

FADE IN

By Jon Buck

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INT. COYOTE BAR & GRILL - EARLY MORNING

"I'll have another." Fiera Romanov motioned to the bat-eared bartender with the empty glass, sliding it down the dark mahogany counter. "In fact, make it a double this time."

The bartender regarded the Amazon woman. She was just under two meters tall, with long hair the color of honey, with an imposing, yet beautiful physique. Her toned muscles were as impressive as her bustline, as well as the tolerance for strong drinks. "White Russian number five *and* six, coming right up."

It was the nearest bar to Fiera's discount Econolodge hotel, close to the Neorus Consulate. And at five in the morning--very early by the Zharusians 30-hour day she had yet to adapt to--there were only three other patrons. At the far end of the counter was a man with raccoon tail and ears, or "tags" as they called them here. His RIDE was nowhere in sight.

The other two--*No, four*, Fiera corrected herself--was a pair of rabbit Fusers engaged in a very heavy amount of petting in the booth scaled for their animal armor mecha. Even with the privacy field engaged it was patently obvious what they were building towards.

Still, after the events of Fiera's last two days, it was barely worth noticing. She resisted the urge to lean back a little and see if she could balance the glass atop her breasts, or maybe stick it in her cleavage.

The bartender watched her sip her drink. "You know, I know a fresh crossride when I see one. But between the lack of tags, and the Wonder Woman cosplay, there's a story I'd like to hear, if you don't mind telling."

Fiera considered the offer to let her vent a little. She decided it was a sincere one. She put her glass down on the counter. "You're looking at the newest Amazon, a Citizen of Sturmhaven. Winner of a contest among 'lesser' men to join the best of the breast--best. Heh. Breast of the breast!" Fiera laughed humorlessly. "All I can say is, read the fine print. I thought I was going to be an *honorary* woman. Heh heh. No. And I'm a long way from home. Long way."

The bartender regarded her with some sympathy...or as much as a man could, for a woman like her, dressed in a red bustier with a golden eagle breastplate on it. The costume was part of the prize. The contest had emulated the one in the centuries-old comics that had won the Amazon Diana the right to *be* Wonder Woman. It was complete with red leather high-heeled boots, tiara, brass bracers, and the most

important thing, the golden lasso. Aside from being blonde, Fiera now fit the archetype perfectly.

But they hadn't stopped at changing her body. No, they had to do some *brainwashing* besides. They had planted a vague, yet powerful feeling that she was *proud* to be a woman. Then there was the name, which her sponsor had given her. She could only think of herself as Fiera, proud Amazon--apparently with a high tolerance for booze. The Wonder Woman cosplay was just the icing on the cake.

Her old name? She couldn't remember it. The brainwashing had done its work. The Amazons had even "helpfully" disposed of all of her old ID, doing everything within their power to erase the old one, going so far as to notify the Neorus Consulate. She'd even been issued a new passport.

She took a long swallow. "This is Neorus vodka. Not fabbed. Tastes like home."
"Another one?"

Fiera shook her head. "No, I think I've had enough. I don't want to smell too much like booze when the Neorus Consulate opens. Want to see what my legal options are. I figure I got two choices."

She held up one finger. "First, put myself on ice and ship directly home. That would suck, since that would eat up half my Grand Tour." She held up two fingers. "Second, wait it out here for three Zharus years and become a mmm--" there was that brainwashing kicking in. The thought of being a man just made her sick to her stomach. "My *old self* again. Pffft."

"That sounds unnecessarily limiting." The voice was the only other person at the bar. He had slid over a few stools and. He had a raccoon's mask over his eyes in addition to the ears, wearing a black fedora and brown suede duster.

"Maybe, but right now it's all I can think of." He was kind of cute. Then again, she would have thought he was cute *before* winning the prize. She was just that sort of person.

"Why, thank you."

"Wait, did I say that bit out loud?"

"What bit? I can see how you're looking at me, Miss. It's your body language. You're--"

The sound from the two Fusers in the booth changed from heavy petting and moaning to a harsh, shocked *screech*. The bartender hit a button under the counter, shutting down the privacy field, rushing over to see what was happening.

The female rabbit Fuser's metal skin was exposed, and she was *melting*. Her partner was holding her tight, confused and panicky. "My comm is down! Someone call an ambulance!"

Fiera's suitor sighed. A tigress RIDE had just entered the bar, all by herself. And a brown fox RIDE with very large ears had come in from the bar's employee area. Both had rather vacant expressions. The bartender was trying to access the comm in the

countertop, then he was engulfed in the fox.

A veil of hardlight shimmered away from Fiera's suitor, revealing a man who was as much raccoon as man. Hardlight lenses were embedded on the backs of his hands. "Well, I'm sorry it's come to this, everyone." He pointed at the bartender's Fuser, then at the other rabbit. Their hardlight flickered out and they too started to melt, collapsing to the ground as they did.

She sprinted for the door, only for the tigress to block the way. Fiera turned to face the...whatever it was. "What the *hell* is going on here? What did you do to them?"

The raccoon removed his hat. "I'm sorry this turned out to be a really bad week for you. But don't worry. You'll be among friends." He gestured at the tigress.

Fiera didn't even have time to dodge. The Fuser took her in, then within seconds, darkness.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HELLIR ENCLAVE BEDROOM - DAY

Consciousness returned piecemeal. Warmth coursed through Fiera's body, accompanied by a slight electric hum from underneath her. It evoked a memory of snuggling down in the blankets while the long winter storms raged outside her childhood home on Neorus. The city of Novy Kyiv occupied some of the best climate on the planet, but growing seasons were short. The planet was in an Ice Age, after all. The sound of voices from beyond snuffed out the dream. She clawed her way to wakefulness.

"Just how many hours were on that poor tigress, Clayton?" The unfamiliar voice was feminine, but growly. "Two, three in realtime? You *know* what can happen with that kind of life experience disparity."

The second voice was all too familiar, and on the defensive. "She was new off the lot, I know. But she was also the best I could find. I've done forced Integrations before, Ambri. I know the risks. We'll mourn her if she's gone. This one was particularly rough. Fresh crossride nannies in her system, plus the Fusers in the tigress. Probably why she ended up like she did."

"You need to get out of the Snatchers, Clay."

She heard a snort. "Nobody ever leaves the Snatchers, Ambrosia. I try and minimize the collateral damage. But I can't control how an Integration goes."

Fiera tensed at the sound of *that voice*. Ambrosia apparently noticed. "She's waking up. You'd better leave, Clayton. I don't want the first face she sees when she awakes to be yours. Unless you want it clawed off."

"I hear ya. I'll be catching up on the Carla's continuity updates in the Green Room, anyway. I don't like the way Tallyhawk's been playing her while I was in Cascadia. She's cliquish, but not *that* cliquish."

"Have you watched everything yet? She also made a pass at Big Jim. *Way* off

Script.”

“What...she...*damn!* That’s some Drama I just don’t need in her life. Well, I’m going to do some damage control then complain like hell to the Director. Good luck with our new kitty faun.”

Kitty what? Her limbs felt like distant provinces of some weak empire. But her energy levels kept rising. Her ears twitched towards the sound of pouring liquid.

“You need to replenish yourself, honey.” Ambrosia had a gentle, rumbly voice for a woman. An equally gentle arm went underneath her shoulders and lifted her up. “Here, drink. You’ll feel much better shortly, I promise. This is my special Noob Milk. Contains all the essential nutrients for newborn Integrates like yourself.”

She swore she could hear the zeroes. Obediently she drank. It was a hot, sweet, creamy liquid with a hint of chocolate. She grabbed hold of the mug and gulped it down. Full consciousness returned rapidly and she opened her eyes.

Shock number one. Looking right into the face of a busty brown bear wearing a dress and an apron.

Shock number two. Furry hands with little black stripes and retractile claws.

Shock number three. She was lifting off the bed like the gravity had been turned off.

Ambrosia pushed her back down. “Calm down, there. Get control of your lifters.”

“*My* lifters?” There was a buzzing sensation in her shoulders and hips. Her breasts were squashed as the bear-woman held her down against their force. “Ow!”

“Sorry, sorry! Take a deep breath, Miss Fiera. Deep breath. Calm down. I’m not trying to hurt you on purpose. You’d just hit the ceiling pretty hard. Shut your lifters down.”

“How?” Fiera exclaimed. She was still trying to zoom off the bed. “Who are you? Where am I?”

“Butt on the bed first, honey! Just calm yourself and they’ll click off. Fight-or-flight response. *Literal* flight, in our cases.”

Fiera took deep, calming breaths. The buzzing in her body stopped. Her full weight was back on the bed.

The bear smiled, and it was somehow friendly. “There you go. Welcome to Hellir Enclave. We have cookies and souffle!”

“I’m sorry...did you just say ‘welcome to Hell?’”

“Hellir. It’s an Icelandic word that means ‘cave’.”

Fiera was nonplussed. “Oh. Well. Then, let’s just start at the top again, here. Where am I, and more importantly, *what* am I?” She stared at her hands...or paws...or handpaws. Her breasts were semi-familiar at this point, now it was everything below the waist that drew her attention. Her lifting off the bed had pushed off the blanket. She was in the nude, which gave her a full view of the fur that appeared at her waistline, thickening into a tigerish pattern like her hands. Her feet were quite firmly feline paws.

“Really, *what am I?* What did he do to me?”

“You’re an Integrate. This is going to take a while. So I suggest you settle down. If you’re hungry I’ll have someone bring in some more food. Also, I expect you to tell me more about yourself. Even trade, you see. This is your home for now, so we should get to know one another. I’m Ambrosia. Ambri for short.”

Sighing, Fiera pulled her knees up against her chest. “The Amazons took my old name. Can’t even remember it. I hate the one they gave me, but for now...Fiera. Fiera Toscano. I’m from Neorus...”

“A long way from home, then.”

“Yeah. Forty light-years and two years by starliner. Since I graduated college I’ve been doing the Grand Tour of the colonies. I was going to stop at Wednesday, Earth, and Eridani on the way back. I take it that’s not going to happen now, is it?” She gave her benefactor a skeptical look. “Your turn. What am I?”

Ambrosia took a deep breath. “Well, Fiera...”

It turned into a very long and complicated explanation. A tale of the invention of true AI, of war, and of accidental technological discoveries. She explained she was now a technorganic being, a fusion of two people. That Integrates were basically urban legends on Zharus, they kept themselves separate for vague reasons Ambrosia herself couldn’t detail very much. Hellir was Fiera’s home now. There were almost fifty other Integrates here and she’d soon get to know everyone. Integrates had perfect recall, after all.

Fiera felt more and more...detached as the explanation went on. It was sinking in. Her situation gone from the merely tolerable into a double-whammy. Not only was she a woman, but no longer human, either.

“Wait, hold on.” Fiera pointed at the floor. “Just so we’re clear, here. I can’t go home?”

A guilty swallow. “No. There are ways we have to pass the time. But, no. None of us really can.”

Fiera stared at her, then at herself. *I’ve completely lost control of my life. I’ve completely lost control of being me. I’ve...oh God.* There had been rumors about Zharus back home. She wasn’t sure she’d believed them. But the truth had turned out to be stranger than anything made up. “I’d like to really get a look at myself, if you don’t mind.”

