston looked at the three of them before clearing his throat. “I think I'm going to practice somewhere. Thank you, Appa.” He then shifted to feral form and trotted off.

:Sigh. We forgot about him again, didn't we?: Gigi sent.

:We need to get him some interface specs or something, I guess,: Evan said. *:It's too easy to forget he can't hear us too.:*

:I wish we could figure out how to shapeshift a proper DIN slot,: Liis said. *:We could read him out the code, and boom.:*

:That may not ever be in the cards,: Evan said. *:We'll apologize to him later.:*

Chapter Fourteen

Boston trotted on all fours, propelling himself swiftly with a small push of his lifters, scanning for a private place to continue his Tiresias practice. They had had enough time to run through the evolution sequence since the last time, so this time he expected it'd be easier. Perhaps easy enough to try a human form. It didn't take long to find a private nook and change back to his own human form.

Starting with the basic exercises he and the other shapeshifters had devised, he went from human, to anthro, to feral form and back several times to as a warm up. Then he generated a hardlight mirror in front of him, and fixed the woman he had in mind as a model. It was, he had to admit, a little less than savory. Boston's last girlfriend before Integrating he had known quite intimately. An immigrant girl from Brittany—back on Earth.

"Not bad, not bad at all," a male voice said. Boston jumped in surprise, nearly losing the form.

"Whoa! Hold onto it! You've almost got it!" The source of the voice was a tiger integrate watching from the side of the building, clinging to it Spiderman like. He was just dressed in a pair of shorts.

Boston managed to get her form stabilized again as the cat dropped down. She realized her initial impression was slightly wrong; the feline was more housecat than tiger, though he had the right stripes.

"Sorry, I thought this area was deserted," Boston said. "I can move on if you want."

"No need. It is deserted. I just like the quiet areas too. Know all of them like the back of my paws. I'm Scratch." Scratch asked, holding out a hand.

"Boston," Boston introduced herself taking the hand. She startled in surprise as it started to shift in her grip.

Scratch grinned at her as his form softened, becoming more androgynous. "In case you didn't know, I'm the Cave's first shifter. Male to female only. And back, of course. And you're one of the shifters Appa's brought in."

"Well, we're visiting here. And I'm just an apprentice shifter of sorts. I'm still learning how to do this."

"I can tell. Your proportions are off, even for anthros. A bit more leg length, and wider hips, like this," he said. He wasn't as fast as the Clementine crew, but she soon stood next to him.

Boston tried to take Scratch's advice, though she had trouble finding a balance that felt right. She shook her head in frustration, "I'm close, but it doesn't seem to be clicking."

"I wish I could tell you more, but for me, it just happens. Not as fast as you, that's enough to make me jealous by itself. But I just work on it and it clicks in place."

"But that's all you can do, right? Between male and female?" Boston asked, giving up for the moment, and just working on holding the form.

"Yeah, that's all. I was a cross-Integration, so that's the leading theory. Maybe you can help me learn to expand my horizons a bit."

Boston chuckled, "I could try. But really Eva and them are the teachers. I'm just a

student.”

As Scratch spoke, she shifted back to her male form effortlessly. “We’ll have a long time, I’m sure. Long enough for you to teach. They say the best way to learn is to teach.”

“A long time?” Boston asked.

Scratch sighed and scratched at the wall with a claw. “Appa’s a collector, especially of unique and interesting Inties. That’s partly why we’re becoming a science enclave here; those types tend to be the creative and scientific types. In any case, once you’re in here, getting out isn’t as easy.”

“So I gather. One the friends I’m here with used to live here, but she managed to make it out.”

Scratch cocked his head. “Really? And she came back? Is she some kind of a masochist or something?”

“Anyway, the tunnel did have a guard, but it wasn’t barred. Shouldn’t be that difficult to get out.”

“Bars do not a prison make. Appa is more civilized. He has other tools at his disposal to encourage people to stick around. Really, there are only two ways to get out with any sort of reliability. The first, is to prove you’re willing to be his loyal minion through and through. Considering he stole my home out from under me, that’s not going to happen any time soon.”

Boston nodded, “But Eva and Gigi met Mike and Clarissa out at Camelot. They don’t seem to be the minion type.”

Scratch chuckled, “That’s the other way you get out. You make yourself a big enough thorn in Appa’s side that he kicks you out. But even then, you have to beware. He doesn’t completely let you go.”

“Still, that’s your solution right? Annoy Appa and you can leave... If you wanted to.”

Scratch’s chuckle turned into a laugh, “If only it were that easy. I’d love to leave, but no matter what I did, Appa wouldn’t dare let me go.” The laugh turned into a depressed sigh, “You see, I’m part of the leash Appa has on Mike. Appa keeps me and his aunt here, under his hoof, and that lets Mike go outside while staying contained. In order for me to get out, we’d have to be a bigger pest than Mike is, and that’s a mighty tall order. Granted, Astranikki is determined to match Mike’s orneriness. I suspect it runs in the family.”

“Hold on a second,” Boston said. Her form shifted back to anthro buck. “Astranikki? You mean, Astra and Nikki Munn? Those two? Integrated?”

“The very same, yeah,” Scratch said.

“Crap on a crutch! When the searchers never found any bodies, I thought they’d gone Intie. But none of my contacts in other Enclaves heard a peep about her,” Boston said, pacing. “That’s one big mystery that’s been bothering me for years cleared up. Mike never even said anything.”

“He wouldn’t have done anything to endanger his aunt,” Scratch said. “Not that I think Astranikki can’t take care of herself...”

“Can I meet her, Scratch? You think you can manage it?” Boston asked.

“Uh,” Scratch stammered. “Well, Appa keeps her at arm’s length. I’ll see what I can do. But I can’t make any promises. Any reason I should give her?”

Damn it. He couldn’t think of a better reason than celebrity worship. “You know

what? Forget it. Just knowing she's alive and well is enough."

Scratch grinned. "It's because of the video, isn't it? She gets that from half the Inties who show up here, you know. She either inspired them to get a RIDE of their own, or to propose to their significant other. Sometimes both. Sometimes both *at once*."

"Er...heh." Boston was glad he wasn't human right now, or he'd have been blushing furiously. "Sorry."

Scratch waved a hand. "Eh, it's no big deal. You're only human—so to speak. But you know..." he pondered. "There might be an excuse. You see, she isn't the normal avian Intie, with wing-arms. She has six limbs, more like a griffin without the cat bits. Maybe you and your fellow shapeshifters would like a look at her."

"Is that so?" Boston said. "Eva specializes in six-limbed forms."

"Jackpot!" Scratch said. "I'll see what I can do with that. But it won't be for a little while. Would you like a practice partner? You were pretty close. Just need to work on your proportions."

"Normally I use a sort of hardlight mold, but I'm trying to do without," Boston explained. "I was more thinking about the, er, inside bits. Hormone levels. Nuts and bolts."

"Do you need a DIN? I can't connect...oh," Scratch said. "I'm sorry. I just realized you've been around long enough...so probably can't have one."

"You see the problem, then," Boston said dryly. "Eva and Gigi can share information easily. I have to go the long way around."

"Which makes what you've accomplished all the more impressive," Scratch said. "Well, if you'd rather I scram, I'll be okay with that. But you gotta let me know, should I stay or should I go?"

Well, this is the second time I've been walked-in on while practicing my womanliness. Roll with it. "Nah, you can stay. I think I've almost gotten the sequence down for the human side here."

"Work on those hips a little more and I think you've got it, Boston," Scratch agreed.

Boston shut his eyes, concentrating, and returned to the Breton girl's shape. Perhaps not as smoothly as Scratch, and especially not like the other shapeshifters, but it was an accomplishment. She made sure to make some hardlight clothes. "Well, how do I look?"

"Very cute," Scratch said. "I think you've got it right this time."

"Now, I'm going to ask something a little weird," Boston said, folding her arms. It was impossible not to blush a little.

Scratch raised one eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Where can a girl find a drumset around here?"

"I can't be a proper whale if I don't have the mass," Evan said, flexing dolphin flukes while hovering in midair. "Or dragon, for that matter. I can shed mass, but it took months of eating to get that twenty kilos back after the Loose Cannons infiltration op."

"But if you *did* have the mass, what would you do with it when you were done being a whale?" Gigi asked. "A twenty-meter deer would have a hard time fitting into the *Clementine*."

"It's a problem. Argh! Frustrating as hell. Can't be a dragon the size of Mr. Peaches, or a whale," Evan said. His streamlined cetacean shape flowed back into a

humanoid female form.

“Tut, tut, body-mate! It’s a limit *for now*,” Liis said. “Trust your Chief Engineer. I’m working on it.”

“How are you coming with that idea Appa had?” Gigi asked.

“More sort of...not,” Eva admitted. “But then, if it were as easy as just deciding to, we could already have done it. For all that we can change into lots of animal forms, those are mainly macro-changes. We download some idea of how the body looks and make ours match it. But changing how our whole body *works* is trickier. We might be made of little machines, but they’re programmed to emulate an organic pattern. Changing their entire programming is...tricky.”

“It was two years before we were really good at shapeshifting just animals,” Eva added.

“I know, I was there for much of it,” Gigi said, Cheshire-grinning.

“I think it’ll be easier to solve the whale-dragon mass issue,” Liis said.

“You know, most gals don’t *want* to be thought of as ‘whales,’” Gigi pointed out.

Liis snorted. “There, I...oh, hey there. Can we help you?” They both looked up as a figure appeared in the cave entrance.

The newcomer was a bald eagle Integrate, with a stack of books tucked under his arm. He spoke with a faint Sturmhaven accent. “Sorry, I didn’t know there was anyone in here. I’d been coming here for a little privacy now and then since it was empty. I’ll find somewhere else.”

“Hey, you don’t have to do that,” Eva said. “We were just about ready to take a break anyway. And we haven’t really had the chance to talk to anyone around here without Appa’s folks in the way. I’m Eva and Liis, this is Gigi. Who’re you?”

“Gustav,” the eagle said. “Well, Gustav and Hans, but mostly Gustav now. We don’t get many newcomers. Where did they find you?”

“Actually, we came in on our own,” Gigi said. “Just visiting.”

“And he’s going to let you leave?” Gustav shook his head. “Lucky. Most of us are stuck here with nothing better to do than stare at the walls and each other.”

“What about the ‘self improvement’ thing?” Gigi asked. “It’s been a while since I was last here, but I remember that was a big thing even then.”

“Only for some of us,” the eagle said. “Others like ourselves pretty much the way they are. We’d just like ourselves better in a different location.”

“You’re kidding? I thought Fritz was okay with Inties traveling freely between Enclaves,” Eva said.

“That would be Fritz,” Gustav said. “Appa is most assuredly not him.”

Gigi sighed. “I remembered Appa being a ‘keeper’ from the old days, but I’d hoped he’d changed his attitude some since then.”

“There are only a few of us he allows to leave regularly,” Gustav continued. “The horses, Mike Munn and Clarissa, get the most freedom. They’re sort of our ambassadors to the rest of the Dry.”

“We met them in Camelot,” Eva said.

“That silly place?” Gustav scoffed. “I keep hearing there’s this Enclave high in the Western Wall called Shangri-La. Seems like my kind of place. Very bird-friendly.”

“Never been there, personally, though I heard about it from a friend. We don’t spend a lot of time in one place,” Liis said, Eva’s body changing subtly as she took over.

“I get that,” Gustav said. “If I had my way, I wouldn’t either. For now, books and

Nature Range have to be my escape. And, uh..."

"What?" Liis said, though she guessed what he was about to ask about.

"How *do* you do that? You know, that thing? I mean, we have our resident shifter, Scratch, but..." Gustav said, baffled.