The she-bear nodded. Fiera looked around the room. It resembled the studio apartment she’d rented for a month in NuJose. A large single room with the bed, couch, an easy chair, a dining table, a pair of dark wooden wardrobes instead of closets, and a preponderance of pink decor and cushions edged with lace. One wardrobe had a full-length mirror.

Okay, so. Walking tippy-toe. Gingerly she put her paws down on the carpeted floor. She had only barely gotten used to how her female body moved. This added a whole new layer of strangeness. The carpet felt odd under the pawpads. She flexed her

toes, only for claws to emerge.

The woman in the mirror was at least somewhat familiar, from the waist up she was essentially the Amazon the Sturmhaven women had made her. Hair was still blonde and long. Tiger ears, orange fur on her back with tiger stripes. She was some kind of feline satyr.

“You’re an unusual Intie,” Ambrosia said. “I think you look stunning.”

“Not...really helping.” Fiera looked more closely at her face, then leaned in towards the mirror. There was a shallow metallic socket on her forehead, like a third eye. “What is that?”

“Your Data Interface Normalizer slot. Or just ‘DIN’. I need to get the Rod and make one for you. When you’re ready. Now, is there anything I can get you? Hungry? Souffles are my speciality.”

What do I need? Well, it’s not food! She growled. “What I really *need* is some kind of control over my life! Can you give me that? I don’t even have my old name! I can’t even remember it! The Amazons stuffed my brain full of...I don’t know what! I don’t know *me* anymore, okay? Who am I now?”

“For someone in your situation...I’m honestly not surprised you feel that way. Clayton told me the story he overheard at the bar. I thought the Sturmies had stopped doing that kind of crossride brainwashing when the War ended.”

Fiera smiled humorlessly. “When I refused to accept, they drugged me and tossed me in that chamber. Something about ‘Male Transgression Laws’. After they took me out, they welcomed me like I’d wanted this all along. I can’t even *think* about being a man without feeling a little sick.” She turned to her strange reflection, and felt a fierce unnatural *pride* about her new sex. The Amazons had insisted she’d actually wanted to be female her whole life, and had merely ensured she’d be happy with herself. *What was that song they played during the contest? ‘I am Woman, hear me roar.’ Huh. I wonder if I can literally roar now.*

“Now, if I understand you correctly, to keep your little secret you kidnap people and make them into one of you. So I think I have a right to be a little pissed off right now.” She growled and snarled through her words. “Damn you, I *will* escape at the first opportunity. I’m *not* Zharusian, so I don’t give a *damn* about your secrets!”

Ambrosia was unperturbed. “Honey, you’re about as Zharusian as it gets now. As for escape, well, you’re welcome to try. They’ll always bring you back, assuming you can find your way out of Hellir. Noobs don’t have access until they’re trusted.” Ambrosia sighed. “Fiera, I’m your friend. *Believe* me. There’s a half dozen other crossriders here that’ll help you through the hard stuff. As your friend, can I make a suggestion?”

The new Integrate regarded the friendly bear for a few moments and decided she was being sincere. “Sure.”

“The Amazons gave you a new name.”

“Yes. And *brainwashed* away my old one. I hate ‘Fiera’. It’s pretentious and just

leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

“I was going to suggest choosing a new one anyway, but this will make it easier. I doubt the conditioning will let you choose anything un-feminine, but I’m sure one will present itself that you do like. You have more control over your life than you think. Start with something fundamental and work your way up. What do I call you from now on?”

There was one. She didn’t know where it came from. But it was right at the tip of her tongue. It felt...familiar. “Jade.”

“Jade, then. Happy to meet you, Jade. Now, I’m leaving what happens next up to you. The rest of the Enclave is concerned about you. When you’re ready, you can meet them. Just tell me what you want to do, and how. You choose, Jade.”

Jade looked at her naked self. All this time she’d been so off kilter her own nakedness had simply fallen by the wayside. “I think I need to put on some clothes. And, I’d like a hand. I have no idea what I’m doing with women’s clothing.”

Ambrosia clasped her hands together, delighted. “A good, very practical start for a new young lady. Let’s go from there.”

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INT. HELLIR ENCLAVE - DINING ROOM - DAY

Jade met the rest of her new Integrate cohorts on a daily basis. There was DevCorby, the name combination of the bartender and his bat-eared fox RIDE. Hanley Rose was a gray lop-eared rabbit, the boyfriend of Aeolia Keys, the woman who had Integrated naturally that night. They weren’t unfriendly people, and she felt a greater, more trustworthy connection to them than any of the Enclave’s residents.

A few days after their Integration the four of them had their own table in the Enclave’s Dining Room. They’d been given some materials to study, a *Guide for Noobs*. The chapter was “getting to know your body systems”. Jade had reluctantly done the various exercises. It was one thing to know you had ovaries and a womb, it was another to actually *feel* them on the inside down to individual ova. But there were other systems adapted from her RIDE half. The lifters in her hips and shoulders, the hardlight emitters embedded in her skin, the changed Fuser nanites that made up almost half of her being.

“Who wrote this...stuff?” Hanley scoffed. “There isn’t even very much here. Not much of a guide.”

After the last chapter Jade was feeling a little green around the gills. Aeolia looked at her and tilted her head. “Are you okay, Jade?”

“When am I *ever* okay?” She drank some noob milk. Her body systems were still out of whack from the rough Integration. The DIN gem (jade, of course) in her forehead glittered with data transfer, then flashed out. As was now habit she ejected it and placed a new one in, tossing the burned out one in the fabber garbage.

“I’m six years a crossrider,” Aeolia said. “I keep telling you, Jade, ask me anything you want. Even the gross and nasty stuff. We can do girl talk over a private channel so the guys don’t go nuts on us.”

Hanley thumped on his tablet. The tablets were hardly necessary, but it was more comforting to go through the motions. “It says here we can ‘pee sunshine and poop rainbows’.”

“Really? Ick!” DevCorby made a disgusted face. “Too much information, Hanley.”

An attention signal came in on their DINs. An excited voice rang out. “Everyone! Everyone! Check out the raw feed from the gym! Carla and Big Jim are having it out!”

Hardlight screens rezzed all around the Dining Room, on the walls and in the middle of the tables. They resembled the kind of ancient CRT television replicas that Jade had seen all over Zharus. The scene was a rapidly changing focus as whoever was running the camera changed between points of view. It was the inside of a generic gym. The only woman in the scene wore a tank top with HOOTERS emblazoned on the front and a pair of bright orange shorts. She was even bustier than Jade.

The other person was a bald, bearded man in a black muscle shirt. He practically *oozed* testosterone from every pore. “You should *never* play with a Man’s affections like that, woman!”

I swear I heard a capital letter there. Jade watched the scene, as did everyone else. She wondered what the big deal was. “Just what are we watching here?” she said, only to be shushed into silence from every direction. *Okay, fine.*

The woman, a sultry beauty with black hair, sharp features, and flashing eyes snorted derisively. “*Real* Men learn how to recognize such things, Jim. What kind of man are you?”

The watchers cringed, and Jim backed away as if slapped. The clear de-emphasis on the M was apparently the thing.

“Oh, he’s going to lose points for that one,” someone said.

Aeolia laughed. “Oh. It’s Cape Nord. What a silly place.”

“You’re thinking of Camelot, noob,” a hawk-woman added.

“Since she’s a noob I rather think she isn’t, Tallyhawk,” someone else said. “We wouldn’t be having this scene if you hadn’t meddled with the Script. Silver lining and all. Now shush!”

The melodrama continued. Whenever anyone spoke up, they were shushed again. There were mutterings about “shipping”, speculation on how this would affect Carla’s relationship with her workplace’s owner for some reason. But the scene didn’t move on like it would on a real drama, nor was there any musical accompaniment. It was more like one of the so-called “reality shows” that were popular in NuJose.

When Carla left Jim suitably cowed and left the room the feed came to an end. “Well, that’s it for now, everyone. Be sure to applaud the Players when they get in.”

“Is that some kind of roleplaying simulation?” Hanley wondered. “Like Nature

Range?”

“Something like that,” Tallyhawk said, putting a taloned fingertip on the side of her hooked beak. “You’ll find out soon enough. All I’ll say is that it’s how we pass the time here.”

“It’s like one of those soap operas Steader Entertainment dredged up on Earth. Is that the the only thing to do around here? I’m already getting bored.”

Aeolia pouted. “Already? Aren’t I enough for you?”

“That’s not...” Hanley sighed. “That’s *not* it. Ever since that fast-time exercise yesterday it feels like we’ve been here months already. I must’ve watched every episode of *Hill Street Blues* and *M*A*S*H* a half dozen times. I know I watched *Watership Down* about fifty.”

That was an exercise Jade hadn’t done yet, and she wasn’t sure if she would actually follow through. She had watched a few movies, read some books, and caught up on some Zharusian history as a matter of course. Some part of her would *never* feel like Zharus was home. Her thoughts stopped wandering when Ambrosia--then *Clayton* entered. She felt herself growl and grasped the tablet more tightly.

DevCorby put his hand on hers. “Easy, Jade.”

The rest of the Dining Room--except for herself--broke into a round of applause for them both as they took bows.

“Thank you, thank you,” Ambrosia said. “You are such a gracious audience. Thank you!”

“So, I’m guessing they were acting out those parts,” DevCorby mused. “Wonder if I could get in on something like that.”

Clayton, narrow muzzle smiling from the praise just heaped on him, sauntered over to the cohort. “Funny you should ask there, Hanley. Y’all have earned some trust, and you’ve been diligent in your studies. So, you’ve earned some reward. Yes, even you Jade.”

Jade folded her arms. “You’re not going to be so foolish as to let me go outside, are you?”

“We’re confident that you won’t do anything we can’t fix. Now, noobs, follow me.”

The Enclave itself was only large enough for its residents to not feel crowded. Clayton and Ambrosia led the new Integrates down a corridor near the Dining Room none of them had seen, then into a larger room about the same size as the one they’d left. There were a half dozen wall-mounted clothing fabbers, and another female Integrate sitting at a desk. She was a white lab mouse, about half the average size, with a pencil in her mouth, peering intently at something only she could see.

Ambrosia ambled up to the desk. “The noobs are here, DesiLu.” The mouse was a little too focused on her internal world. The bear gently tapped the desk. “Des?”

The mouse opened her mouth, the wooden pencil falling out. “What? Oh! Sorry, Ambri. Script rewrites. Will you be checking out Big Jim again? He’s still available.”

“Nah, I think he’s earned a break from me. We just need the ‘out of town visitors’ standby for our noobs here.”

Looking at the four noobs, she fixed on Jade. “Wow! I don’t think we’ve actually met. I practically live in the Green Room here. So, um, let me get everything squared away for you. Procedural generation for generic vacationers, or are they going to be friends of someone established?”

“Generics are fine,” Clayton said.

Jade smiled toothily. “So what *are* we doing here? Are we joining your little soap opera somehow?”

“Always room for some bit parts.” Clayton clasped his hands. “*Anyway*. Aeolia, Hanley, DevCorby, Jade, I want to welcome you to The Show. Today’s outing will serve a dual purpose. One, it’ll show that we trust you enough to venture outside the Enclave; and two, it’ll bring into practice the hardlight glammers we tested you on yesterday. Desi, send them their CP and Script packets.”

Her DIN burned out once during the data transfer, and Jade found the files were still encrypted once finished. “Now what?”

“Okay! Unpack both and execute,” DesiLu said.

All at once, the hardlight emitters on the four noobs glowed and flashed. The other three were replaced by human women all wearing revealing clothing. Hanley and DevCorby were a *little* taken aback, the way they immediately took to staring at themselves. For Jade, the glamour itself was hardly worth mentioning. It was the Script that went along with it. She reviewed the rather sparse character notes.

TONI BLAKE is a sorority girl from ALOHA on vacation in CAPE NORD. She’s a little shy, but fun-loving girl who likes to flirt. She’s with her sorority sisters PHOEBE, YUMIKO, and NICOLE.

To go along with the notes, the Script included some hard-coded personality traits. A guide that would help her play the character to type.

“So, apparently I’m Phoebe. Uh, I’m DevCorby, by the way.” She cupped her breasts. “Holy crap! This feels weird. Doesn’t it, ‘Nicole’?”

Nicole-Hanley nodded emphatically. “She” looked at Yumiko-Aeolia and Jade-Toni with respect, before her expression abruptly changed. “Like, ohmygod! This is so trippy! I totally have bodacious boobs!”

“I see you found your Script,” DesiLu said, smirking. “Nicole’s a generic Valley Girl. Is that okay? I can give you a male role if it’s too oogy. But in Cape Nord it’s just easier to have all of you female as a group. Women here are almost never by themselves. It’s not a safety thing, just an enforced stereotype.”

“If Jade can do it permanently, I can manage for a couple of hours,” DevCorby said. Then, in character, “right, Toni? We need to get you to loosen up a little.”

Jade felt a tingle as the Script dialogue wrote itself. “Um, then we should have stayed in Aloha.” She coughed and shook her head, pausing the Script, then looked at Clayton and Ambrosia. “So, are you two going to be our escorts?”

“We’ll be watching, discreetly,” Ambrosia said. “You girls have a good time.”

DevCorby shut down the Phoebe glamour. “I just have one question.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“This isn’t really a simulation we’re walking into, is it?”

“I did say we trust you to go out on your own. Might help to think of it as a reverse-holodeck. The world *around* you is real, but the people you’re playing aren’t. They’re one-offs without any real backstory. They won’t stand up to scrutiny, so don’t get into trouble.”

“But...Cape Nord?” said “Nicole”. “You know how they *treat* women here?”

Clayton nodded. “We know. But you’re tourists, so certain standards won’t apply. Just go and have some fun, ladies. Let the Script guide you, but don’t feel too beholden to it.”

DesiLu snorted. “The Director says, stick to the Scripts, noobs. That’s me, by the way. See you all back here in two hours. Just remember, we’ll be watching.”

“I’ll show them the way out,” Clayton said. His outline fuzzed for a moment, then Carla from the earlier scene stood there. The woman’s tone of voice was so different than Clayton’s it was hard to believe they were the same person. “Ladies, this way. I’m sure you’ll want something to eat first. Hooters is happy to serve pretty young ladies as yourselves.”

“Especially when we’re additional window dressing,” Nicole-Hanley quipped.

Carla giggled. “Yes, there is that. Right this way. Put that glamour back up, Phoebe. Scripts on.”

The door out led to a long corridor with several other doors on the end and either side. They were unlabeled in the Real, but with her Integrate augmented reality they went to different businesses. On the left: Big Jim’s Gym, another dark passage, and Barb’s Body Salon. To the right, Hooters and the Goldman Detective Agency. The metal door at the end went outside to the street.

“I’ll head in to work through this door, you head out to the street, then enter the normal way. Just remember, stick to your Scripts for now until you get the knack of it. If you want to say anything OOC--that’s out of character--stick to the private channels via your DIN.”

Jade raised her finger. “Just, wait. One more thing. What is the *point* of all this? If you’re just playing parts in a play, why do it out in the world? It’d be much easier just to make a holeroom in the Enclave, wouldn’t it? No risk of exposing ourselves?”

“That is a very *good* point.” Clayton-Carla smiled. “But it’s *not* how or why this all started. I really have to get back to work now. The history of the Show is in the packet we gave you. So read up, and have some fun.”

They paused in front of the door before leaving, syncing up their Scripts via their DINs. They emerged from the corridor talking about makeup, and clothes, and chatter that was stereotypically female even on Neorus. Over secure comm, DevCorby expressed his displeasure. *:This script thing is killing me. No woman I ever served at the Coyote talked like this. And I've met many Nordy women.:*

Aeolia sent a wink emote. *:Just go with it, Phoebe. Welcome to Cape Nord. Just keep gossiping like the Script says. This is what Nordy Men think women talk about all the time. How we talk in private among ourselves is something else.:*

The pungent odor of stale beer and buffalo wings from Hooters mingled with masculine sweat from the gym next door. Most of women on the street who were about their apparent age seemed to be stamped out of the very same mold, and showing an awful lot of skin. Jade looked at the sky overhead, and saw stone with many skylights for allowing some sunlight in--which wasn't that much at any time of day, several hundred meters below the surface. Lighting on the cavern walls and ceiling provided daylight.

She'd read about Cape Nord. The city-state was inside a massive cavern system under the surface. The caves were climate controlled, because the weather this far north was still chilly even during summer. Jade had never planned on visiting this city-state, though the climate reminded her of home. *:What is wrong with this place?:*

:In Cape Nord, the women all look the same,: Aeolia explained. *:In fact, they get free body sculpting to fit whatever standard is fashionable. Men, on the other hand, have to work for it. A Man who bodysculpts his way to fitness is no Man at all. Might even get his Man Card revoked. That's a lot like what the Amazons did to you, by the way. Women, on the other hand...we're women. We don't need to constantly prove ourselves. Already being a woman is enough.:*

It wasn't about the color of skin, hair, or even complexion. Just body shape, as if they'd come off a production line. Instead, women seemed to set themselves apart from one another with rather outlandish outfits and hairstyles. Though the outfits all seemed to expose at least half their skin. In her halter top minidress Jade still fit that standard. They all did.

The girls were all from Aloha, though. They were actually showing *less* skin than usual. Nudity didn't have nearly the same sexual connotations in that tropical polity as it did here. Of course, on Zharus it was cheap and easy to have any physique you wanted, of either sex. A fifteen minute bodysculpting job on Zharus would take hours or even days on Neorus. *Gain a few kilos? Why, just head over to Barb's Body Salon for a quick tune-up.*

Compared to the other polities, Jade saw extremely few RIDEs or people with tags on the street. The Script told her that those who did have them were more likely to be out-of-towners.

Carla greeted the four girls on entering the restaurant with the promised welcome and cheerful smile. They were put at a table in the center, so the Men could

ogle them as well as the employees. Their menus displayed a substantial “center table discount” for them.

“This is disgusting,” Phoebe said, looking around. “*Why* did we come to Cape Nord again? These people are primitives.”

Jade couldn’t quite tell if the last line was in the Script or not. It felt like borderline ad-libbing. Jade decided to respond in kind. “Wasn’t this your idea in the first place, Phoebe? New place, a new corner of Gondwana we’ve never seen...”

“It was here or Punta Sur,” Yumiko said. “And there’s *nothing* in Punta Sur worth seeing.”

“Girls, can we just order something? I’m famished,” Nicole said, glaring at her friends. “Why don’t we just catch the sub back home in two hours? I think I’ve *already* had my fill of this place.”

Clayton sent a chuckle on the OOC channel. *:Ooooooh, burn. Really putting the Nordies in their place, eh? Now, my turn.:*

A few seconds later Carla returned to take their orders. She was nonplussed by the conversation at the table, and just stood there with a slightly condescending expression on her face. “Your orders, girls? Do any of our specials interest you?”

It really didn’t feel like anything special so far. The Scripts, adapting as the situation changed with their ad-libs, had the four of them snarking about the polity atmosphere, food, the uniformity of women’s bodies, and anything else within earshot. The other patrons took this as some sort of entertainment. Jade wondered how many of them were actually people and not other Enclave residents assigned to watch them under their own personas.

:What you’re doing right now? It’s pretty close to the way this started,: Clayton said in fast-time. *:The vast majority of Enclaves are way out in the Dry, away from people. It was a really hard-sell to Fritz, so I understand, to found one here. But after they showed him this thing they were calling ‘Cover Personas’ at the time, he said it was copacetic.:*

They all knew the name and profile of Fritz, the first Integrate and beatnik “Bosscat”. He had decreed that the Integrates separate themselves from “the meat and the mech”, and to keep their secrets by any means necessary.

:The Enclave isn’t really self-sufficient, so we need things,: Ambrosia added. *:Decent foodstuffs, especially. And everyone who left under a CP naturally had to be watched. So, to help make things more interesting for the watchers and themselves, they started to ham it up for the cameras. It’s pretty much snowballed from there.:*

:Well, you certainly have my attention,: Jade said. There really was a kind of thrill, like being on stage. *:I remember what happened in the Dining Room earlier. I guess you have persistent CPs, too?:*

:Most of us have a preferred CP, but yes. The ones you’re inhabiting right now are one-shots we use for noobs,: Clayton said. *:We’re willing to whole-cloth one out for*

each of you, but keep in mind we'd rather the persistent cast stay as small as possible. So, look at the Cast List and find a role you'd like to play.:

:What makes you think I won't just use it to escape?:

:And go where? Look, we're about out of fast-time pause. We'll talk more once you're back home. Enjoy yourselves. And when you get back, you won't be noobs anymore. Congrats!:

April 15, 147 AL

INT. HELLIR ENCLAVE - GREEN ROOM - NIGHT

"For this outing you'll all be assigned a persistent CP," Clayton announced. "These personas are one step above the one-shots you played last time. They have backstory. They have depth. You'll be expected to play them for the next day or so. Live our their lives according to the Script. Got it?"

"Got it," everyone echoed--almost everyone. Aeolia wasn't here yet, and...

"Jade?"

"I'd rather just...do Nature Range in my bedroom." Jade had only discovered it the day before. With her perfect recall, she could visit almost-perfect simulations of Novy Kyiv. It wasn't...quite right. The people she could also simulate were very cookie-cutter and stuck in the Uncanny Valley. But it was maybe better than nothing, she wasn't sure yet.

"None of us spend more time in the Enclave than we have to," Clayton said. "It's one of the benefits of living in Hellir. I could have brought you to any number of isolated Enclaves far out in the Dry. They're...weird."

Hanley folded his arms. "If you consider *them* weird, what does that make us?"

"Normal people going about our daily lives. Speaking of, go ahead and unpack the personas you've been assigned. Read the character notes, catch up on their continuity, then we'll turn you loose. As for me..." He started to take off his clothes. On the table next to him was Carla's Hooters uniform. "I have a restaurant to assistant manage."

Jade stifled a chuckle as he put the uniform on, then he briefly glowed like before, then there was a busty young woman there. Then she looked back at the others. "Hanley, you're a guy today."

"Thank you!" the gray rabbit said. "Jack Wilson, huh? Okay..."

"What about me?" DevCorby asked.

"Luisa the foxy bartender, where I work. You played Phoebe *very* well. I think you're a natural CrossPlayer."

"Uh, I'm flattered, I think. But if she tends bar, I'll be just fine. I'm sure I'll get a lot of tips."

With the CP information unpacked, Jade read the character notes.

JANE WYMAN works at the QUICK-E-FAB down MACKENZIE STREET from her modest apartment. It's not glamorous work, but it keeps her in decent living conditions for a single woman of her age. Her roommates are LUISA MENDES and JACK WILSON...