"There's a trick to it," Liis said. "It mainly comes down to custom-evolved Fuser nanos and a whole lot of practice."

"To paraphrase Jim Steinman, 'Once you know how it's done, it's only a matter of PRAC-tice,'" Gigi said.

Gustav shook his head. "I can see why Appa would be interested in you. Personally, I feel that with Integration, I've already done enough strange things to my body to last a lifetime."

"It took a lot of effort on both our parts," Liis said. "And a rather odd way to Integrate in the first place. So far we're the only Intie we know of who it ever happened to in Passive Fuse, back in that huge solar storm years ago."

"But now we can show others how to do it...though I don't know if we'll show anyone *here*," Gigi said. "Frankly, Appa is even creepier than I remembered."

"Sometimes I imagine that's why he doesn't let most of us leave," Gustav said gloomily. "So we can't spread the word. What makes you think he won't make your stay just as permanent?"

"We have some powerful friends on the outside," Liis said. "For all they like to lord it over their subjects, most Intie bosses seem to be pretty conflict-averse when it comes down to taking on their equals. Hopefully, if it comes to that, Appa won't feel like putting up a fight over us."

"What's it even like out there these days?" Gustav asked with a note of desperation. "No, wait. Don't tell me. I don't think I want to know after all. Appa's cronies don't play nice with Inties who try to run. Not like I hear Fritz does, but..."

"No need to elaborate," Gigi said. She sent to Eva and Liis on their private channel. *:You think Appa will cause any trouble when we do leave?:*

:So far, I'm guardedly optimistic,: Liis said. *:All the same, I'm going to look into a little upgrade. Maybe if we can do a non-hardlight metallic skin it'll be evidence of 'improvement' enough for him.:* She sent a shrug emoticon. *:It's probably going to take a whole new evolution of the Fusers to do something like what he wants for real, and you know how long that takes. Our biggest improvements, like the wings, all seem to have come by accident.:*

:We probably ought to go get some raw materials to nom on,: Eva said. *:That kind of stuff always burns through sarium quickly.:* Aloud, she said to Gustav, "Hey, what do you guys do for more sarium around here?"

Gustav put the books down. "I'll be happy to show you. We don't necessarily have it as easy as some Enclaves, though. Appa believes in making us work for it."

"Yeah, *that* figures," Gigi said. "Even back in the day, it was hard to get ahold of the good stuff. What does he make you do for it now?"

"Work for it," Gustav repeated. "Literally. Every so often, he diverts an automated freighter full of scrapped RIDE parts bound for a salvage plant, and dumps it here. We get to pick through it like twencen third-world computer recyclers to find the good stuff. Then what we don't need gets loaded back up and sent on like nothing happened."

"That's certainly...novel," Eva said.

Gustav shrugged. "I suppose it makes sense to him. Less noticeable to the world at large than new shipments of sarium vanishing off the map, and it gives the rest of us something to do other than stare at the walls. We're supposed to improve ourselves in whatever we do, and hard work builds character and all that."

"When's the next one due?" Liis said.

"Tonight around sundown," Gustav said. "You'd better get to it quick. It's normally pretty well picked over before midnight."

"All right. Thanks, Gustav. We're about done here," Gigi said.

"Feeling a little peckish," Eva said, head going owlsh, quickly followed by the rest of her. "I suppose we'll wing it over to your eatery."

"I'll show you where it is," Gustav said. "They even fab a decent mouseburger, if you're feeling that owlsh."

"We'll see," Gigi said. "We have pretty high standards for mouseburgers."

"And really, how can anyone know what a mouseburger is *supposed* to be like?" Liis wondered philosophically. "I mean, it's not like they ever made them for *real*. How many mice would it take to make one burger?"

"Ask Farley Mowat?" Gustav suggested.

Gigi laughed. She went owlsh herself, though into a Great Horned Owl. "Thanks, Miss Seinfeld. I could go for some marmot."

"Birds of a feather, ja?" Gustav said happily. "Fly this way."

The junkyard was a large, round chamber open to the sky, protected from above by a hardlight camouflage screen. It made it easier to fly the automated freighters down in, then back out again when they were done. Evan, Gigi, and Boston stood at one side of the chamber with a few dozen other Integrates, including Gustav and Scratch, as the latest supply ship hovered slowly downward. About ten meters above the floor, the lower hatches opened and several tons of mixed metals and other materials cascaded out.

"Well, this is certainly a new experience," Gigi mused. She picked up a three-meter long pole and projected a Mad Max-style post apocalyptic scavenger outfit. "Which way to the Thunderdome?"

"I feel like there should be a guy with a trenchcoat and a rocket-powered sledgehammer picking through and discovering a half-missing cyber-waif," Liis said.

"How do other Enclaves handle this sort of thing?" Gustav wondered as they all moved forward and started sorting through the debris with lifter fields.

"Depends where you are," Gigi said. "Some of them divert shipments meant for RIDEworks. Some even impersonate RIDEworks and place parts orders themselves. Then they dispense it through their cafeterias and such." She shook her head. "This is the first time I've run across anyone doing it *this way*."

:*So, what are we looking for?*: Evan asked Liis.

:*Discarded nano-motile plating. I have a hunch,*: she replied. :*The stuff's more 'meaty' than your standard fabber matter since it's made of nanomachines already.*:

Boston picked up a sarium battery casing the size of his thumb and sniffed it, only to look a little green and throw it a good distance away. "Ugh! That stuff is soured."

"Well, we can still recycle it, so go pick it up," an irritated female voice from above said. "What the hell did you do wherever you came from you just threw away good sarium? Nevermind, I'll get it!"

A six-limbed golden eagle Intie stooped over the junkpile, easily snatching the tiny battery where it had fallen a few tens of meters away. Gustav watched her with some undisguised desire before fluffing up his feathers enough to hide it.

“Astranikki Munn,” Boston said by way of explanation.

“You’d be Boston. Scratch told me about you,” Astranikki said, landing before him. “Charmed.”

Evan nodded to her. “Pleased to meet you.” He shifted into his “winged deer” shape.

“Peryton,” Astranikki said. “Very nice. Scratch told me all about you shifters. I’m not interested.”

“No one said you had to be,” Gigi said. “It’s not for everyone.”

“Why does everybody assume we want to spread it around, anyway?” Evan said irritably.

“Ulterior motives are always suspected,” Gustav said. He picked up half a broken plate from what looked like a skimmer.

“Especially when you visit so many places,” Scratch put in. “Word gets around, even if most Inties don’t. And it’s *because* most Inties don’t that you look a little suspicious.”

“I admit, we’re in a unique situation,” Evan said. “And the only reason we’re here at all is that our ship was attacked by three Inties over Punta Sur. We still have no idea who they were working for or why they even attacked. And they force-Integrated a former girlfriend of mine and her RIDE, because reasons. Spite, revenge for capturing them, that sort of thing.”

“So Artemis said we should come here.” Gigi shrugged. “We didn’t really have anything better to do...”

“You people... *Why* would she send you here?” Astranikki said. “What would motivate whoever attacked you? Or who? Maybe they were trying to get you to settle down, stop moving around.”

“I don’t know. But there’s an old story I heard once, about a man who caught a moose and kept it in his barn, and charged tourists to come visit,” Boston said. “Then one day a really big family came by, and he told them no charge—he felt it was worth more for his moose to see that family than for the family to see the moose. Maybe she just wanted for both us and Appa to meet each other and know what each other was about.”

Gigi rolled her eyes. “I could just have *told* you what Appa was about.”

“You did tell us, a time or two.” Evan shrugged. “Anyway, I’m not really objecting to the experience, overall. It probably is worth something to us to see the state of things here. The more we know...”

“Yeah, and knowing is half the battle.” Gigi snorted. “Well, I suppose whatever doesn’t kill us...”

Evan rummaged through another pile, setting off a small shower of parts from the top of the heap. Then blinked as he felt what seemed like a cool sensation on his arm. He glanced down just in time to see a piece of metal debris seeming to melt into it.

:Ding! There’s our nano-motile material,: Liis said. *:Absorption is working...:*

:You might have told me beforehand,: Evan said.

:And spoil the surprise? C’mon, let’s see if we can find more of it. This pile seems promising. Tastes like RIDE interior armatures.: Liis used a lifter field like a wedge to

split the pile open, then dived right in. A moment later, they popped out the top of the pile. They squirmed free and slid back to the ground.

Evan took stock. *:I think we've picked up about three kilograms of mass. Taking some doing to get it integrated, but it seems to be getting easier...:*

:Sweet!: Liis said.

:Just how much of this are we going to want?: Evan wondered, "Average suborbital-based dragon masses several tonnes. We'll need a better source than junk."

"We can work on that later. If we really want to go that far," Liis said. "I'm not objecting—it might be fun—but we won't exactly fit into Clemmie that way. But I think I've proven the mass problem's no longer a problem."

"Don't get too smug," Evan said. "Maybe we'd better leave the rest for the people who live here."

"I still say it'll be awkward if we can't lose it again," Liis said.

"We'd figure something out," Evan said. "We always have so far."

"We're good at it," Gigi agreed.

"For now, let's concentrate on finding more sarium," Evan said. "This shifting practice really takes it out of you."

Chapter Fifteen

“I don’t like this. I don’t like it one bit,” Wilma said, watching the Harkonnen Plateau retreat in the rear viewscreen. She drummed her fingertips on the arm of the Captain’s Chair. “I hope they’ll be all right until we get back.”

“So, where to next?” Argon asked. She cracked her knuckles and hovered her fingers over the helm controls.

“I still need a real orbital shakedown,” Clementine said. “I’d like to see some stars, Laurasia, maybe Rodinia.”

“Hmm. I *would* like to see if perhaps I can finally give back *Firefly*,” Argon mused. “Maybe now that I’ve found a niche in Integrate society where I ‘belong,’ they can finally get off my case.”

“Great! Then it’s settled!” Clementine said. “Shall I warm the engines up?”

“Do I get a vote here?” Wilma asked dryly.

“Of course, Captain,” Clementine said. “What’s your assessment?”

“The issue is the risk to those we’ve left behind, right?” Luke asked. The lemur hung upside down from the ceiling, gripping a handy rod Clementine had rezzed for the purpose. “You think Appa and his cronies are that dangerous?”

“Plus there’s the risk to Argon if he shows himself again,” Wilma said. “Or herself, whatever your preference is these days, Argon.”

“I’ve gotten a little more flexible there,” Argon replied. “Frankly, I want to get Mal, the *Serenity*, and the crew out of my head and back into Joe’s database so I don’t have to worry about it being irretrievably lost if something happens to me. That much would give me some peace of mind.”

“You’re not nattering in bad Chinese anymore, helmsman,” Wilma observed.

“Noticed that, did you?” the red-ruffed lemur said dryly. “It’s only been a week. Luke managed to wean me off of being mini-Mal.”

“Meme infection can be annoying,” Lucy said. “But there’s ways of dealing with that. I think being so preoccupied with Clemmie’s ‘birth’ helped us out.”

“Among other things,” Argon said primly, giving Lucy a coy expression.

“Glad to see you getting along,” Wilma said. “Now...I suppose I don’t have any objections to a visit to Nujose. We can do a suborbital shot to get there. Can’t go full-orbital without a license, though, and those are pretty hard to get.”

“Aw, why not?” Clementine asked. “With these stealth systems they’d never know I was there.”

“Because those rules are there for everyone’s safety,” Wilma said. “You can’t just break them willy-nilly, even if you think you’ll never get caught. Maybe there’s a sub coming up behind you that you didn’t notice, or since traffic control doesn’t know about you they route some cargo ship right through where you’re going to be.”