Okay, okay. Yadda yadda yadda. She didn't read it all. The descriptions of her life and times were rather unexciting, not even that different from an average person on Neorus. She loaded the Script, then put on Jane's humdrum (for Cape Nord, just a store uniform) clothes, then rezzed up the hardlight glamour. Her body shape was rather different. "I look like somebody's mother."

"You're a divorced mom from Cascadia, remember?" DesiLu said. "Read the whole thing."

So Jade did. Jane was a 40-year-old divorced mom who hadn't seen her kids in five years due to bad blood between herself and her ex-husband. An immigrant from Neorus, she had no other family on the planet. Jade sighed at the last character detail. "She's from Neorus? No way *that's* a coincidence."

"I thought a sense of familiarity would help you in the role," DesiLu said. "You can even ad-lib a little."

"I don't know how to be a 40-year-old divorced woman with two kids."

DevCorby--or rather Luisa Mendez, the young woman with fox ears and tail and the Hooters uniform--rolled her eyes. "I don't have a clue about how to be a Hooters girl, either. But it's better than being bored down here. I'm heading up to work, then. See you at home, Jack & Jane. Tootles!" She gave them all a friendly, girly little wave.

With "Luisa" out the door, Hanley dressed up--in pajamas. "Script says I'm supposed to be up in bed, asleep. I dunno, Miss Director. What's my motivation?"

DesiLu laughed. "Get along, you. Now, where's Aeolia? Anyone?"

"Still chowing down on some of Ambri's dinner leftovers, last I saw," Jade said. "I'm sure she'll be along. I suppose I'd better go to work."

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. QUICK-E-FAB - MORNING

Even after living here twenty years Jane wondered why Zharus did things certain ways. There was no reason for the storefront to have anyone to monitor it, let alone a cashier. But handing over big wads of paper money to pay for physical goods was one of the things the Men of Cape Nord liked to do--to impress women, and to one-up each other.

Jane didn't toe the line on local body fashions. Her upbringing still considered the free bodysculpting here an incredible extravagance. Not to say she was out of shape, but she just didn't have the cookie cutter physique even women twice her age had here. Still, the pay was decent, even for busywork, and it gave her time to do the hobbies that

gave real purpose to her life at present.

Jade was unhappy with this. *These 'hobbies' are all boring.* Knitting, sewing-- dressmaking, in particular--and a half dozen inoffensive others. Jane's life was busywork. Jade opened the OOC channel. *:Desi, does this woman actually do anything for a living?:*

:Jane is a 'low impact' CP. She was one of our first, too. A lot of the things listed for your hobbies were supplies we needed when we were setting up the Enclave five years ago,: the mouse said. *:Not so much anymore.:*

During her shift, Jane's background had given Jade a few ideas. *:Look, I..I'm going to shake up her routine a little, okay?:*

There were a few milliseconds of silence. *:Okay, Jade. I suppose everyone needs that every once in a while. But not too much. Remember, we're watching.:*

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. PATTON PARK - ICE CREAM STAND - DAY

After work Jane decided to do something off the beaten track for her and get an ice cream. Normally she just went directly home, but today it felt right to try something new-ish. "Kinda early for you, ain't is Missus Wyman?" the young man behind the window said.

"Just treating myself, Max." Jade checked the young man against her cast list. Ambrosia owned the ice cream stand, but the employee was just a normal human. "Feeling adventurous today. I'll have a Double Peanut Butter Dip."

It wasn't nearly as tasty as the ice cream she'd had in Uplift, but it *did* lift her spirits all the same. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a man.

He had a face that might have been chiseled from the Southern Crystal Range back home. He wore rumpled slacks, a button front shirt that may have been white once, and a long brown leather duster coat. But it was the felt fedora that really gave him a certain look. A certain masculinity that made send the hearts of the ladies (and some men) aflutter. Tall, muscular, he walked with a strength of purpose.

The man walked up to the Ice Cream stand window behind her. "Tutti frutti mondae, please."

"Mr. Goldman! Long time no see."

"Been busy on a case out of town, Max. Make it snappy, willya?"

Max looked doubtful. "Uh, you *sure* you want a Tutti Frutti, sir? I mean, that's a bit guh..girl...I'm gonna...have...deduct..."

Goldman calmly reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his wallet, removing a card from it. He showed it to the boy. "Do you see this, Max? Do you see this right here? What does it say?"

"T-True N-Nordsman."

“You can’t deduct any points, so give me my *damned* Tutti Fruitti!”

The Script said to laugh, but this time Jade felt the same way, so her laugh was genuine. Cape Nord didn’t make any more sense than Sturmhaven--maybe even *less*. The handsome man heard, then looked her direction. He gave her a friendly nod, then took his ice cream to a vacant table to eat it.

Silly Men and their silly games, Jane thought. Yet her thoughts strayed to young Max. He reminded her of her son, whom she hadn’t seen in years, down in Cascadia...

The thought that was natural for the Cover Persona gave her Player an idea. Jade wondered just how long it would take to catch on, or if she would even make it a fraction of the way before they caught her. But it was time to make an honest attempt at escape. But she couldn’t reveal herself to the crowd. Who knew how far Clayton would be willing to go to keep Integrates and the Enclave secret. She couldn’t risk anyone else going through what she was. That meant no lifters, either.

Steal a car? No, she cringed at committing one crime to rectify another. That left what? A suborbital trip? No, she didn’t have enough cash on her to pay for that. That left the skimmer bus to Cascadia...

Oh, no. They’d never anticipate that, Jade. No, never!

Jade picked up a SegSkimmer from the sharing rack near the ice cream stand, then popped out her DIN after putting her hand against her forehead. She dropped it on the ground and sped off towards the Greyhound station.

Have to make the effort, have to...feel like I’m doing something to get home...

She saw none of the CPs she knew about on her way to the ticket kiosk. The next bus to Cascadia was only ten minutes from departure. A desperate hope arose. *I might actually make it, I might...*

Then a large hand gently grasped her on the shoulder. She turned to be face-to-face with the man who bought the Tutti Fruitti mondae. “Mrs. Wyman? I’m Mitch Goldman, Gumshoe. I’m under the employ of your former husband Mark.”

“Well?” Jane could only choke out a single word.

“I’m here to remind you that there’s a restraining order against you. Jane Wyman may not set foot in the polity of Cascadia without a hefty fine and possibly jail time. I’m sorry, ma’am, but I won’t allow you to ruin your life like this.” He held out his hand, holding her DIN in the palm.

Jade snarled. “Up yours, Gumshoe!” Then she threw it in his face and fled the building.

Was that Clayton? It had to be Clayton! Only Clayton is that much of an asshole!

She ran. She ran from Patton Park in the South Cavern to Herakles Arena in the North. Never once did she spin up her lifters, still mindful of the risks to innocents and the Snatchers’ extremism. Every few streets, Mitch Goldman awaited here. He made no motion to actually catch her, but she turned away from him anyway. At some point,

though, her batteries had run down so much that the glamour shut down, leaving her in Jane's clothes. Few even gave her a single glance.

Then there he was again, waiting.

This time she didn't turn. This time she allowed him to put his hands around her shoulders, then pick her up in his arms as if she weighed nothing. The air around them shimmered with a cloaking field as he lifted off the ground and flew towards the Enclave.

Jade sobbed against his chest.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HELLIR ENCLAVE - DAY

"When you break the rules, you pay the price." Ambrosia, DesiLu, and a dog named Ubu sat at a long table in the Enclave's makeshift courtroom. DesiLu spoke in the gravest of tones when announcing judgement. "Even if you didn't seriously think you could escape, as you claim, we've been around long enough to know a test run when we see it. The next time you'll actually use your cloak and lifters. And we'll have to get more serious.

"As of now, your Show privileges are revoked for at least the next two weeks. More if we deem it necessary. You're returned to Noob status during that time. If you've mended your ways, earned back some of our trust, the following two weeks you'll be restricted to one-shots under heavy supervision. What steps are necessary after that, we'll make those decisions when we come to it."

Jade exploded. "How fucking *dare you!* You can't bloody sit there and pronounce judgement on me when *you kidnapped me!* I'm sitting here, in this weird body nobody from home would *ever* recognize me in, *forty light-years* from home! I'm more alone here than any of you could *possibly* imagine! I'm no fucking *threat* to you if you'd just put me on a starliner and send me back to Neorus!"

DesiLu gave the angry catfaun such a pained, sorrowful look that Jade actually backed down a little. "Well, Jade. I know that forty light-years is hard. But imagine, just for a moment, that it's just forty meters. That you can see, but never touch, never communicate. And they're just right there. You can't imagine, can you?"

"That's the situation that many of us are in," Hanley added with a very bitter note. "I have family here, myself. Family that thinks I'm dead."

"At least you and Aeolia have each other," Jade muttered. "I don't understand why any of this secrecy is *necessary!* It makes no sense!"

"We're just not ready yet," Ubu said. "At least, I like to think that's the reason. You haven't met the Bosscat yet, Jade. You will at some point soon. He always makes the rounds to welcome noobs."

In the back of the room, whoever was playing Mitch Goldman hadn't yet shut

down the persona's glamour. He just stood there impassively, arms folded, watching the proceedings.

Jade growled. She was only partly recharged, but she still stood up and walked right up to him. "You..." she hissed. "You...fucking...*fuck you*, Clayton!"

She punched, she kicked, she clawed. But he still stood there and took it all, as if the beating just wasn't getting through. Everyone waited for her to exhaust herself again before Ambrosia took her back to a comfortably padded chair, panting.

"There there, honey. There there," Ambrosia soothed.

"I'm not Clayton," the faux detective said. "Hate to break it to you."

"Then who the hell *are* you?"

The hardlight shimmered away, leaving someone with the head of a hawk, wing-arm feathers sticking out of the sleeves. Jade couldn't tell under the overlarge clothing if the hawk-person was male or female, until they spoke. "You may have heard my name earlier, Jade. I'm Tallyhawk. We haven't personally met."

Jade stared at her, slack-jawed. "Ma'am, you are one dogged detective."

"Well, I have a *few* advantages over the everyday gumshoe. But yes, I'd like to think so."

"Uh, I didn't hurt you, did I?" Jade said sheepishly. "Not that I don't want that raccoon's tail as a hat."

"It wouldn't be the first time someone's threatened to skin me for some Davy Crockett headwear." Clayton appeared in a corner of the room. "And if you still want to, be my guest. I deserve every blow. In fact, I've taken more than a few." He nodded at various Integrates around the room--most of them. "If you want, I'll let you beat me up like you did Tally, but with no shielding. You're entitled."

She could only growl a little. "If I had any energy left at all I'd take you up like that. But I need about ten hours of sleep, a kilo of food, and a full charge before I can do anything. You...you...motherfarking *dickweed!*"

"Food, then bed," Ambrosia suggested. "Sound good? You need to rest."

Jade yawned, tongue curling like a tiger's. "I think it'll have to be sleep first, Ambri... In fact, I'll just catnap right here in this chair."

She made good on that. Cats can sleep anywhere, after all.

May 20, 147 AL

INT. HELLIR ENCLAVE, JADE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Completing a Grand Tour was the ambition of every young person on Neorus. After college, see all the Colonies, and maybe Earth. Naturally Zharus was the halfway point of the years-long journey. Neorus was the last officially established colony, yet it already had over a hundred million in population. Zharus was larger than it in every conceivable way. And weirder in every inconceivable one.

A number of young Neorussians had gone to Zharus and not come back. Jade herself now numbered among them--just another statistic the government would use as a warning. So far Jade's journey had also included Ibn Rushd, Centauri, Proxima, and Zheng He. All spectacular in their own ways.

The archipelagos of Zheng He, the twenty man-made worlds of Proxima, the painted deserts of Ibn Rushd, the cavorite caverns of Centauri. But even her own memories were glitched because of the Amazon conditioning. As she tried to relive anything, her virtual body remained stubbornly female. It was less disconcerting to prowl the streets of New Singapore as a tigress than a human.

From the Real came the soft beep from her DIN. Someone was trying to connect. Reluctantly, she opened the channel. "Yes, what?"

"Can I come in?" Tallyhawk asked. "I've been wanting to apologize, but you haven't left your bedroom in days."

Jade shut down her internal world and returned to the Real, reluctantly unlocking the door. The hawk-woman came inside, unclothed. A barred gray pattern covered her front from her neck to her knees, with her arm feathers a darker, solid gray. She had large red eyes in a gray feather mask. Her body shape seemed rather humanoid. She even had breasts. But her feet were almost entirely bird-like. She appeared to walk, but with a bounce that probably meant she had lifter assistance.

"I hope you don't mind my so-called nudity. Clothes and feathers don't mix for me," Tallyhawk said. "I thought now might be a good time to properly introduce myself. I'm Tallyhawk. I can't say it was 'my' RIDE's name, since I we were forcibly Integrated just like you were. Or should I say 'you two'?"

"Uh, they tell me that the RIDE's mind was basically absorbed into the rest of me. She was brand new off the lot. Something like that. But apparently I picked her name as my own, since I'm not going to use what the Amazons gave me." She was just not sure how to react to that fact at all. That's all that remained of the RIDE, her name. But Jade herself couldn't mourn for someone she'd never known. It was just a great big nothing, and she had enough trouble adapting to her present situation as it was.

Jade sat up on bed while the hawk-woman found a chair to sit in.

"I can understand that. I sort of did the same. Picking a feminine version of 'Mitch' as a new name just didn't sit right, but Tallyhawk does. About a quarter of me is her."

"Wait, you were a 'Mitch'?"

"Yes, yes I was. Six years ago I was a Detective for the Aloha Police Department named Mitch Gardener. There are understandably a *lot* of missing persons cases. Just think about that for a moment and the reasons why will become apparent."

"Of course," Jade said dryly. "Go on."

"I was actually searching for a missing APD beat cop, guy named Mitchell. The trail went out to Bartertown, way out in the Dry. Wretched hive of scum and villainy and

all that. Trail turned hot there. Too hot. Next thing I knew I woke up melded with a female hawk RIDE named Tally. My first few weeks were almost as rough as yours.”

“How do you deal with...with...” Jade grasped her breasts. “These? You know. All this. Everything. They took away your humanity *and* your manhood.”

“Not only those, but my *mammal-hood* too.” The avian Integrate laughed. “To be honest, I think of myself as an Intie first, a bird second, and a woman a distant third. I mean, look at me.” She fluffed up her chest feathers to expose herself. “My ‘breasts’ don’t even have nipples. They’re vestigial. Purely for show. I don’t have any curves to speak of, really.”

“Not...really an option for me. The complete opposite, in fact. Woman first. Woman *always*. I swear they soaked my brain in some kind of super-estrogen.”

“What they did is technically *illegal*, you know. Even by their own laws.”

“Pffft. Like I can do anything about it *now*, thanks to you.”

“A point against us, yes.”

Jade decided to change the subject to something slightly more pleasant. She sat up on her bed with her legs over the side. “About this Mitch Goldman guy you were playing. Same name as your human self? They’ll do that?”

“It’s called a ‘Danza’ role. Here, let me explain the trope...”

She explained it wasn’t unusual back in the day for a character to have the same first name as the actor playing them. The namesake was Tony Danza of the ‘80s sitcom *Who’s the Boss?* Will Smith of the *Fresh Prince of Bel Aire* was another example in the next decade. Jade wasn’t too familiar with the idea, but the Zharusian obsession with media five hundred years old was well known even on Neorus.

“So, this Goldman guy is a lot like you,” Jade said.

“There’s still some differences, but yeah. He’s kind of hard for others to play, since he’s a licensed detective and those skills don’t translate into character notes. So he’s out of town a lot while I take on other roles. Some of the Players get a little too complacent with their plotlines, so I mix things up a bit. Throw their CP curveballs. That sort of thing. It’s my speciality.”

Jade smirked. She was warming to Tallyhawk. She had a sense of humor and a mind as sharp as her talons. “Like you did to Clayton’s earlier, right?”

“Any CP Clayton plays, but Carla especially.”

They shared a laugh at Clayton’s expense.

“Would it help if they made a Danza role for you?” Tallyhawk asked. “I doubt the conditioning would allow a male one, but a woman named Jade something might work out.”

“What makes you think they’ll trust me to leave the Enclave again?”

“Boredom. On your part. Maybe you could do some behind-the-scenes work. But unless that *really* interests you, I suggest not trying to escape again. You’ll be banned from the Show for good. You don’t want to spend the next few years just watching the

rest of us have fun, do you? Or worse, expelled out to one of the isolated Enclaves in the Dry. They're *nuts* out there."

Bitterness smouldered, but she did have a point. "I'll be good. I promise. As long as I don't have to play anyone like Jane Wyman again."

"Hey! Jane was my first role," Tallyhawk needled dryly. "At any rate, what if I finagled a Danza for you to play? What do you think about that?"

"You sure you can trust me, then?" Jade raised one eyebrow. "You're willing to do this for me?"

"We want you to make a life here, and if this helps, then this is what we'll do for you. I'll see it through."

Jade stared. She knew an offer of friendship when she heard one. "Um, yeah! Sure. I'll give it a try. I don't know how to thank you, Tallyhawk."

"Just 'Tally' is fine. Don't worry about thanking me. I'm only repaying the kindness done to me."

June 15, 147 AL

INT HELLIR ENCLAVE, JADE'S BEDROOM - EVENING

Jade thumbed through the virtual pages of Tallyhawk's special CP for her in disbelief, for the third time in as many realtime minutes. Her name would be Jade Cattano, a Danza-type role, just for her.

Jade Cattano had more than the real person's first name. She also had her physique, feline characteristics and all. The only hardlight touch was to tiger-pattern her hair rather than keep it blonde. "How do you even explain this to anyone?" she asked him.

"Well, unlike the rest of us, you can easily pass as having extreme tags. Though in Jade's case she went to the Body Salon upstairs. It's body fashion choice on her part," Tallyhawk explained.

The personality notes described a very strong streak of independence. Cattano didn't care for prevailing Cape Nord fashions, preferring to do her own thing regardless. After seeing the uniformity among the Nordian women going her own way did hold a certain appeal. "Here I thought you'd *want* me to be invisible. I'm--Jade is going to cause a stir wherever she goes."

"Oh, you'll be in good company, don't worry," Ambrosia said. "Wait until you meet the female CP I normally play. I'm a tall, big Woman of Sturmhaven. Hardlight can only do so much to make you appear smaller."

Jade smiled. "I think I'm getting it now. There's always a few black sheep in the flock."

"Yep! Now, a few more rules of the road before we do a test run."

"Okay, first," Tallyhawk smiled. "Although this CP was made for you specifically,

she's not yours *exclusively*. CPs like this are persistent. They're seen in public all the time. So they need to be out and about as much as possible in their day-to-day life. No unexplained vanishings. So, when you're not playing Jade Cattano, someone else probably will be. It might be Aeolia, it might be Hanley, it might even be me. So she may not even be available when you want her."

"Second," Ambrosia added. "Keep up on your CP's Continuity Notes. Whoever was playing her last will leave you a mem-summary. You're also responsible for leaving one when you check out. Instructions for packing one are in the CP notes."

"Last, and really the *most important*." Tallyhawk looked deadly serious--fairly easy for a bird of prey. "Keep Drama between CPs between them *only*. If you find you're taking things too personal with someone playing another CP, take a break. Related to this, don't go too far off Script. We do *love* a good ad-lib, but you have to really pick an appropriate moment to use one. Okay? Everything square?"

Implicit in their rules was that she couldn't be Jade Cattano full time. The Enclave itself was her home, not whatever apartment she'd live in up above. Still, it was better than what she had now. Boredom had set in just like it had with the others. "I can do this, sure."

"Welcome to the Show, Jade Cattano!" Ambrosia cheered. "How about a test run? We'll get her on-set in a day or two, once the bugs are worked out of her Script."

"Can't wait!"

June 18, 147 AL

In Hellir Enclave life was the Show, and the Show was life. All of Cape Nord was its stage. To really be a part of it one had to spend a lot of fast-time catching up on the Continuity. But there were loads and loads of characters, with cobwebs of interrelationships that were hard to track. Some had been retired, even killed. Others were like Jade Cattano, created for noobs. With new Integrates trickling in on a weekly basis there were many more of the former than the latter for the 53 Integrates who called the Enclave home.

To make their job easier of changing in and out of their CP, the Integrates had bored a series of tunnels covering an area of a few city blocks near the Enclave. They led into storefronts and apartment buildings the Enclave itself owned under several front companies. Personas ranged from shopkeepers and business owners like Big Jim McGee to waitresses like Carla and now Jade. Nobody was in any governmental position, or law enforcement. The rules that the Bosscat had set down excluded those. They were all just normal people going about their normal lives.

Jade Cattano had moved to Cape Nord in mid-April, arriving on a bus from Dome Rainier, Cascadia (or so her records would say). Despite its bad reputation there were still opportunities for women in Cape Nord. She found an apartment on McKenna

Street, a block from Hooters, where she'd quickly found a job despite her outside-the-norm catfaun looks. Among her co-workers she was unique. The work uniform's shorts almost matched the color of her leg and back fur.

The owner of the restaurant, Johnny McGee (who *happened* to be the younger brother of Big Jim), had hired her just for that uniqueness. Having someone on-staff who didn't quite fit the current fashion always generated a little more customer traffic than having everybody look the same. It was part of how new fashions took hold.

The other staff grumbled, especially Assistant Manager Carla Pearson and her clique. Jade took home better tips than the other girls, who were told by Johnny *not* to follow her into that type of body modification. He said that fur and food service generally didn't mix, but everyone else suspected he had ulterior motives. Johnny was quite taken with his new waitress, but too shy to act on it.

Next door, Big Jim had noticed the new hire. He was also quite taken with the catty waitress was little more aggressive in following his desires. He was a man of deep insecurities, and Jade responded in the subtle way women often do. On the other hand, Johnny had the habit of misreading her.

Then there was Carla's Clique...

The three of them made Jade's life difficult in a hundred little ways. Her fur comb frequently went missing. They would make little meowing, hissing sounds at her just in earshot. A thousand snide comments were muttered behind her back between the Clique and the other girls on staff.

But Jade was not without her own growing circle of friends. There was Natalia Petrovna, who was a self-professed "Voman uf Sturmhaven" studying "Boorish Masculinity" in Cape Nord for a doctoral thesis. Doreen Parker was another woman with unusual tags. Her head and face was a doe mask, but the rest of her was unaltered aside from a tail. Like Jade she didn't have a RIDE. Her cervine looks were a fashion choice.