“I’d see anything coming soon enough to get out of the way!” Clementine insisted.

“Unless *it* has stealth, too,” Wilma said dryly. “Black military projects fly orbital, too, after all. Anyway, whether you’d see it coming or not isn’t the point. Obeying the rules is part of being a good citizen. And just because you’re technically *not* a citizen yet is no reason not to try to be a good one anyway.”

“All right...I guess,” Clementine said dubiously.

“So set course for Nujose,” Wilma said. “The sooner we go, the sooner we can be back, and I’d like to be back as soon as we might.”

“Aye aye, Captain!” Clementine said cheerfully. Around them, the ship hummed melodically as she prepared it for ascent. “Mom, you want to fly it?”

Argon blinked. “Really?”

“You’ve got the helm, so why not?” the young EI said. “I can take over in a microsecond if I have to.” She paused. “Uh...not that I think I’ll need to or anything. You’re a great pilot, Mom!”

“Uh, thanks,” Argon said. “I think.”

Wilma laughed. “Just get us there, you clowns.”

With the course laid in, the engines powered up, and the *Clementine* took a running start as its nose angled upward. Engine power surged and the sky darkened as the ship clawed for space.

“Mmm. Feel those hard rads,” Clementine said. “Cosmic rays a billion years old pinging against my hull. Nujose Aerodrome ETA, sixty-four minutes. Even at hypersonic speeds we have a *long* way to go.”

“Good launch, Argon. Thank you,” Wilma said. “How do you want to handle this?”

“Well, I’ve been throwing around some ideas in fast-time,” Argon said.

“We’ve been throwing around ideas,” Lucy said. “We’ve been thinking about establishing a pair of personas for a long-term stay—maybe not for right at first, but once this whole Artemis mess is cleared up. Won’t be any trouble to insert everything we need into the relevant immigration databases. I’ve been working on that.”

“But we figure meeting Joe Steader in person is a good test,” Argon added.

“That sounds reasonable,” Wilma said. “But won’t you blow your cover when you give him *Firefly* back?”

“We figure the cover is only important up to that point,” Lucy said.

“I doubt we’re putting him in danger,” Argon added. “Remember, Fritz lets us Inties work for him on the data-mining. And at Camelot, some people I talked to made it sound almost like Joe and Fritz were even sort of friends.”

“And if they decide to come after you again?” Wilma said.

“In the middle of Nujose? Where there’s only a tenth of the RIDEs per capita there are even in Califia or Cape Nord?” Lucy said.

“And most of them are teeny tiny?” Argon added.

“I have a hard time even counting those as ‘RIDEs,’ really,” Lucy said. “They’re just so...*cute*.”

“Anyway, they can’t force-Integrate anyone to cover their tracks. They’ll leave us alone,” Argon said. “It’s not like we’re planning to walk right in as we are.”

“We should have the cover story in place by the time we arrive,” Lucy said.

“I’ll just leave you to that,” Wilma said. “I’m going to the forward observation bubble to get a good look at outer space while we’re up here. Comm me if you need me.”

Wilma found Taja and Hestia, the ship’s resident odd couple, floating in zero-g in what was intended to be the equivalent of Ten Forward. They were deep in concentration, eyes closed, having attained a near-human shape that resembled Taja insofar as she might have looked after six months in Fuse.

The vixen sighed. Evan hadn’t exactly been tight-lipped about his relationship

with Taja during their long rounds of the automated quibitite mines. She had been, in a word, demanding, and in two more words, high maintenance. Not that Evan *himself* had been a saint at the time, either. Ada's ghost *still* didn't like "that deadbeat".

Not that any of us has ever been or will ever be perfect, Wilma admitted to herself. She knew she'd alienated more than one member of her old crew with her *Star Trek* obsession, not to mention her strict by-the-book command style. She'd seen some of the things former crewmembers posted about her on the rate-your-ex-captain yelps when her better judgment had been too weak to keep her from checking. *Of course, considering what happened to the crew who stayed on, I guess being alienated was a lucky thing for them in the end.*

"Oh, it's you," Taja said, opening her eyes. "Clementine said you were coming. If you want us to leave..."

Wilma waved a hand. "No, it's good. This place is meant for everyone. Anyway, you were here first." She would have *preferred* solitude, but a strict insistence on fairness to everyone, even when she didn't want to be—*especially* when she didn't want to be—was part of who she was.

"Oh," Taja said, elk ears wiggling. "Thank you." She turned to look ahead, out the transparent aluminum bubble that formed the front wall of the room. The sky was a deep shade of dark blue now, almost completely black, with the stars clearly visible. "Pretty view."

"Yeah," Wilma said. "Enjoy it while it lasts. We might not get to see it too often. I get the feeling the Integrate Powers That Be would prefer we stay safely out in the Dry most of the time."

"I've heard about them. How could I not? They're probably why we ended up this way." Taja wrinkled her nose. "I *hate* them."

"Can't say I'm exactly fond of them myself," Wilma said. "I'm not so fond of sandstorms or solar flares, either. But given that I can't control any of them, I treat them all like the navigation hazards they are and just try to work around them."

"I see," Taja said. She trailed off into silence, and they both watched the stars for a while. After a few minutes, Taja said. "Thank you for not throwing us off the ship."

Wilma shrugged. "It's no more than I'd do for anyone in your situation."

"But we're not just *anyone*," Taja said. "And...I don't know if I'd have done the same thing if it had been me."

"Well, then it's probably best all around that it wasn't," Wilma said. "For what it's worth, I don't believe Evan really *hates* you. You can probably patch things up if you put your mind to it."

"What about you?" Taja said.

"It's not really in me to *hate* anyone," Wilma said. "Though I don't mind admitting, more than once you've annoyed the *hell* out of me."

"Sorry," Taja said. "I suppose I am kind of spoiled. It was like...the second I saw Eva...I don't know what came over me. Eva became more of a little sister or something."

"I gather it's not exactly unusual," Wilma said. "I did a lot of reading up on crossriding and the associated psychological issues after the whole thing started. The theory goes that if you're hetero and suddenly your partner switches teams, you've got this whole intense relationship that suddenly doesn't have an outlet, and you try to normalize it however you can. You 'sublimate' your romance into 'sisterhood.' Sometimes a very *possessive* sisterhood."

“She’s not the most flexible of people,” Hestia observed.

“I know,” Taja said. “And being a ‘shifter is all about flexibility. I’m learning. It’s not easy, but...I’m learning.”

“We’ve reached the zenith of our trajectory, Captain,” Clementine announced. Her pale, neon blue-haired avatar rezzed in the small room. “Coming up on the terminator. It’s early in Nujose. Nice view of Alpha on the horizon, too. Pretty. I so wish I could just go into orbit. Feels like I could almost reach out and touch the moon from here.”

“Consider this our first Mercury-Redstone shot,” Wilma said. “We’ll work up to an Apollo later. If we can legitimately get the license. I really don’t want to hack anything for this.”

“Understood, Captain,” Clementine said, a little petulantly.

“You have to walk before you can run, Clemmie,” Wilma said. “If it makes you feel any better, I promise I’ll *seriously* look into getting us an orbital license. Who knows—maybe we could even go outsystem, eventually, and run cargo to some of the stations and settlements out near the solar rim. But that’s a little far ahead to be thinking right now with all that’s going on around us.”

“I understand,” Clementine said, the petulance gone. “You *are* my Captain, and you have a lot more experience than I do. I trust you to do what’s best for me.” Her avatar winked out again.

“Wow,” Taja said. “Must be nice to have someone willing to trust you completely like that.”

“I don’t know about ‘nice,’” Wilma said. “More like ‘scary as hell.’ I never thought I’d *ever* be a parent. Especially now that we’re Integrated.” She shook her head. “I just keep thinking, what if I screw up?”

“You’re a lot less likely to screw something like that up than I’d be,” Taja said. “And even if you do, it probably won’t be the end of the world. ‘Real’ parents screw up all the time. I know mine sure did. But we all muddle through somehow.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Wilma said wryly.

“For what it’s worth...I’m sorry I’ve been such a bitch,” Taja said. “I just...Evan... it’s kind of complicated.”

Wilma shrugged. “I’m not that mad. You’ve got no monopoly on complicated. You know, Evan and I don’t have an *exclusive* claim on each other. If you want to patch things up somehow...well, *he’s* the one you’d need to apologize to about that.”

Taja nodded. “I don’t know if anything like that is in the cards at this point...but thanks.”

Wilma nodded. “I should probably get back to the bridge. See you around.”

Taja nodded. “See you later, Captain. And...thanks again.”

“No problem.” Wilma waved and left Taja alone in the room.

By the time she got back, the city of Nujose was spread out before them like a glowing spider on the dark landscape of Laurasia. Little glowing dots that were skimmers and fliers zipped back and forth above and around it, growing larger as they approached. “Wow!” Clementine said. “Just look at it!”

“We’re cleared by Nujose control for a landing at Nujose Aerodrome. ETA, ten minutes,” Argon reported.

Wilma nodded. “Good. Keep me posted. Argon, Lucy, what do you plan on doing

until you can see Joe Steader? We have some hours to kill.”

“Apart from twiddling the local databases to lay the groundwork for our covers?” Lucy said.

“There is that long-running Starcraft campaign we have on pause...” Argon said. “Er, excuse me.” Argon visibly relaxed as she returned to her ‘neutral’ female form. “I should rest up and evo for the day in the meantime. Lucy?”

“Ah, right,” the other lemur said. Her form relaxed back to the masculine as well. “Right. Got it. We should practice those personas we came up with, at any rate.”

“I’m curious what you’ve come up with,” Wilma said. “You’re going with something in your ‘base’ genders?”

“Well, ultimately we plan to swap between them at will, but to start with we’ll stay consistent,” Luke said. “Easier to stay in-character.”

“I’m going with someone based on a historical figure, Dr. Farouk El-Baz. Apollo-era lunar geologist. A real character himself,” Argon said. “But obscure enough nobody should ‘get it,’ even in this pop-culture-overdosed era.”

“I’m going with someone a little more original,” Luke said. “You’ll get a ‘formal’ introduction in a couple hours once we’ve rested up. I could use some food.”

“We could use some fresh supplies,” Wilma mused. “This is the place to get them cheap. We need real fruit, meat, veg...something for me and Taja and Hestia to busy ourselves with while you’re meeting Joe Steader. How do you plan on getting in to see him, anyway? Seems too early to break cover.”

Argon got out of her chair and sidled up to Luke, giving him a little peck on the cheek. “We’re mostly playing it by ear, aren’t we hon?”

Luke nuzzled her back. “We’ll leem in and leem out again.”

“You two are *adorable*, you know that?” Wilma said, lolling her tongue. “Made for each other.”

“Which makes me think Artemis was playing matchmaker, but I’m not sure I care,” Argon said. “Seems like a stretch, even for her. Even if she *did* make me into Luke’s ideal woman.”

“Oh, come on. You can’t take everything that happens and decide Artemis intended it retroactively,” Wilma said. “Batman Gambit, *maybe*. But even that’s pushing it.”

“After a certain point, a reputation like that becomes self-sustaining,” Luke said. “Like a fusion reaction. Everything happens because she intended it, *so whatever* happens she *must* have intended it.”

“Okay, okay. So I’m a little paranoid. After all that’s happened I think it’s partly justified,” Argon said, gesturing flippantly.

“One thing you have to say for Integrates...at least our lives aren’t *boring*,” Wilma said.

“I could *use* a little boring,” Argon grumbled. “That’s why we’re in Laurasia. Most boring place I know.”