Then there was Jeanine McCray. A former Man who had recently lost her Man Card for unspecified reasons, currently in heavy therapy for a *very* rough transition. She needed a gentle introduction to the new world of Womanhood, but wasn't getting one. Doreen and Natalia often argued over what philosophy of womanhood Jeanine should follow. It was a classic Sturmhaven vs. Cape Nord tug-of-war, good for a lot of laughs in the Enclave.

Under the hardlight, Natalia was Ambrosia, Doreen was Aeolia, and Jeanine was Hanley. Somehow Aeolia had convinced her boyfriend to take on a female CP. He'd decided to go against the crossrider stereotype and play one who was having a rough time adapting. Jeanine also worked at Hooters, which made her situation all the more awkward for her. Inside their apartment it was perfect sitcom material, with unlikely misunderstandings, awkward moments, and humorous plot twists.

Though it *did* confuse the neighbors some. To keep that to a minimum, the Script

backed off on the tropes when regular people were around. Though sometimes it was hard to resist a little ad-lib here and there. Jeanine could be quite endearing at times, even with her discomfort.

“I play her a bit of a Woobie,” Hanley explained one evening in the Enclave over an after Show coffee. “And frankly, there’s a lot of things about women that honestly confuse me. I thought this would be a good way to get a clue.”

“Since crossriding is out of the question now?” Aeolia said, raising one eyebrow. “I hear there are some shapeshifters out there you could learn from.”

“Uh, *no*. Hardlight breasts are quite enough, thank you.”

“Took me months to shake that oogy feeling as Carla,” Clayton said. “So don’t sweat it, ‘Jeanine’. You’re doing fine. Adds realism.”

“Say, what’s DevCorby been up to?”

“Schedule says he’s on Johnny McGee right now. Let’s check the live feed...”

Jade stood up and glared at the screen. While she was guaranteed majority time as her namesake CP, others wanted a chance to play her as well. Playing out on the screen, Jade Cattano was flirting pretty openly with her boss. The real Jade checked to see who was playing her. Seeing the name, she laughed and sat back down on the couch.

“Tallyhawk?” Clayton said. “Yeah, that’s her MO. And after you were flirting with Big Jim, too. That...what the hell does Tallyhawk think she’s doing?”

“She’s setting up a challenge for me. What else? This double-flirting isn’t really that out of character for Jade. Still...” Something like this needed to be resolved soon. She connected to the OOC channel and pinged Tallyhawk.

:Why hello there, RealJade,: she replied, sending a smirk emoticon. :FakeJade was just going to give Johnny here a smooch.:

:Just a peck on the cheek, eh? Well, I’m invoking my Primary Player Clause. Extricate yourself from the scene and meet me the Green Room stat to swap out, you sneaky, sneaky bird.:

:Happy to oblige, RealJade. How’ll you get out of this one, I wonder. Challenge! But if you’re not up for it...:

:Don’t worry, Tally. I’ll put on a good show for everyone.:

Clayton brightened. “Hey, you going up top?”

“Yes, and I’m actually going to need you as Carla up there for this. I’ll need Jeanine, too.” A rather fun way of resolving the dilemma started to germinate. It would probably require going off-Script, but after Tallyhawk’s actions with the CP, she could rationalize what she was planning. She sent pings to Ambrosia and DevCorby as well, not really giving them instructions. The way the Script was adapting to the curveball would work just as well for setup.

Clayton rezzed into Carla, complete with uniform. “Almost time for my shift anyway. Can’t wait to see what you come up with, Jade. Tata!” She swept off towards the Green Room.

A confrontation with Carla was inevitable. She and Jade sparred with each other frequently while on the job. Jade often protected poor Jeanine from their hazing the new girl. Hanley's CP was about as average-looking for a Cape Nord woman as it got, but it was more about the mysterious loss of the Man Card that caused her so much grief.

Everyone was heading towards the Green Room. Apparently Tallyhawk had spammed that something big was going to happen up top, and every CP who could reasonably be there, would be. Everyone else would just have to watch the raw feed. Hanley had also invoked the same swap-out clause Jade had. For a moment there were two of each CP in the Green Room as Continuity packets were exchanged and the Player went out.

DesiLu stood up on the Green Room's central desk to get everybody's attention. "Okay, everyone. This feels big. Tallyhawk, nice setup. Jade's going to have some fun resolving the situation. New Scripts are loading. Places!"

Script notes unfolded in fast-time, telling each player what they needed to do to get into the proper setup.

The Green Room was a flurry of activity as the Players put on real clothing to go along with their CP. Ideally it had to be real (hard to leave clothes on the floor if they vanished a half meter away), but for the timing of this scene it could be hardlight. Hanley quickly put on the Hooters uniform then rezzed into Jeanine before dashing towards the restaurant's door. There was a great deal of hardlight nudity around the room. Cross-Players like Clayton, Ambrosia, and Hanley abounded.

When the players neared the start positions, DesiLu called out via the Director's own channel, "Action!" The mouse Intie snapped a virtual clapboard.

INT. HOOTERS RESTAURANT - BREAK ROOM - DAY

JEANINE has been cornered by CLARA, who is giving her the third degree about losing her Man Card and manhood. JADE arrives to defuse the situation.

Jade Cattano sauntered downstairs from Johnny McGee's office, hips and tail swinging. The nuances of Cape Nord culture were finally starting to sink in for her. Only in Cape Nord was sleeping the way to the top considered a valid way for a woman to advance her career. While she hadn't gone that far yet, the groundwork was laid. Of course, it didn't take much here to lure any Man into a woman's bed.

She liked to think that her purpose was nobler than most. Jade only sought this path for the sake of Jeanine. *Only* by becoming Assistant Manager would she be able to do something about Carla. For all her faults, Carla herself was a little too nice to use her position for personal gain. Jeanine was too financially and emotionally fragile to simply quit.

While heading down, Jade's feline hearing picked up some talk from the Break

Room.

“Leave me alone, Carla! Can’t I have five minutes without you looking over my shoulder?” It was Jeanine, and her squirrely voice was trembling under the pressure Carla had her under. “I’m *not* telling you that!”

“I knew some details I could at least reassure you about...things. Why *did* they revoke your Man Card? Really, everyone wants to know.”

“It’s...really embarrassing, that’s why. I haven’t even told Jadekitty.”

Jade smiled despite the seriousness of the situation. Jeanine had a cute nickname for almost everyone--except Carla. Unless Jade did something, though, Carla would hound the poor girl about it the rest of the day. It was time to intervene.

“I promise I won’t laugh,” Carla continued. “Let me tell you about my mother sometime, *then* you can laugh.”

The catfaun turned the corner, then leaned against the doorjamb, tail swishing. She folded her arms. “Hello Carla, Jeanie-girl.”

“Jadekitty!” Jeanine shouted. She flounced over and hugged her friend. “Where have you *been* the past hour?”

“Strutting about like a tigress in heat for that so-called Man Johnny, no doubt,” Carla sneered. “And after you flirted with his brother, too. You know that Man hates mixed signals, right? Ask me how I know.”

Shouting out in the restaurant proper interrupted their catty little spat. Luisa rushed into the break room, out of breath. “Jade, get out here, quick! Johnny and Big Jim are fighting!”

Carla smirked. “Really? Over who this time?”

“Where have *you* been lately, Carla? Who do you think?”

Luisa grabbed Jade by the arm and pulled her towards the fight. Chairs and bar stools were being thrown, while the rest of the patrons had simply made room to watch the fracas. Jim and Johnny McGee barely tolerated one another at the best of times, but since Jade’s arrival they’d finally come to blows, apparently having realized they were both competing for her affection. The Script said it was finally time to resolve this.

Jade’s arrival made the two men stop, with Big Jim on top of his younger brother, and Johnny developing a real shiner of a black eye. It was the classic female dilemma. Big Jim was the standard alpha male, all muscles, a real Mr. Right-Now. His younger brother was more emotionally stable and reliable--the classic Mr. Right. The kind of man a woman could go into a long term relationship. The Script rolled onwards in her head. “Guys, please. Stop this *right now* or I’ll drag you apart myself.”

“Women!” Big Jim scoffed. “You never make decisions. If you’d stop with the mixed signals--”

“We’d really appreciate if you’d decide which one of us you want to bed with.” Johnny smiled sheepishly.

The procedurally-generated Script unrolled in Jade’s head. She grimaced to

herself, then wrested the resolution away from it. She folded her arms and sniffed. “Men! What makes you think I was serious about *either* of you? I’m *bi*. I like you two, and I don’t mind playing, but I’ve been after Carla all along.”

Clayton sent her a giggle over the OOC channel in fast-time. *:Oh, really? Wow! I think you just buggered up my Script with that plot twist, Jade. Guess I’ll have to ad-lib.:*

:Don’t worry, Clay. It wasn’t in my Script, either. The Scriptwriters are really getting controlling lately, you know. They’re not actually supposed to give us dialogue:

The rest of the cast in the room joined in. Ambrosia chuckled. *:Damn, catgirl! When you go off Script, you really go off it! You were supposed to pick Jim!:*

:Then Johnny was going to drink himself stupid in his office,: DevCorby, playing Johnny today, added. *:Now what?:*

:Ad-lib it. The meat are watching,: DesiLu said. *:It’ll be at least ten seconds before the Scripts catch up with us again. Places! Action!:* The mouse Integrate clapped the slate.

A stunned Carla walked out of the break room.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HELLIR ENCLAVE - NIGHT

The scene was easily the most popular in the Video Room that evening. There was much praise and applause showered on the members of the cast who had played it out, including Tallyhawk for setting it up so well. After Jade’s admission, a tearful Carla had admitted she actually enjoyed the catfaun’s company after all, but not in *that way* (unrequited love was great Drama). The result had actually warmed the relationship between them, despite that fact. Then the others revealed what hadn’t played out quite as planned after the Scripts caught up.

Dev went first. “Right now, Aeolia is playing a heartbroken, drunken Johnny McGee lurching down down McKenna Street to the Maidenform Salon. After one rejection too many and losing the fight with Jim, he’s turned in his Man Card. By the time Hooters opens tomorrow, *Joanna McGee* will be the owner.”

Clayton snorted, leaning back on the comfy u-shaped couch in front of the largest TV. “Well, that’ll make it easier for Aeolia to use that persona. She’s never quite gotten used to playing men. Though not for lack of trying.”

Dev put his paws up on the coffee table, where empty beer mugs and half-empty plates of sweet and spicy snacks were placed. “I was getting tired of playing him anyway. I’d like to do more behind-the-scenes stuff. She can have the role if she wants it so badly.” He picked up his mug and gulped some beer, then gestured at the guest bartender occupying the wet bar at the back of the room. “Hey, Serena, you have any

more of that Shangri-Lager?”

“You’re drinking me out of house and home, Dev. I’ll have to bring in another shipment,” the clouded leopard Integrate said.

There was another round of applause from the back of the room, and the sound of a voice nobody wanted to hear. “Bravo, bravo. That’s, like, one of those old soap operas. Like *Days of Our Lives*, or *Melrose Place*, or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Bravo.”

Clayton cringed. “Oh, hey there Bosscat. Didn’t see you come in.”

“Hey Clay. You retiring from the Snatchers? I noticed you’ve been absent lately so I decided to check up.”

“Well, the Show needs me,” Clayton muttered.

“I can see that. Don’t worry. It’s copacetic for now.”

Clayton visibly relaxed. “Copacetic” was the word anyone always wanted to hear from Fritz. “Glad you like it, Bosscat.”

“Needs a proper title, though. I dunno, maybe *The Days of our Meat*.” The lynx snickered. “*One Meat to Live* or something. I mean, there you cats are, living among the meat as one of ‘em, hamming it up for your fellow enlightened Inties, and they don’t even know.” There was a light in his eyes--the same one from many an aspiring actor. “Gonna pull a Joe Estevez here. Got any spare roles for me to play?”

Now it was Ambrosia’s turn to cringe. “Uh, not really any you’d like, Bosscat. We could make one for you special. One that makes sense for coming and going like you do. Maybe a Nextus war hero--”

“Naw, I’m already that in real life. I want a challenge. Maybe I should play a chick, like Clay there.” He snapped his fingers. “Coo coo. Hey, I got a ginchy idea. I call this one ‘Major Hayseed’. Dig?”

The concept was a rather unobvious one. The Major spoke with an exaggerated country accent, tended to drink and curse a lot, and wasn’t very smart. Ambrosia smiled and nodded. “Uh, sure. Sure. I can get started on that, Fritz.”

“You do that, dutchess. You do that. Now, I’m gonna split. Keep it up, my hep brothers and sisters! I’ll be back once Major Hayseed’s ready for me.”

When everyone was certain Fritz was safely gone they relaxed, but only a little. Hanley pulled in his ears. “Holyyyy shit.”

“I know. Rock and a hard place,” Ambrosia said. “For the life of me I can’t imagine Fritz being a good actor. Let alone playing a woman.” The she-bear sighed. “Anyway, I still want to reiterate that you’ve all done good today. I’ll call this one a wrap and send it to DesiLu for the final touches before putting it out on IntieNet.”

Jade put her hand up. “Wait, you’re officially going *public* with this one?”

“Now that Fritz knows about it, we need to get ahead of the game. Some folks here have put some of their favorite scenes up for friends in other Enclaves. Might as well do it with a more professional touch. We’ve been moving this way for a while now, so why not just make it into a full production? Hellir Studios.”

“I can think of a half dozen reasons why not. You know what TV and movies are like.” She ticked each one off on her beclawed fingers. “One, it’ll bring in more Inties to the Enclave than we can handle, all of whom wanting a role. Two, if we deny them a role they’ll find some way to bully in on the production uninvited and mess with our Scripts. Three, the *fanfiction*. Oh God, the fanfiction. We, and the personas we play, will be celebrities.”

Clay smiled at her. “Come on Jade. You’re having tons of fun. You’re the queen of the Script-snarl and ad-lib. We’ve had more plot twists just this past week than we did the last five months.”

“And what am I, chopped liver?” Tallyhawk huffed.

“No, that’s just your dinner,” Ambrosia said dryly.

“Oh, and a fine dinner it is.”

Ambrosia stood up and shut off the replica twencen console color TV by the switch. It shut down with the hum of vacuum tubes. “Okay, Jade. Okay! I get it. I don’t need to hear all of your reasons. I understand what you’re getting at, but I think you’re being too, well, *jaded* about it. We’ll hold auditions, and we can take measures to keep another Intie from trying to surprise us with a walk-on.”

“We won’t have to worry about that, at least for a little while,” Clayton said. “Now that the Bosscat’s interested nobody’ll do anything that stupid. But you know him. He’ll eventually lose interest, *then* we’ll have that problem.”

Whatever else had happened, the Show went on. Freed from the pressures of having to maintain Manhood, Joanna McGee would be a far better businesswoman for it. But the women of Cape Nord had their own cultural expectations. While Men got into open fistfights with each other, women were usually far more subtle about relationships among other women. As the old saying went: “Betrayal may come easy to women, but Men live by iron codes of honor.”

This was supposed to be the case, but Joanna had yet to learn subtlety. Shortly after returning to work the next day, she called Jade into her office. Shortly thereafter Jade found herself out of a job for publicly humiliating her in front of everyone. When Jeanine heard, she took a stand herself and quit, then the two of them marched out of Hooters together.

“You know, I hear Detective Goldman upstairs needs a secretary,” Jeanine said. They were enjoying some comfort food in Patton Park. Chocolate ice cream seemed to cure all ills (especially when it was Ambrosia’s, since the ice cream stand was actually one of her three CPs.). “I think it’d be a good fit for you.”

“Maybe.” OOC she sent, *:Hanley, I’m curious. Why did Jeanine lose her Man Card?:*

:Have Jadekitty ask her, and she just might tell you,: he replied.

That wasn’t a bad idea, and the Script allowed it. Now that they had a bigger

audience than the rest of the Enclave, there was some pressure to move things forward.

Jade decided to leave out that she was going to sleep with Johnny so she could fire Carla. There were a few moments of quiet between them as they focused on their ice cream cones.

“Jeanie-girl, can I ask a question?”

“You can ask, Jadekitty, but I can’t promise I’ll answer.”

There were times when a girl had to be blunt. “Why did you lose your Man Card?”

Jeanine grimaced as if she had an ice cream headache. “Okay, I think we know each other well enough I can actually come clean on that one. So...

“You’ve seen my bedroom. It’s all cute stuff. Stuffed animals, wall vids of kittens, puppies, fawns, baby animals of all kinds. I was a *sucker* for capital-c Cute. Still am, of course. But it’s perfectly okay for a woman.” There was an edge of bitterness in her squirrely voice.

“I can’t see you really losing a Man Card for that. Maybe you’d lose a couple ranks, but getting it revoked *and* making you a woman?”

“Then a friend found my Lisa Frank collection. And my *Hello Kitty*. And my six generations of *My Little Pony*.” Jeanine looked down at herself. They were still in the Hooters uniforms. “I must’ve crossed a line somewhere. They called a Ref in. He pronounced sentence, they ceremonially tore up my Man Card, and it was off to the Feminatrix Body Salon.”

OOO, Jade sputtered. *:Really? They’d really do something like that here? Shades of what those crazy Amazons did to me!:*

:Oh, yes. Cape Nord and Sturmhaven aren’t really that different. Besides, Jade, look at the real me. I’m a cute bunny rabbit, and I do like Lisa Frank and the rest of those things. I love cute. It warms my heart. Makes me feel good. But I’d never get a Man Card here. Not that I want one anyway. Think I’m going to stick to CrossPlaying.:

DesiLu chimed in. *:Good scene, you two. But wrap it up. Aeolia’s little ‘you’re fired’ curveball there is a good setup for a standard ‘Girls Night Out’ for Jeanine and Jadekitty. So, unless you want to check out, I want you to prepare your CP for that.:*

Normally DesiLu had a very light touch, but things had changed. The reception to the “pilot episode” the Director had constructed and sent out to the other Enclaves had been positive so far. Now the mouse was exerting tighter control over ongoing plots and storylines. *:Okay, Desi, will do.:*

Back in the real world, Jadekitty was more stoic about it. “That’s...actually a good body salon, you know?”

“I know. They didn’t skimp on making me into the cutest pretty young thing ever. And you know what? I’m trying, I’m really *trying* to learn how to be a Cape Nord girl, but...between Natalia, Doreen, and you...I just don’t know. It’s not exactly coming natural to me, you know.”

The Script was just inadequate sometimes, and this was one of those times. Jadekitty's next line was supposed to be "just keep at it, you'll find your way." But that didn't seem nearly insightful enough to Jade. It was time to ad-lib again.

She turned so she was face-to-face with Jeanine. "I know this is un-asked-for advice, Jeanie-girl. But it has to be said. Stop trying so hard. You're a Nord Girl now. There's no 'Woman Card' to lose. Let the silly Men play their even sillier games and keep track of stupid points. You're one of us now, and you have nothing to 'womanly' prove."

Jeanine stared at her, dumbfounded, then understanding dawned. She put her hand on her chest. "I...didn't think of it that way, Jadekitty. I...no, I really didn't. It's like a great weight's been lifted..." She looked down at her chest. "Well, *figuratively*."

"Well, there's that." Jade giggled. "I think we've earned a Girls' Night Out, don't you?"

"I've...never done that before."

"Well, then we'll make a real night of it! Come on, let's go back to the apartment and put on something that'll knock *everyone's* socks off!"

:End Scene, : DesiLu sent as the duo left the park. :A little ham-handed, Jade, don't you think? Is Cape Nord really that bad?:

:Why, yes. Yes it is. I'm going to check out once we're back at the apartment. Last couple days have been exhausting in this role. I think I need a break from it. A few days at least.:

:Well, a half dozen others want a go at Jadekitty. : Jeanine's nickname for Jade's namesake role had caught on. It helped differentiate the fictional version from the real one.

:My preference is for Tallyhawk to play her, but fine. See you in the Green Room in a few minutes.:

After she finished making the Continuity Notes in the Green Room, Jade went to her own quarters in the Enclave. She'd barely seen the inside of it for weeks now. The decor was very Spartan. With a tired sigh she lay down in bed and popped out her DIN. If anyone wanted to talk to her they'd have to just knock.

It felt like a lifetime since Clayton had brought her here. *When was the last time I thought about home?* She searched her memories and found the exact moment, when she'd left the Enclave that first time as Jadekitty. From then on it was all about the Show. It set her imagination on fire. Other Enclaves, the ones out in the Dry, were reputedly intensely fixated on a genre, or even a single creative work. Not so in Hellir.

Hellir absolutely *fizzed* with creativity. It was a thrill to be a part of. She could almost forgive Clayton for Snatching her here. Almost. In the quiet moments like this one, when she wasn't in the role, the homesickness returned.

Briefly, she entered Nature Range to see the glory of the Southern Crystal Range. Neorus's geology was unique among the colonies. Its crystalline metamaterial

neosilicate had infinite information density when refined into Infinium. It was a lot like Zharus's own qubitite, but the planet literally had continent-sized deposits of the stuff and more of it was liberally scattered around various planetary bodies in the system.

Like the other metas, it had a number of other uses. But unlike cavorite production, the method for enabling that infinite information density was the most-guarded secret on the planet, as were the Infinium datacrystals themselves. The penalty for trying to smuggle a datacrystal off-planet was life imprisonment. Raw neosilicate itself was exported in limited quantities. It had uses when combined with other metas, just not the one use it was renowned for.

Funny thing was... She remembered what had sparked her wanderlust. Funny thing was that someone had managed to sneak a RIDE off Zharus, or at least the shell of one, and brought it to her hometown. Remembering perfectly now, it obviously had lacked an RI core. Then there was the time she managed to go to the Star Circus and see the Zharus Zoo, and the animal-featured performers there.

The problem...

The *problem* was...

Even her own memories insisted she'd been a young girl at the time, when it was clearly not the case. The dissonance gave her a very strange headache.

Jade snarled, extending her claws, grabbing the blanket underneath and tearing it. The memories themselves weren't changed. It was just a very insistent background nagging that *would. Not. Stop.*

She sat up and brought her knees against her chest, thinking. *Just how bad is this conditioning? What can I do about it? I'm an Integrate! Why can't I find where they've screwed with me and change it back?*

Was it even possible to have that much control over herself? Messing with her own brain was incredibly risky, even if she did. *I wouldn't even know what neuron to begin with.*

If there was no way to be subtle about it, maybe she could brute-force her way through. Jade laughed ruefully. *Just like a man to punch something until it gives.* Just like a...