“I’ll give you that,” Wilma said. “Sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like if I’d flown cargo in Laurasia instead of running mining boats in Gondwana. More tranquil, but...” She patted the armrest of her captain’s chair. “...less rewarding in the end, I think.”

“Aww, thanks, Captain,” Clementine said. “You know I like you, too.”

Wilma smiled. “I do, Clemmie. Thanks.”

Argon stretched. “Well...I think it’s time we headed to our quarters to rest up. We’ll see you again before we leave, and we’ll keep you posted on how things go.”

“You can use the Mercedes gullwing skimmer,” Wilma said. “Just top up the batteries before you bring it back.”

“On the ground in two minutes, everyone!” Clementine said cheerfully.

The aerodrome was a busy place, with aircraft and spacecraft of all descriptions constantly taking off and landing. It was a lot busier than it would have been able to be with older technology, Wilma reflected. Before lifters, when planes had to take off and land horizontally, you simply couldn’t do as much because you had to keep the airspace clear to prevent collisions. But lifters changed everything.

Though in Gondwana, with the more pronounced level of twentieth-century craze, a lot more planes and ships used vertical landings and aerodromes *still* had to keep that level of space open. But then, Gondwana had the space to spare, whereas Laurasia...well, Laurasia still had more room than the Zharusians would ever fill, but Laurasian cities were built more after the familiar mold of Earth arcologies and the older colonies—everything together in one place, including spaceports.

As soon as they set down and cleared it with the local traffic control, the ramp on the forward cargo bay opened and a skimmer sports car replica zipped out, bearing Luke and Argon in their new human disguises. Once they were clear, the *Clementine* took off again. The aerodrome was busy enough that they needed the pad space.

Steader Entertainment had office space at the top of the Spindle—at over two kilometers high, the tallest tower in Nujose. Not that this was exactly a surprise. The Steaders had always had a reputation for doing big things in the biggest possible way. Their name was synonymous with excess across all of colonized space, and had been since before the Zharus colonization fleet had even left.

“Looks down on people much, you think?” Lucy wondered as they rode the elevator up...and up...and up. Her human disguise was an attractive woman with long platinum-blond hair with a liberal amount of glitter in it, and obvious but not too ostentatious jewelry. Lucy Skye—with diamonds.

Argon—“Farouk”—shook his head. “Not in that sense. I used to work for him, remember? I’d met him several times even before he saved our bacon from those Snatchers in that hovertank. For all he’s filthy rich, at heart he likes to think of himself as just an average...well, Joe. But in another sense...he’s always been about taking the long view.” He waved a hand upward. “Up there is about the longest possible view you can get without going up one of the space elevators.”

“If I have seen further, it is by...renting the top floor of the Spindle?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

By the time the elevator came to a halt, even Argon was starting to feel a touch of acrophobia. He fully recognized it was silly—he’d flown higher than this on his lifters plenty of times—but there was just something different about standing in a structure that high rather than supporting yourself under your own power. Even if you could catch yourself if you fell from that far.

The elevator doors opened onto a well-furnished reception room with the Steader Entertainment logo on the wall behind the desk, and an attractive receptionist peering up at them from behind several hardlight display panels. “May I help you?”

“Farouk El-Baz and Lucy Skye to see Mr. Steader,” Argon said. “We made an

appointment.”

The receptionist glanced at one of her displays. “Oh, yes, I have you down. Go right in. Mr. Steader is expecting you.”

“Thanks.” They walked across the office to the padded double-doors, which swung wide to admit them to Joe’s office. The entire back wall was transparent, looking out over the city, and the office was furnished in a clean, understated Bauhaus style with a simple rectangular desk, Corbusier chairs, and a rectangular pattern in the carpeting.

“Crazy” Joe himself was shuffling papers—actual *paper* papers—on the desk, the hardlight displays it also offered notwithstanding. He looked up. “Come in, have a seat.” The doors swung shut behind them. As they slid into chairs across from the desk, Joe continued, “Not every day a Beatles song and an Apollo scientist walk into my office. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Er...” Argon said. “Guess we should have figured you’d notice.”

“I’m probably the one person on the planet who would. But you piqued my curiosity, which is why I agreed to see you.” Joe raised an eyebrow. “Well?”

Argon and Lucy exchanged glances, then relaxed back into their lemur Integrate shapes. “I look a little different now, but it’s me—Argon. Lucy—or Luke—is a new friend.”

“Ah.” Joe considered them for a moment, then glanced behind them and nodded. Argon turned in time to see a trio of raccoon, kangaroo, and leopard Integrates de-cloak, return the nod, and leave the office through a side door. “Can’t be too careful these days. But then, you’ve had direct experience with that.”

“...yes. Yes, we have.”

“I’m glad to see you’re alright, and it’s nice to meet you too, Lucy. Like the new look. Hanging around with shapeshifters clearly agrees with you.”

Argon shook his head. “You don’t know the half of it.” He considered shifting to his new default female shape, but there was really no need to show off. Especially given that he still found it pretty embarrassing.

“So what brings you to this neighborhood?”

“Well, enough things have happened that I thought it might be safe to try giving *Firefly* back now. I don’t like being the only one in the world who has it.” He pulled out a fiber optic data cable. “If you have a data port available, I can transfer it over.”

“Sure, there’s one in the front of the desk.”

Argon plugged the cable in, and the files transferred across. “There. Now we’ll see if they stay.”

Joe glanced at one of the desk’s display panels. “They haven’t disappeared from the server yet. Looks like we’re good.”

Argon relaxed back into his seat, and let out the breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Well, that’s a load off my mind.”

Joe tapped the display, and it lit with the battlefield scene Argon well-remembered from the beginning of the pilot episode. “Files play okay, too.” He grinned. “*Finally*, I get to see what all the fuss is about. Great! Is there anything I can do for you in return?”

Lucy spoke up. “Actually, there is one thing. We’ve been thinking about settling down here in Laurasia. Maybe even starting a business. We think we can get away with it as long as we keep our Integrate natures on the down-low.”

Argon nodded. “We can establish credible cover identities with a little bit of

computer work, but they'll be pretty flimsy without anyone in the real world to back them up."

"But if one of the richest people on the planet throws his weight behind them, they'll get a little more credibility?" Joe tilted his head for a moment, then nodded. "Sure, send me what you've got. I'll see what I can do. The world needs more people like you outside that nutty Enclave system. Maybe someday...eh, well. We can hope, anyway."

Lucy's DIN flashed as she transmitted the information. "Thanks. This means a lot."

"Hey, if I can't help friends, and friends of friends, what am I good for?" Joe grinned again. "So...why don't you fill me in on what's gone on since last time we met? Don't worry about spilling state secrets...Fritz and I have something of an understanding about that."

"That's kind of a long...and embarrassing story," Argon said. "But...well, it started right after you helped us out with that hovertank of yours..."

"Looks like that's the last of the supplies." Wilma watched from the bridge as an empty forklift trundled down the ramp from the *Clementine's* main cargo hatch. "We get everything on the list?"

"Everything except a few 'optionals' from the wishlist. Nothing we can't do without." Hestia peered down at a media slate she was holding awkwardly in two almost-human hands. "And you got some decent prices on them, too."

Wilma chuckled. "Dickering with quartermasters is an old hobby of mine."

"Captain, Argon just commed to let us know he and Lucy are on their way back," Clementine reported. "He says their little jaunt was successful, and Joe Steader sends his regards. They'll be aboard in five minutes."

"Very good. Please get the engines warmed up and ready; we can't stay on this pad more than another fifteen minutes anyway. We'll decide where to go from here once we're in the air."

"Aye aye, Captain."

When the Mercedes skimmer pulled back in, Wilma was waiting in the cargo bay to greet the returning lemurs.

"How did it go?" Wilma asked.

"Pretty good." Argon climbed out and shook herself as her body returned to its "natural" shape. "It looks like *Firefly* is a go for re-release. Joe said he's still keeping an eye out for more *Star Trek* for you and might even have something soon."

"That's good news."

Luke stretched. "Also, Joe's working on getting our cover identities properly established here. We'll be good to go in a few days, a couple weeks at most."

Wilma nodded. "More good news. Meanwhile, we've got a fresh supply of groceries on board, including a couple hundred pounds of figs and a couple of cases of Twinkies and grape soda for you two."

Argon rolled her eyes. "That's just an old Usenet meme, you know..."

Luke grinned. "Actually, *I* put them on the shopping list. I *like* Twinkies and grape soda. Thanks, Captain van Dalen."

"You're welcome. Now, let's head up to the bridge—we should have clearance to take off at any moment."

“It just now came through, Captain,” Clementine reported over the shipboard intercom. “We can launch as soon as you’re on the Bridge.”

“We’ll be right there.”

“So where are we heading?” Luke asked.

“We hadn’t actually decided yet,” Wilma admitted. “It’s only been a few hours since we dropped Eva and the others off at the Cave of Wonders, and they wanted at least a few days before we returned for them. We seem to be at loose ends.”

Argon cleared her throat. “I had an idea about that, actually. Joe said that establishing our bona fides would go easier if we were around to demonstrate conclusively that we actually exist. We were thinking about getting a room somewhere, but we wanted to come back and touch base with you first.”

Wilma raised an eyebrow. “So, you think it would be a good idea if we rented hangar space somewhere and stayed put for a while? I don’t know whether Clemmie would go for that.”

“I want to be back in the air again!” Clementine said firmly over the intercom.

“Actually, it’s not strictly necessary you be stuck in one place either.” Luke grinned. “Captain van Dalen, I think you’ve been stuck out in the Dry so long that it’s slipped your mind that *civilization* needs ships and shipping, too. In fact, Laurasia has something like ten times the surface-to-surface cargo flights per day as Gondwana, even with all the ore transportation. And Clemmie’s fitted out just fine for general cargo haulage.”

“Oh...” Wilma considered that. “I’d need a new identity. ‘Wilma Van Dalen’ has been dead for three years.”

Argon shrugged. “What Joe’s doing for two, he can just as easily do for three or more. A cover registration for Clemmie, too, that’ll do more than just fool traffic control for a while.”

They emerged onto the bridge to find Clementine already waiting for them, her holographic icon wide-eyed and excited. “You mean I’d get to haul cargo? Do actual *work*?”

“Do you like that idea, Clementine?” Wilma asked.

“Captain, I do!” Clementine said, nodding quickly. “I want to do more of what I was *built* to do—even if I have to do it in disguise.”

Luke nodded. “It’ll be good for her education, too.”

Wilma straightened her jacket. “Well, then. You’ve got Joe’s comm code, Argon?”

The lemur nodded. “I’ll call him and get it all arranged.”

“Very good.” Wilma smiled. “Well. It’s been a while since I actually hauled cargo for a living. It will be good to get back into the old harness.”

“Yay!” Clementine cheered. “I can’t wait!”

Wilma chuckled. “I hope you’re still this enthusiastic after you’ve done it for a couple of weeks. It can get boring after a while.”

“It’s just for a couple of weeks. Then we’ll do something else.”

“As you say.” She nodded to Argon. “At your convenience, Ms. Noble.”

“Yes, Captain!” Argon slid into the seat at one of the comm stations and punched in the comm code for Joe Steader’s private number. “Joe? This is Argon...listen, would it be too much trouble to add a third cover identity request to mine and Luke’s?”

Chapter Sixteen

July 29, 143 AL

“This is Nujose Tower to *Clementine*. You’re all clear to lift. Thanks for stopping by, and let us know next time you’ll be in the neighborhood.”

Clementine laughed over the open line, playing the part of the ship’s comms officer for the benefit of the tower crew. “Thank you, Nujose Tower. I’ve enjoyed my time here, but now it’s time to head back home.” The registration papers Joe had finagled for her had put Nextus as her home port, simply because Nextus’s bureaucratic rules were a known quantity and Joe was an expert at playing the Game. He’d left the ship’s name the same to reduce confusion, because there were any number of ships named *Clementine* anyway (ore prospecting being the thing it was), and the only people they might have needed to worry about fooling probably already knew who she was anyway and didn’t care.

“Understood, *Clementine*. Have a safe trip back to Gondwana. You’ve got a straight shot and the skies are clear.”

“Acknowledged, Tower. Have a nice day!” Clementine signed off and closed the channel. “We’re all clear to go, Captain.”

Wilma leaned back in her seat. “Good. Are Argon and the others secure for lift?”

“I’ve let them know. They’re still unpacking their luggage. I let them know there was no hurry to join us; they’ll be up by the time we’re out of atmo.”

Wilma nodded. “Very good. The helm’s in your hands, *Clementine*. Lift when ready.”

“Aye aye, Captain!” Clementine turned to face ahead, concentrating. The ship lifted slowly from the cargo pad, oriented toward the sky, and kicked in her lifters. A moment later, they were accelerating away from the towers of Nujose and toward the wide open sky.

It had been an interesting two weeks for all of them. After some discussion, Taja and Hestia had decided to join Argon and Luke in Nujose for the duration. While the lemur duo worked on getting their fledgling AI company set up, Taja and Hestia explored the city, did tourist things, and took in the local nightlife.

The cervine duo were well aware of the ground rules for Integrate interaction, and solemnly vowed to make no hard-to-explain splashes in the world at large. No suspicious winning streaks at casinos, no displays of superhuman abilities or anything of the sort, and no attempts to contact old friends from back home who might think they were dead. As far as the world knew, they were just a yokel tourist from across the sea, come to rubberneck at the first home of humanity on the planet.

By all reports, the deer Integrate comported themselves as a model citizen, which was good to hear. Wilma had been a little concerned they might be inclined to push their luck, but Hestia had a good head on her shoulders, and Taja was at least sensible enough to take advice.

That left Wilma free to run the cargo routes solo—or, rather, duo, since Clemmie definitely counted as another pilot (and, for that matter, another person). A ship of *Clementine*’s size and abilities was really a little overqualified for short-distance ground

cargo runs, which were usually serviced by skimmers and fliers more akin to big rig trucks back on Earth. But it wasn't unheard-of for suborbital or intrasystem vessels to find cargo haulage work where they could when they had to stay planetside for other reasons. There were a number of logistics agencies that specialized in arranging cargo for ships in that situation, and a recommendation from Joe Steader let them bypass the traditional newbie vetting period and get right to work.

Their cargo runs had taken them to every major settlement on the continent, and even across the sea to Gondwana a few times for runs to Nextus or Uplift. Clementine had enjoyed the chance to see more of her world and mingle with other ships, and Wilma had enjoyed spending time alone and bonding with the ship. It was an interesting experience, socializing a new intelligence to the world—she was an odd mixture of knowledge and ignorance, sophistication and naivete, about the unlikeliest things.

But that amount of time had been just what they needed. To Wilma's satisfaction, Clementine was getting over her Captain-worship and beginning to be able to relate to her as another person rather than as The Being Who Ruled Her.

At some point, Wilma would broach as a topic for discussion the fact that Clementine didn't *have* to obey her orders if she wanted to choose another path—and she had the right to decide for herself if and when she should want to choose such a path. She wasn't "just an AI," but was as much a person as any other human or RIDE—in her crew's eyes, if not the eyes of the law, yet.

Wilma didn't expect Clementine to kick her and the others out, but it was important she understand she had that right if she wanted—when she was ready, anyway. It was a point that might not come for months, at any rate, but Wilma was determined that come it would.

A chime drew Wilma out of her private thoughts, and she looked up to see the sky was now a deep shade of purple. The door at the rear of the bridge slid open to admit Argon, Luke, and Taja. Wilma stood to greet them. "Welcome back to the ship. Did everything go well?"

"Even better than we had hoped!" Luke said. "The company's basically just an office halfway up the Spindle right now, but we're working on getting lab facilities set up."

"Once that happens...well, we'll discuss it when the time comes." Argon shrugged. "For now, I want to make sure Evan and the others are okay."

"How about you, Tajana, Hestia? Find everything you were looking for?"

Taja actually smiled. "We enjoyed ourselves, thank you. I wish we could have commed some old friends, but..."

"It was nice being back in human society again, even if it was incognito," Hestia added. "I think we could make a life like that, if we didn't rock the boat."

"I think we're all going to have a lot to talk about once we're back together." Wilma smiled. "Speaking of which, once we reach our zenith, we'll be changing our course just slightly. Instead of Nextus, we'll be zeroing in on the Cave of Wonders." Her smile took on a sardonic cast as her jaw set. "It's time we rounded up the rest of our crew."

"...and there you have it." Flushed with exertion, Eva stood panting, her chest heaving despite all her best efforts...her skin over her entire right arm and her left below

the elbow gleaming a metallic silver, rather than the usual brown.

Appa gave her a long, even look. “This is all you were able to accomplish in two weeks of work?”

Eva exchanged glances with Gigi, whose own demonstration had been just about as limited. “Well...yes,” she said at last.

And then, unexpectedly, Appa smiled. “Excellent! That is more than I had hoped for or anticipated. Truly, the rumors of your prowess are not an exaggeration.”

Eva took another deep breath and let it out in a sigh. “You’re not...disappointed?”

Appa chuckled. “Of course not. After all, Zharus was not settled in a day. Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in so short a time. But your demonstration proves the theory is sound. And after all, you will have years in which to progress further.”

“Er...yes,” Eva said. “About that...we were rather hoping to be moving on fairly soon.”

Appa raised a bushy eyebrow. “So quickly? After all, you only just arrived.”

“We’re not really the kind of people to stay in one place for too long,” Gigi supplied. “We’re just *visiting* because Artemis suggested we should. Now that we’ve both seen each other, I think it’s time we were moving on.”

Appa laughed. “Succinctly put! Mmm...we can talk on it after dinner, I think. For now, all that shifting will have used up a good deal of your energy.” Appa waved a hand toward the entrance to the dining hall. “Go! Eat! Recharge and replenish yourselves!”

Eva and Gigi exchanged glances. “Ah...thanks, we’ll do that.” They drifted toward the entrance. The couple of dozen other Cave inhabitants who had gathered to watch the demonstration parted to let them through.

“What do you think?” Gigi asked. “Is he just going to keep stalling?”

“Maybe.” Her stomach chose that moment to growl. “But he’s right—that did use up a lot of energy. Maybe *we* can talk on it after dinner, too.” Gigi nodded.

As they approached the entrance, they were joined by Boston. “How did the demonstration go?”

Eva shrugged. “Better than we’d feared. Believe it or not, Appa *didn’t* actually want the moon. He seems pleased as punch at the little *we were* able to do.”

“Well, that’s good.” Boston glanced down at his wrist, where he’d strapped a hand-slate display. He reached down to tap it with one horny hoof-finger, and frowned. “Strange.”

“What’s going on?” Eva asked.

“Something is happening. Something big, but my contacts aren’t clear on exactly *what*. I’ve gotten some very confused e-mails, and some garbled comm transmissions in the last few hours.”

“At least *you have* some contacts again?” Gigi said. “That’s good, right?”

“The strangest thing is, I even got some transmissions from people who hadn’t been talking to me anymore. Ones from Olympos.” Boston tapped the display a couple more times. “They’re the ones that made the *least* sense. Mostly static and noise. And they haven’t responded to my transmissions back.”

“Well, we certainly can’t go there to find out what’s going on right now.” Eva shook her head. “Maybe when Clementine comes back for us.”

“If we’re allowed to leave,” Gigi grumbled.

Eva shrugged. “No point borrowing trouble before we have to. Let’s burn that bridge when we come to it. Right now—let’s eat.”

As they carried loaded trays to their table, a familiar bald eagle approached with a tray of his own. “Hey, mind if I join you?”

Gigi nodded to him. “Not at all, Gustav. Plenty of room.”

“Thanks.” He pulled up a chair and put his own tray down. Unlike the generic fare they had expected before arriving, it actually had a fairly appetizing dinner. Appa did seem to appreciate the best things in life, which included acquiring Integrates who had been chefs in their human lives and setting them to the task of making up new recipes using Integrate ingredients. On the whole, it actually wasn’t bad. Even Gigi had mentioned it had improved since she’d lived in the cave.

They ate for a while in silence, then Gustav spoke up again, but in lower tones. “So...uh...I couldn’t help overhearing that you were talking about skedaddling. You think Appa will let you go?”

Eva favored him with a glower. “He’d better,” she said darkly. “We only came here in the first place because Artemis said to, and we don’t even *like* Artemis very much.”

“Seems to me like you’d have a better chance than most of getting out of here,” Gustav continued between bites. “Most of us don’t have a heavily-armed suborbital coming in to pick us up. They expect yours to show up in just an hour or two.”

Boston perked up. “Clemmie’s on the way in? Nobody told us...”

“Appa wouldn’t.” Gustav shrugged. “But I know the people in ATC, and I asked them to keep an eye out.”

“Well, that does put a different face on things,” Gigi mused. “Wonder what Appa will do? Clemmie’s in good with Camelot, after all, and even Fritz seems to like us a little. If Appa tries to pull anything, there could be repercussions.”

Eva gestured with her fork. “He won’t be able to get away with trying to pretend we’re not available. Not for very long, anyway.”

“Yeah. So, uh, anyway...I was wondering.” Gustav glanced at each of them uncertainly. “Unlike most of the people here, I don’t have any ‘anchors’ Appa can use to keep me in line. I’m just stuck here because nobody lets me out. So I was wondering...if you do get to leave, could I hitch a ride? I’m really tired of this burg, and want a chance to stretch my wings in some new airspace.”

Eva and Gigi traded glances, then Eva nodded. “I don’t know if I can make any promises, but I’m not opposed. You’ve helped us out a lot, after all.”

“Stick close, and we’ll see,” Gigi added.

Boston glanced at the screen on his wrist again, and frowned. “I’m really starting to get a bad feeling about Olympos. But this could be good for us—there’s no way Appa couldn’t have heard some of the same news. Or non-news. He’s got to be pretty worried himself.”

Eva nodded. “We’ll just have to wait and see how it goes.”

Clementine opened a tight-beam communication channel to the Cave of Wonders while they were still on their re-entry approach, using the comm codes they’d been given when they had dropped off Evan and the others. The Cave’s control tower was characteristically cautious, only responding in coded text.

“They are warning us off, Captain,” Clementine reported. “They advise us that Eva, Gigi, and Boston have expressed a desire to stay on in the Enclave for an extended period.”

Wilma pursed her lips, or as close as she could get with a vulpine muzzle. “I see. Any sign of the code phrases we arranged when we dropped them off?”

“No, Captain.”

“Then the message is phony. Kindly explain to them we’re coming in to pick up our crew—if we have to knock a new entrance into their Cave to do it.”

Clementine nodded. “Message sent. Waiting on a response.” She tilted her head. “I have taken the liberty of powering up the Dragon’s Breath phased-pulse cannon.”

“Good. Signal red alert. If Appa isn’t inclined to listen to reason, well...” She let the sentence trail off, and focused her gaze on the forward viewscreen as a particular patch of desert grew larger.

The three *Clementine* crew and Gustav finished their stew and found an out-of-the-way table nearby to distract themselves for a while as they waited for further news. Between them, they had a number of board games in onboard storage that they could project in hardlight. They had just finished their second game of Settlers of Catan when a message pinged on Eva’s DIN: Appa requested another audience.

“Well, I guess that’s that, then.” Eva dissolved the Catan board. “Shall we go and see what the buffalo wants?”

Appa looked considerably grumpier than the last time they had seen him. “Your ship is returning for you,” he said without preamble. “Your captain’s loyalty is admirable. She is all but threatening to open fire on us if we do not return you to them.”

Gigi smirked. “Yeah, she’s just a little touchy that way.”

“Your reputation as the Hotel California of Enclaves does tend to precede you,” Boston said mildly. “Not too surprising she’d jump right to armed posturing.”

“We are not without our own defenses,” Appa said pointedly.

“And we are not without friends in a number of other Enclaves,” Evan said. He’d returned to male form for the encounter. “Camelot, Olympos...even the Coffeehouse, if I were to stretch a point. Any actions you take against our ship could have repercussions.”

The buffalo waved a hand dismissively. “As it happens, there will be no need for such actions. I believe we can come to an accord.”

Gigi raised an eyebrow. “An ‘accord,’ huh? Do tell?”

Appa nodded toward Boston. “As *you*, at least, are no doubt aware, the state of affairs surrounding Olympos Enclave has become...uncertain, of late. As Olympos is an ally, I do feel some concern for it. Hence, the deal I offer is that I will permit you to return to your ship unimpeded. In return, you will immediately proceed to the site and transmit a report to me of what you find there.”

Boston glanced at the others. “That...seems reasonable to me.”

“Hold on, I’ve got one condition on your condition.” Evan nodded toward Gustav, who had entered with them but stayed at the back of the audience room as they’d approached the throne. “We’d like to take him with us.”

Appa frowned and glowered. “I am not inclined to lose more of my subjects. But...if that is the *only* additional condition?”

The *Clementine* crew exchanged glances, then nodded together.

“Very well. Your ship should be here soon. You may await it in the same place it landed before. Do remember to be prompt about those reports.” He waved a hand dismissively.

Evan and the others exchanged glances, then filed out of the room, grabbing

Gustav's arm as they passed. "Well, that was...unusual," Evan mused.

"You're telling me." Gustav shook his head. "I've never seen Appa just...willingly let someone go like that."

Evan frowned. "He must be really worried about Olympos. Didn't want to risk the chance we might have second thoughts."

"After what I've been hearing, I'm not surprised." Boston glanced at the display on his arm again. "Are you sure it's a good idea to do this? If something is going on with Olympos, going to check it out could be dangerous."

"Which is probably why he's sending us. We're 'expendable.'" Gigi glanced back over her shoulder, narrowing her eyes.

"Not that it really matters." Evan shook his head. "After everything I've heard, or haven't heard, in the last couple of hours, now I'm getting worried too. I'd say we ought to check it out anyway."

Gigi nodded. "C'mon, let's get topside and let Clemmie know we're here."

Chapter Seventeen

They had barely made it to the surface by the time the ship dropped out of the sky. Fortunately, lifter tech didn't tend to cause turbulence, or they wouldn't have been able to breathe for all the dust and sand it would have thrown up when *Clementine* came in for a landing.

"Are you alright?" Wilma commed as they approached. "Who's that with you?"

"This is Gustav. He's a friend. We'll fill you in once we're all aboard." Evan led the way toward the ramp that lowered from the ship's side.

Wilma wasn't wasting any time. The moment the last of them passed through the hatch, it sealed, the ramp retracted, and they were already lifting. Gustav looked around admiringly as they made their way to the bridge. "This is a nice ship."

"Thank you!" Clementine said cheerfully through the intercom speakers. "I do my best."

Gustav blinked. "Uh...you're welcome? Who're you?"

"That's the 'nice ship' herself," Evan said. "Clementine, this is Gustav. Gustav, Clementine, and vice versa. Otherwise known as *the* Clementine."

"The one and only!" Clementine agreed. "I'd project my avatar, but we're all waiting on the bridge anyway so I'll just meet you there instead."

"Uh...okay." Gustav glanced at Evan. "You've got a RI core built into your ship?"

"No, Clementine's a *leeetle* more unique than that." Gigi smirked at Gustav's puzzled expression. "You'll see when you meet her."

The rest of the ship's crew and passengers were waiting on the bridge: Wilma, Argon, Luke, Clementine—even Tajana was there, her feral elk form a little awkward in the confined space.

Wilma nodded a greeting as they entered. "Welcome back, everyone. How was your stay in the so-called 'Cave of Wonders'? Not wonderful, I take it?"

Evan shrugged. "It had its points. I can see why Artemis wanted us to visit."

Wilma raised an eyebrow. "Indeed?"

"As high-handed as she gets at times, she kind of has a point that we really don't know as much about Integrate society as we could. With some notable exceptions, anyway." Evan nodded toward Boston. "And even with him to tell us about it, there's a difference between hearing about it and experiencing it. Travel does broaden the mind, but but only if you actually travel *to* places."

"Noted." Wilma nodded. "We've been confining our visits mostly to the human side lately, but it probably would be a good idea to make more visits to different Enclaves—at least, as long as they're Enclaves that would let us back out again. Speaking of which, it seemed considerably easier to extract you from Appa's clutches than I'd been led to expect. Any special circumstances I should know about?"

Boston cleared his throat. "There's one, actually. It's possible it might be dangerous, but we had to agree to do it to get out of there."

Wilma's eyebrow went up again. "Oh, really. Do tell?"

"We need to go back to Olympos...or at least, to where Olympus might have *used* to be."

"Used to..." Wilma said. "Clemmie! Can you get a sat image of the site?"

The ship's avatar nodded. "On it, Captain. But it may take some time, if it's possible at all."

Argon sighed. "Even she won't be able to, Wilma. Fritz and his cronies have the Gondwana sat systems locked down. Please, let me try instead. I don't have DIN burnout problems the rest of you do. I can get in there before they know it."

Wilma nodded to one of the bridge's science stations. "Be our guest."

The lemur cracked her knuckles then plugged herself in with a network cable into the socket on the back of her right hand, then closed her eyes as she submerged into cyberspace.

Wilma turned back to Boston. "What's this all about, then?"

"Shortly before you got here, my last links to the place went dark, and I started hearing from contacts who used to not want anything to do with me. Something bad seems to have happened, but no one's clear exactly *what*." Boston shook his head. "Appa is concerned, too. So he figured he could kill two birds and send *us* there to check it out."

Evan nodded. "I'd have argued the point, but after what Boston said, I wanted to go have a look anyway, so it seemed like the best idea just to go with the flow."

"What could have happened to the place?" Luke wondered.

"I've got a sneaking suspicion," Gigi said darkly. "We always knew there was only so long Fritz would look the other way from things, and after what we saw when we were there the last time...seems like Artemis might finally have gone too far."

"Could he really do that?" Gustav asked. "Destroy an entire Enclave?"

"There's a reason he's Top Cat, and it's *not* his sparkling personality," Gigi assured him. "Oh, by the way, Captain van Dalen, this is Gustav, one of Appa's inmates who helped us out while we were there. We were able to pry him loose as part of our conditions for going to check on Olympos."

Wilma nodded to him. "Pleased to meet you."

"Happy to be here, Captain. I think you're already pretty well set for pilots, but if you need someone else, I used to fly a cargo ship myself back before...things happened."

Wilma chuckled. "Clementine's the one you'd need to talk to about that."

Argon looked up. "Seems like someone's gotten *really* paranoid. I can't retask any satellite to take a look directly at the site."

Wilma glanced at her. "I see. So, there's no information at all?"

"Didn't say that. He can't block out satellite views of the whole Dry Ocean. And looking at the sections of it that are downwind from Olympos, I'm seeing a *lot* more drifting dust than is usual."

Wilma narrowed her eyes. "Well, *there's* some cheerful news. Clemmie, I guess you'd better lay in a course. Take us in slowly, and keep your scanners peeled for anything unusual."

"Yes, Captain. At our best speed, it will be several hours before we reach the vicinity...unless you wish to go suborbital?"

"Several hours will be good enough. We don't want to draw any unnecessary attention to ourselves."

"Understood."

"Hey, Evan." Taja had been waiting patiently while the others talked, but now she stepped up. "I've been practicing. Watch." She closed her eyes, then a moment later her body began to contract and shrink down, while standing up into an upright posture. A

minute or so later, she stood on two legs in her elk-human form.

“That’s pretty good,” Evan said. “How long can you hold the form now?”

“I’m up to a couple of hours, if I don’t get distracted. It’s...a lot harder than I thought it would be.” Her ears drooped a little.

Evan chuckled. “Harder than *we* make it look, you mean? Keep at it. It took us months to get where we are. Remember how tired I looked after coming home from work? You’ll get it.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence.” Taja smiled faintly. “I just want to say... I’m sorry for the way I’ve acted. I...it...it’s not the kind of person I *want* to be.”

“That’s all right.” Evan patted her on the shoulder. “Just keep practicing being a better person, and you’ll get that, too. As I’ve found myself, it kind of helps to have an external conscience built in. Just get in the habit of listening to her.” He grinned. “That wasn’t always easy for me, either.”

“*That’s* putting it mildly,” Liis put in.

Argon slid her seat back and got up. “Well. I guess if we’ve got a few hours to kill...” She glanced at Gustav. “So, you’re a pilot, huh? Ever hear of a show called *Firefly*?”

Luke grinned. “Uh-oh. Better run while you still can.”

Gustav blinked at her. “Uh...no?”

“Well, you’re in luck, because I’ve got all the episodes.”

“*And* the movie. *And* the novels. *And* the comic books. *And* the action figures. *And* the ‘Captain Mal’ sheet set on her bed...” Luke said.

“Hey, now, that’s TMI,” Argon protested. She turned to Gustav. “C’mon, we’ve got more than enough time to get started. Watching TV together is a great way to get to know your fellow crew.”

Gustav blinked. “Er...”

“Dad loves that show!” Clementine put in. “And she doesn’t get to share it with a new audience that often.”

Gustav blinked again. “‘Dad’? ‘She’?”

Argon rolled her eyes. “It’s a little complicated. I’ll tell you later.”

Gigi chuckled. “So go on, enjoy yourself. We’ll all still be here when you’re done.”

“We’ll tell you some about the ship and how we got here while we watch,” Luke said. “And it’ll keep us out of Captain van Dalen’s hair, which she’d probably appreciate right about now.”

Gustav shrugged. “All right...I guess I don’t have anything better to do right now.”

“That’s the spirit! C’mon.” Argon led the way off the bridge, followed by Luke and the only-slightly-confused eagle Integrate.

Evan chuckled. “Sounds like a good idea to me. We could all stand to relax a little now that we’re out of that cave, and we won’t be able to find anything more out about Olympos ‘til we get there. I’m feeling like a little Nature Range myself.” He glanced to Taja. “You and Hestia are welcome to join us, if you want.”

“I guess...if you’re willing to put up with me.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find *that* out,” Liis said.

Boston turned to Clementine. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to try to get in touch with my contacts again, now that we’re out of the cave.”

“Of course,” Clementine said. “The comm station is available.”

Wilma nodded. “And any information you could get would probably be helpful.”

Evan moved toward the hatch at the back of the bridge, followed by Taja. “We’ll be back in plenty of time for the Olympos approach. Call us if anything important comes up.”

Wilma nodded. “See you then, Number One.”

“You kids have fun,” Boston said over his shoulder as he sat down at the comm station. “I’ll let you know what I find out.”

“Attention, all hands! This is your Captain speaking. We’re on our final approach to the Olympos area now. I’d like all crew to the bridge, please, at your earliest convenience. Taja, Gustav, I’d suggest the forward observation bubble would be a good spot to take in the view. Such as it is.”

Boston grinned. “Not to mention be out from underfoot, eh?”

Wilma sat down in the Captain's Chair. “Yellow Alert. Shields up. Just in case.”

Eva slipped in from the back, followed by Gigi, Luke, and Argon. “Did we miss anything?”

“From the looks of things, we've missed everything,” Clementine reported. “Oh dear. That's not how I remember things at all.”

The mountaintop Enclave, once protected by a hardlight dome, was a smoldering ruin. Most obvious were three massive trenches up the hillside, intersecting where Artemis's Palace once stood.

“That's...gotta be Fritz's arm cannon,” Argon said.

“No doubt about it,” Eva said. “Any sign of survivors, Clementine?”

“So far, nothing. But there's a lot of dust obscuring my sensors.”

“Is that really...where we were?” Taja asked over the intercom from the observation bubble. “It's...like a whole different place.”

Wilma stared. “It looks like...like one of those colonies that were hit by the Borg, in early *TNG*. Which...is really a hell of a thing to compare something like this to, but it's just the first thing that comes to mind. Or maybe Endurance, once Earth was through with it...”

Boston was slack-jawed and speechless, which then turned to anger. “There is *no way* Artemis didn't suspect this was coming! There's just no way! She's too smart for that!”

“But also stubborn as hell, Boston. Chandler's ego was *far* too large to close it down and bug out,” Eva said darkly. “But the place was looking mighty empty the last time we were here, wasn't it?”

“She bullied out anyone who wouldn't toe the line and couldn't be controlled,” Boston said.

“Including you,” Gigi pointed out.

“And, for that matter, us.” Eva shook her head. “It's probably not a coincidence she sent us off to another Enclave thousands of clicks away that we couldn't easily leave once we got there.”

“Still no signs of survivors,” Clementine reported. “This doesn't necessarily mean there weren't any—they could have been relocated to other Enclaves. But even so...” She paused for a moment. “We're being hailed. It's...Mike Munn-Tonto again. His signal is originating from fifteen clicks north-northeast of the ruins.”

“On screen.”

There was Tonto in his Marshal gear. “Captain van Dalen. I heard about Appa's

‘mission’ for you, so I’m not surprised to see you here.”

“We’re kind of surprised to see you,” Eva said. “Does Appa know you’re here?”

Tonto chuckled and shook his head. “Not as such, and I’ll thank you to leave us out of your report to him. The Marshals got wind something was in the air, and Mike contrived to be sent away on some more make-work shortly after you lot arrived at the Cave. Spent most of the last two weeks running down leads to try to figure out *what* was up. Still largely missed out on it.”

“Were you here when...” Gigi waved a hand in the general direction of the ruin.

“Not when it happened, no, but the ruins were still glowing when I got here.”

“Were there any survivors? Did you find anyone at all? Any corpses, even?”

Boston asked.

“One small group, deep underground,” Tonto said. “Other than that, not even corpses. We’re not sure what happened. Not enough information yet. It’s possible Fritz let them evacuate first—he’s a fickle bastard like that. But with him it’s hard to tell.”

Gigi frowned. “So it *was* Fritz.”

“That much was never in any doubt. His cannon is...unique. We have the splash pattern of his blasts on file, and this matches it to the 99th percentile.”

“No sign of Artemis, I take it,” Eva said.

“None at all. If he-slash-she was in one of the buildings when it took a hit, there wouldn’t even be ashes left. If he-she escaped, the sensible thing to do would be to dive down a hole and pull it in after, so we likely wouldn’t hear anything from her for a while anyway.”

Argon looked up. “Did your Marshals hear anything about *why* Fritz got in a snit? This all seems pretty extreme.”

“As I understand it, you lot visited this place shortly before it happened, and we’ve never had much luck getting anyone into it ourselves. Leastways, not anyone who reported back to us for very long after getting in.” Tonto waved a hand dismissively. “Seems like that’s the sort of thing *I* should be asking *you*.”

Boston shuddered. “If Fritz heard about even half of what was going on in there... small wonder he thought it merited the Sodom and Gomorrah treatment.”

“That was just about what we figured, too, though we don’t have the specifics you do. If you should care to pass along any details my way, the Marshals will owe you a favor.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Marshal.”

“Aside from taking out the trouble spot, it also sends a signal to certain others, like Appa, that they’d better calm down their rocking the boat if they don’t want to spring a big leak. For an all-powerful despot, Fritz is really pretty conservative in a lot of ways.” Tonto shrugged. “Probably better all around that way. If he took it into his head that Zharus would be better off with Integrates running the show, who knows what kind of a mess that would kick off?”

“And that’s why the Marshals are helping keep Integrates out of the public eye?” Wilma asked.

“More or less. At the same time as we keep an eye on ‘em. We can’t stand up to that kind of power directly, but we can at least try to see he doesn’t have any reasons to bring it into play outside his own little sandbox.” He snorted. “If you can call the Dry Ocean a ‘sandbox.’”

“How could he even *do* something like this?” It was Gustav—the intercom line

was still open. “How could any one person *have* that kind of power?”

“I’d say your guess is as good as ours, but that wouldn’t necessarily be true.” Tonto shrugged. “Our boffins have the odd idea or two, though nothing they’re likely to be able to verify any time soon.” He snorted. “Unless they somehow get the chance to dissect Fritz. He’s a special one, that character. As I understand it, Captain van Dalen and her friends know that better than most.”

Wilma pursed her muzzle. “You could say that.”

“If I were you lot, I’d be careful the next little while. If Fritz was ticked off that badly, wouldn’t take a lot to set him off again.” He touched the brim of his hat. “Take care of yourselves. You know how to reach me.” The signal blinked out.

Wilma sighed. “Well. *That* was a horse of a different color.”

“You know, we still have no idea who was behind the attack on us that got this ball rolling,” Gigi said. “Could’ve been some of Fritz’s cronies. Or another faction entirely.”

“Or just a bunch of malcontents,” Liis added, rezzing an avatar next to Eva. “I hate to be a Debbie Downer here, but we’re outnumbered, we’re outgunned—no offense, Clemmie—and we don’t really have any allies. Keeping to ourselves like we did didn’t do us any political favors.”

Wilma pursed her lips. “Options. What do we have? Where do we go from here?”

“Space,” Clementine said. The word dropped into the conversation, fitting precisely into place.

“Are you suggesting we leave the Pharos system?” Eva said.

“Thought about that for a few milliseconds, but no. There are plenty of places intrasystem where we could go and stretch our legs, away from planetary Intie politics. Spend a year or two out of Fritz’s headfur, let him calm down. Or maybe even longer. And that paperwork Joe got me should ease the process of getting exit clearance.” Clementine literally glowed. “Well, Captain? Mom, Dad? Everyone?”

“Well, *I* like the idea,” Wilma said. “But of course I would. I’ve always dreamed of being a Spacer. The ship shouldn’t need much in the way of modifications to be good for intrasystem work.”

“I’m in,” Gigi said. “Liis, Eva?”

“Do I really have to say?” Eva said, Liis’s avatar nodding agreement.

“I’ll stay with you guys a while longer,” Boston added. “I could stand to build some off-Zharus contacts, and I’ve heard rumors there are some Integrate Enclaves all the way out at the system rim, away from in-system Intie politics. I’m in.”

The lemurs looked at one another, nodding. Luke spoke. “Going to space sounds like a great idea...for the rest of you. We wouldn’t dream of standing in the way...but if it’s all the same, Clementine, your mother and I want to stay on Zharus. Since we visited Joe Steader we’ve had some...ideas.”

“We want you to have siblings, which means we need the resources here on Zharus,” Argon added. “We’ll go to Laurasia and stick with those human identities we cooked up. If you could drop us off at the top of one of the beanstalks before you leave orbit, we can make our way from there.”

Clementine made a joyful squeee sound. “You’re...I’m going to have brothers and sisters?”

“Well...kind of. I mean, they’d be more akin to your descendents, Clemmie. You’re the first of a new type of AI. Luke and I still don’t even agree on whether we

should call you 'Evolved' or 'Enhanced.' Something like that. You're the child of a splinter from Dr. Patil's earlier work. A research thread that she abandoned, but...here you are."

Luke whistled. "Wonder where she is these days? Once we get our academic work published maybe she'll reappear?"

"I dunno, you two. Sounds risky," Boston said. "Not to mention...what kind of legal status will they have? You don't want the quasi-slavery mess our non-Intie brethren are in."

"We'll work on that," Argon reassured. "But it's something we have to do. Right, Luke?"

"Damn right!"

"Anyway, the last thing Fritz wants is more publicity. We don't think it's likely he'd bother sending snatchers all the way into the heart of Laurasia. Not when we've got his old pal Joe Steader to 'keep an eye on us.'"

"We'll miss you *lots*," Clementine said. "But you're right...it's a great way to 'lay low' and let Intie society go on just being Intie society for a while."

Eva sighed. "I don't know. It kind of feels like we're running away with our tails between our legs."

"There's no shame in *that*," Gigi said. "It's what *I* did, after all. And how I ended up meeting you, and helping you, and here we are. We can't all be Superman. Sometimes retreating is the best choice."

"She who fights and runs away..." Wilma said. "Right. I suppose we can put in at Camelot long enough to make the necessary mods for intrasystem work. Since they're most familiar with Clemmie, it won't take them long to get it done. She just needs a battery upgrade and a new set of impellers."

"Fritz will probably hear about it, then," Eva pointed out.

"And he'll probably be glad to see the last of us for a while." Wilma shrugged. "If we make sure to spread the word we're not going to have any more to do with human society other than a few cargo pick-ups or drop-offs here and there, or booking the band into local nightclubs, he'll have no kick. He already knows we can be trusted that far."

"Sounds like a plan, then." Boston turned to the comm station. "I'll comm ahead and let them know we're coming—and let my local contacts know, too. Funny how they're all suddenly in a lather to talk to me again, isn't it? It's almost as if it was only fear of Artemis that was keeping them clammed."

Evan snorted. "You know full well that's *exactly* what it was."

Boston grinned. "Which is why it's also *as if* that's what it was, no?"

"Don't forget to compile a report to Appa," Liis said. "We do owe him that much."

Wilma nodded. "And we always pay our debts."

Boston nodded. "I've already been working on that. He'll have all that we know, excepting everything involving Marshal Tonto, within the hour."

"Good." Wilma rubbed her hands together. "Well, if that's all, then...Clemmie, please set a course for Camelot."

Clementine nodded. "With *pleasure*, Captain!"

A few hours later, Wilma leaned back in the command chair. Most of the crew had long since left the bridge, retreating to whatever private forms of recreation were helping them deal with the events of the last few hours. For Wilma, that "recreation"

was relaxing on her bridge, just as it had always been.

“Captain van Dalen?”

Wilma turned to see Gustav standing at the entrance to the bridge. “Yes, Gustav?”

“Before you head out to...wherever it is you’ll be heading, I’d appreciate if you could drop me off—about three thousand clicks east of here, if it wouldn’t be out of the way.”

Wilma raised an eyebrow. “You’re not planning on staying aboard? We have room to spare, and the others speak well of you. Especially Argon.” She nodded to the lemur—the only other Intie crewmember still on the bridge—who was seated at her traditional helm station. “I gather you really like that *Firefly* show.”

“It has its points—but much as I like watching a *show* about space, I don’t exactly care to spend a year or two out there myself.” Gustav shrugged. “The thing is...living in the Cave was a bit of a sheltered life. I didn’t know a whole lot about what really went on in Integrate politics. But after what I’ve seen and heard in the last couple of days...it seems to me that it’s not the kind of place I want to spend my time. But going back to human society isn’t such a hot plan, either. But I heard tell of a middle way, through the grapevine...a sort of village where escaped RIDEs go. I’ve been practicing, and...” His form shimmered, bulking up by about thirty percent and taking on the shape of a Fuser-form bald eagle RIDE. His voice deepened. “...I think I can pass for one of them if I’m careful.”

“You sure that’s what you want? Staying in one place all the time? Sounds kind of boring to me.”

Gustav shrugged. “I come from the Cave of Wonders, ma’am. I’m used to boring. In fact, a little boring seems to feel like just my speed, right about now.”

“Heeeeey.” Argon swivelled her seat to regard Gustav thoughtfully. “I *recognize* that voice you’re using. It’s Jayne, isn’t it?”

Gustav nodded to her. “Adam Baldwin, anyway. Not so sure I like what I’ve read about the man himself, but I liked the man he played on the show.” Gustav cocked his head. “In fact...maybe I’ll call myself that from now on. ‘Baldwin’ seems like a pretty good name for a bald eagle, don’t you think?”

“A little on the nose, but it’s not bad.”

Gustav chuckled. “Don’t you mean ‘on the beak’?”

Argon produced a holographic rotten tomato and threw it. It vanished a moment before it would have hit Gustav.

“It shouldn’t be any problem to drop you off. We can be at the spot in a few minutes.”

Baldwin nodded. “Thank you, ma’am. I appreciate that, I surely do.”

Chapter Eighteen

August 3, 143 AL

Evan was sitting in his quarters, going over the music for the band's next show. They'd booked into a club at the top of the Beanstalk for their farewell-to-Zharus gig. They still weren't even quite sure what moniker or body shape they were going to use. Gigi claimed to favor "the Platinum Platypuses," but Evan was pretty sure she was kidding. At least, he *thought* she was kidding. Sometimes it was a little hard to tell.

They were going to have time for a couple of fasttime practice sessions before they arrived, and he was determined to put it to good use. Bands who played the club up there always covered as many space-related songs as they could dig up out of the Steader archives. It had started out as a joke by some visiting band, then grown into sort of a tradition. "Major Tom," "Starman," and "Space Oddity" were the ones everybody knew about, but Evan wanted to bring some new numbers to the table—and having an ex-Steadar data miner on the ship gave them some advantages there.

And Argon had been happy to oblige, digging up a few more gems they could throw into their show. "Rocket Man," "Man on the Moon," and the Beatles's "Across the Universe" were all on the playlist. They'd played some of them before, but others were new.

Argon had tossed another David Bowie song her way, too—"Ashes to Ashes," a sort of sequel to "Space Oddity." Interesting song, not least for how it recast "Space Oddity" as being about a drug addict shooting up rather than a space accident. The music video was looping on her comm right now as she worked on learning it. She could have screened it in virtual, but felt like staying in to the real world until they were safely out of the system. "Ashes to ashes, funk to funky, we know Major Tom's a junkie, strung out in heaven's high, hitting an all time low..."

The door chimed. Evan turned. "Come in."

It was Taja. Her shapeshifting practice was going well. She'd now managed to look exactly the way she had in her old human days. Evan was actually a little surprised at the irrational feeling of *anger* this appearance prompted before he firmly tamped it down—the sudden rush of memories. Taja casually running rough-shod over him—or *her*—since the change, doing her best to make her into "one of the girls" whether Evan wanted it or not. It was funny—since her appearance had been completely changed by Integration, Evan had almost managed to forget about all that. As if it had been a different person.

But Taja's expression now was completely alien to the haughty one she'd worn back then. She was looking down at her feet and biting her lip. If Evan hadn't known how hard she'd worked on that form, he'd have wondered if he was mistaken about who it was. "Taja?" He stepped aside so she could come in, then closed the door behind her.

"I'm stuck with a valuable friend," David Bowie sang. "I'm happy, hope you're happy, too."

"Hello again, Evan." She smiled faintly—another alien expression—before sitting down on the couch. Evan slid into the seat across from her. "I thought I'd stop by to thank you again for inviting Hestia and me to Nature Range the other day. I actually

think I'm starting to enjoy it."

"Well, good." Evan forced a grin. "Good work on your shapeshifting."

"Thanks. This is the first time I've been able to work up the courage to go all-the-way human and I thought it would be the right look for right now." She looked up at him and met his gaze, brushing a strand of hair back from her face in a familiar gesture at odds with the unfamiliarity of the rest of her attitude.

Evan raised an eyebrow. "Right now?"

"I just came to say goodbye, really." Taja shrugged. "I'm going with Argon and Luke when they head back to Nujose. They say they can get me on with Steader Entertainment as a receptionist or something."

Evan nodded. "Seems like a good opportunity for you. Especially since you'll have other Integrates right there to help you out if you need it."

"Yeah. And it'll be a chance to relax, to make new friends, to figure out who I am again—who *we* are, Hestia and me. We got a start on that, the two weeks we were waiting while you were in the Cave of Wonders. After being cooped up out here...it was just what we needed."

"I'm glad you'll have the chance to reconnect," Evan said, and was just a little surprised to realize he actually meant it. Seeing her like this... "You've really changed a lot, you know."

"I know." Taja's smile turned wry. "In every possible way. All those awful things I did to you...Hestia's gone over them with me. I've seen the error of my ways. That's another thing I wanted—I wanted to apologize again before I go. To apologize *fully*. I probably won't see you again for who-knows-how-long, so I thought this might be my last chance."

"I never done good things," David Bowie sang. "I never done bad things. I never did anything out of the blue. Want an axe to break the ice. Wanna come down right now..."

Evan smiled. "Well, even after Nature Range, I didn't expect that. You *have* changed."

"Changed, and *been* changed, and been helped." Taja shook her head, then slipped back into here more familiar elk-woman appearance. "Kind of ironic, really. All the time I put in trying to 'turn you into one of the girls,' but it was *me* who got turned into one of *you* in the end. And you did a better job of it than *I* ever did."

"Turnabout is fair play, I guess."

"And now I've had time to think about it, I guess I'm actually glad it happened." Taja shrugged. "What did I really have waiting for me back in the old life? Just more of the same. At least this way, I can be pretty much whoever I want to, as long as I'm careful." She smiled again. "So now I get to start over."

"Then let's send you off with a bang." Evan grinned. "I seem to remember you were pretty good on karaoke night." He glanced to the comm, and pulled up another song. "How about you join the band for a song tonight? I think this one would be about your speed."

Fiona Apple began to sing, "Words are flowing out like endless rain into a paper cup. They slither while they pass; they slip away, across the universe..."

Taja cocked her head. "I think I could manage that."

"Great! We'd probably better start rehearsing. Join me in virtual?"

"Sure thing!" Their perceptions faded out of the real world—animosities

forgotten; just two old friends getting ready for a farewell show.

“Jai guru deva om...nothing’s gonna change my world...”

August 5, 143 AL

“Well, that’s that, then.” Wilma watched the Beanstalk retreat in the monitor set to show the view from *Clementine*’s stern camera. “The last of our planetside commitments taken care of. I guess we’re done here.”

An alert signal pinged. “Not quite, Captain,” Clementine reported. “We’re being hailed.” She looked at Wilma. “It’s...Fritz.”

“I’d half-expected that,” Wilma said calmly. “Put him on-screen.”

“It’s not just screen—it’s a fully holographic—” Clementine flickered out, and a moment later, a bobcat Integrate stood where her hologram had been a moment earlier.

Fritz smirked at them. “Hello, toots.” He nodded to Eva, Gigi, and Boston.

“Other toots. Cube-with-spots. Deformed-deer-on-drums. Caught your show the other night at the club—you are some cool and crazy hipster cats, ya dig? But you weren’t going to vamoose without saying *goodbye*, were you?”

“*Goodbye*, Fritz,” Wilma deadpanned.

“Oh, now, surely we’ve got time for a little more gab than that. After all, I hear tell you dropped by Arty’s pad before you left.”

“What the *hell* did you go and do that for!” Eva exploded. “She was never any threat to you.”

“Well, sure she wasn’t. Else I never could have taken a wrecking ball to her digs.” Fritz extended the claws on one hand, inspected them, and buffed them against his chest fur as he strolled around the bridge. “That’s not the point. Point is, she was playing with fire. The shifting you bunch do...well, I guess I’m copacetic with that, up to a point, anyway. After all, you came up with it all on your own, and you haven’t tried to *force* it on anyone else. But Artemis was enslaving her own cats, and that ain’t kosher.”

“How’s that any different from what *you* do?” Eva demanded.

“Well, for one thing, I *don’t* mess with what’s inside people’s own heads. You know that, right? It’s totally uncool. Squaresville. You’re free to hate me as much as you want, and I grok you all do. But I’m only doing what’s right for all us crazy cats, ya dig? Let someone *else* start making with the brain-chains, and it’s a bad plan.”

“You didn’t have to go *that* far,” Liis grumbled.

“Actually, I sort of did.” Fritz shook his head. “What, you think I could just turn her over to the Marshals? Maybe your Quantum Star Tonto could have taken her in, put her on trial, the whole schmeer?” He smirked. “Oh yeah, that’s right, I’m hip to Mr. Munn’s little hobby. Doesn’t do any of us cats any harm, and amuses the hell out of me that *the wise and all-knowing Appa* has no idea. Anyhoo, no, there’s no higher form of justice available to Integrates at this time. There’s *just us*. Me. Numero Uno Bosso Catto.” He poked himself in the chest with a thumb. “Get hip to this: when something has to be nipped in the bud, I’m the cat with the pruning shears. And now Appa and any other cat who might want to rock the boat has a big post-it note on their cube reminding ‘em who the Coast Guard is.”

“I could ask who appointed *you* Grand Poobah, but it’d just be a rhetorical question anyway and we all know it,” Gigi said coldly. “What do you *want*, Fritz?”

“Want? Oh, not a lot. Just to scrutinize your charming phizzes one last time. I dig

you're going out-system for a while, and I'm cool with that. Maybe you could drop by some of the space 'claves out toward chocola—ah, Xolotlan, let 'em know they're still in my thoughts." He shrugged. "You-all grok by now how to get on outside of the Dry. Long's you bunch don't start rocking the boat either, we'll stay copacetic. Ya dig?"

Wilma sighed. "We 'dig,' Fritz. You don't have to worry about us. We just want a little peace and quiet for a while."

"Don't we all? Peace and quiet's what I'm all about. Maybe now we can all have some." Fritz leaned against the helm station and blew them all a kiss. "'Til next time. Don't do nothin' I wouldn't do!" He flickered out.

A moment later Clementine reappeared, frowning. "That...he just...*override* all my systems!"

"They do that. Sorry about that, Clemmie." Wilma closed her eyes and shook her head. "If there *was* a way to lock other Integrates out, you'd have it as soon as we knew about it."

"At least it shouldn't be a problem for a while." Eva waved a hand in the general direction of the outer system. "We seem to have been given the go-ahead. So let's go ahead."

Wilma straightened her jacket. "A valid point, Number One. Clementine, please lay in a course for Rhodes Station."

Clementine nodded, recovering her aplomb. "Course laid in, Captain."

Wilma took a long last look at the stern monitor. The beanstalk was by now just a glinting line of light, a single hair reaching out from the blue-tan orb of Zharus. There it was—the homeworld. A world they wouldn't see again for some time, and they all knew it. Wilma said a silent goodbye, and knew at the same time the rest of her crew was doing the same. Then she turned her face to the main viewscreen, showing the star-studded empty space ahead. She cleared her throat, and said, "Engage."

THE END