She facepalmed. "I've been in Cape Nord too long."

Maybe using the stereotypically feminine approach for this polity was the wrong way. Maybe she could...

Jade grabbed her DIN off the nightstand and plugged it back in, then called DesiLu.

The harried Director looked more than a little frazzled, even in virtual. The mouse had bags under her eyes from lack of sleep. "Hey, Jade. What can I do for you?"

"Before I get to that, Desi, just how much multitasking are you doing right now? You're looking a little frotzed."

DesiLu sighed deeply. "I'm managing five major Scenes right now and twice that

many minor. I'm turning raw footage into something usable and working on musical accompaniment, I'm..."

"Doing far too much for one person. C'mon, Desi. Get some help. Mark Seven and Ubu--"

"Aren't as good at this as I am. But, point taken. Do you want to check out Jadekitty again? Nobody's taken her out again as yet. Tallyhawk's wrapping something up with her right now. She's scheduled to do the Girls Night Out scene with Hanley."

After revealing Jadekitty was bisexual, Jade herself had some idea of where Tallyhawk could take the CP on a Girls Night Out with Jeanine. But, at times like this she had to remind herself that the Cover Persona wasn't really *supposed* to be her real life self. It could diverge, and when being played by someone else, generally did. The curveballs and sometimes outright OOC moments other Players brought to the characters was really part of the point of the whole thing. Tallyhawk was especially good at it.

That gave her a potentially very fun idea.

"Desi...is anyone playing Mitch right now?"

"Uh, no, but that CP has some pretty hefty restrictions. You need actual investigation skills if you want to do anything official, for one. I could make up a one-shot for you if you just want to flounce around with testosterone poisoning for a while. Can you even *do* that with your Amazon conditioning?"

Normally thinking about being a man gave her a bad case of nausea and a light headed sensation. But so far, this wasn't having the same effect. "All I want is a few minutes in Goldman's gumshoes. I won't do anything else but maybe stand at the window and look out over the city street."

"I can allow that. Pick up the Continuity in the Green Room, and make sure you dress the part. Real clothes, not hardlight. Even if you're only up there five minutes."

"Got it, Desi. Thanks."

Jade took a deep breath, ignored the nausea that was only now starting, and headed for the Green Room.

The ill feeling only got worse when Jade read through the character notes. This wasn't going to be an end-run around the conditioning as she had hoped. She read through the notes.

DETECTIVE MITCH GOLDMAN, Private Investigator. Man Card, Top Rank. A real True Nordsman. Former detective in the Aloha Police Department. Claims he quit to go out on his own. Moved to Cape Nord recently to establish his Private Investigation firm. A tough-as-nails, cigar-smoking, hard-drinking womanizer.

Goldman fit the Cape Nord masculine ideal to a T. Once a Man reached True Nordsman status it was *very* difficult to lose it. It was a lot like how university professors attained tenure. Even if Goldman had a secret cache of Lisa Frank art somewhere, he wouldn't lose it. The True Nordsman rank was what every Man aspired

to be--in some ways it was akin to just throwing in the towel and turning female. It was even on the Agency's front door: Mitch Goldman, Private Eye. True Nordsman.

"Scene notes for Mitch are up, Jade," Desi said at her desk. She looked just as overworked as in virtual. "And, I've called in Ubu. I *do* need a break. This whole thing is getting away from me. We need more behind-the-scenes people to really make this work. The demand..."

"Is it really that big? I've been afraid to look. I haven't seen anything about it in my mailbox."

"We've set up some fanmail filters, that's why. Don't worry about it now. Just go do your Mitch Scene and get back here pronto."

The wall fabbers spat out Mitch Goldman's outfit. Jade removed her clothes and started putting it on. The nausea increased sharply. She started to try and track down the source. Even the black leather shoes weren't hardlight, but a lightweight armature that imitated plantigrade feet. Her own feline feet fit inside the back of the shoe. The clothes were very loose, even though she was tall for a woman here. The clothes were rumpled, dirty with raw q-dust, and hard-worn.

"Moment of truth," Jade said aloud. Then she activated the hardlight costume. She was suddenly very, very dizzy. It took every bit of willpower she had not to shut it down again or faint. Then something inside her head snapped.

"Jade!" DesiLu exclaimed. "How...are you okay now? Was it the brainwashing?"

"Feels like I broke something, I don't know what," Jade said in Goldman's gravelly bass voice. "I'm okay, really. Ready for the Scene."

"Well, the Script is ready, 'Mitch'. Just make sure you read and re-read every single character and continuity note. I mean it, every one. And don't go off Script! I'm not sure what Tally's going to do when she finds out."

"Well, what's good for the goose is good for the gander, dollface," Jade said in-character. The final touch to go with the duster coat was the brown fedora. "Let's roll."

INT. GOLDMAN DETECTIVE AGENCY - DAY

Having run into a block on an important missing person case MITCH GOLDMAN arrives home for a brief respite from the work.

According to the notes, Mitch Goldman wasn't a very good detective. He couldn't be because he didn't want to attract too much attention to himself, but it also made for good Drama. He was formerly of the Aloha Police Department, fired because he *wasn't* very good at his job. But most of his failed "cases" were actually from other Players. Those few the Detective took from real people had a *much* higher success rate. He wasn't bungling those jobs he failed on purpose, either.

It was huge in the character notes: *NO DRAMA when real people are involved. Just do the damned job. No melodramatic dialogue, either. Just keep it real.*

The others who returning from their scenes were a little surprised to see Mitch in the Green Room. “He” tipped his hat to them, then went into the corridor, up the stairs to “his” office, then tried to settle into the Script.

More Script notes. *Primary Style: Film Noir. Begin the Scene with an internal monologue.* As Mitch, she let the Script get started.

Weather in the South Cavern never changes. After the unremitting heat of the Dry, the chilly air of Cape Nord was like a fresh draught of cold beer. I needed that beer. No, I needed more than beer. Something much stronger.

In keeping with the theme, the inside of the office was a darkened place with half-open blinds that let in only a tiny bit of light through slats, leaving bright lines on the hardwood floor. There was just enough light to make out the dusty, grimy desk with the tablet carelessly laid on top of it and an unemptied ashtray full of half-smoked cigarette butts.

The trail ran cold on me on the Mitchell Case in Bartertown. The missing fat slob of a former cop wasn't as easy to find as I expected. I went to the wall safe to find the object of my return home.

:Not bad so far,: DesiLu informed. :Keep it up, Jade. Stick to the Script. Holding up okay?:

:My boobs are going to be so sore when this is over.: The hardlight glamour still had to squash them down in order to fit inside Goldman's muscular chest. Tallyhawk's own were barely even there, though she did have the arm feather and shoe problem. Still, with the Script running like this, it was getting easier to pinpoint the brainwashing hotspots and fix them.

Inside the wall safe was a treasured bottle of vodka, imported all the way from Neorus. The clear bottle with the blue liquid inside showed it was three-quarters empty. The Detective sighed. He wasn't likely to afford something like this again anytime soon.

:Holy...that's Infinium Ice Vodka! That's pricey stuff even back home!: Jade exclaimed. :I'd...better not touch it. Tally...:

:Uh, speaking of Tally,: DesiLu intoned. :She found out. And she's on her way. As you. Well, Jadekitty.:

Jade remembered a line earlier from Jeanine suggesting she get a job as Goldman's secretary. :Shouldn't she be doing the Girls Night Out about now?:

:Yes, but this is Tally we're talking about. Get ready. New Script rolling out.:

Mitch saw her silhouette against the frosted glass window in the bright hallway. The tiger ears stood out, as did the rest of her luscious curves. She knocked on the door, three quick, precise taps. “Mister Goldman? I hear you need a secretary and I'd like to apply for the job. Can I come in?”

Jade felt an odd twinge. Not from the Amazon brainwashing, but an entirely different kind. There was seeing yourself in photos or recorded on screen, but this? Still, the other Players often interacted with their Mains this way. Now it was just her turn.

“I’m closed, toots. Come back later,” Mitch said.

“I *really* need a job, Mister Goldman,” Jadekitty pleaded. “Please, can we talk for just a few minutes? That’s all I’ll need.”

There was an OOC ping from Tallyhawk. *:Of all the male CPs we have, you choose that one for your first? I didn’t think you were capable of that kind of role. Playing Mitch isn’t for the faint-of-heart, kitty cat. Many others have tried, all have failed.:*

:Maybe they just weren’t motivated enough. He’s helping me break my conditioning.:

:Really?: Tallyhawk exclaimed. *:Well, let’s break it good and hard! Let me help.:*

:Action, you two,: DesiLu commanded.

I unlocked the door. She walked into my office in a red dress and a pushy attitude. Jade tried not to sputter too much over the sexist Script monologue. *She might have come right from a party. There’s always a party somewhere for dames like her.*

“What makes you think I even *need* a secretary, toots?”

Jadekitty handed him a printout from the local craigslist. Her voice purred. “Your ad, Mr. Goldman. It’s been up for five months.”

“I’m really picky about who works for me, miss...?”

“Jade Cattano,” she purred. The cheeky broad looked poured into that dress. “When do I start?”

“Now, just wait a second here, toots,” Mitch sputtered. “I--”

The woman’s shout boomed through the hall. “*Mitch Goldman!* You owe me four months of back rent!”

The Script stuttered. It was Joanna McGee. He was utterly unprepared for the newly-female landlord marching right into his office, apparently not even seeing Jadekitty standing next to him. “Well, uh...”

“You can’t intimidate me anymore, Goldman!” Joanna growled. “I don’t have to worry about a silly Man Card now! Pay up or you’re out on your ear! No more empty promises!”

:What the hell is this?: Jade sent OOC. *:Aeolia? That’s not very ladylike.:*

:Joanna’s a real hard-ass now,: the rabbit replied. *:But then, Jadekitty knows that. She just doesn’t care about ladylike. Why should she?:*

The Script caught up and Mitch smirked. “So, they finally revoked your Man Card, huh? Figures you had to lose your dick to grow a spine, Johnny McGee.”

“*Joanne*, thank you. Like I said, you can’t intimidate me now. Rent *now*, or you’re out.”

“Just how much back rent are we talking about?” Jadekitty asked.

The sound of her voice brought Joanna up short. She turned her head and stared at her former employee and potential bedmate. “Six thousand *mu*,” she sputtered out. “Plus I want the next two months in advance. Eight thousand *mu*.”

Jadekitty gestured flippantly. “Is *that* all? I made that much last month in tips alone.” She took a tablet out of her purse and quickly paged through the right screens. “Here’s ten thousand. Take it or leave it, Joanna.”

:I happen to know I didn’t make nearly that much in tips,: Jade sent. :Where’s the money coming from?:

:Oh, here and there. Plot requirement. Don’t worry,: Tallyhawk said. “Well, Miss McGee?”

“It’ll do,” the new woman huffed. Then she smiled. It wasn’t a friendly smile in the least. It was a triumphant smile. A promising smile. “You know, turning in my Man Card was the best decision I’ve ever made. And it’s not like they can make me take one again for three years. Take a look at what you’ve unleashed, Jade Cattano. I’m a *free woman* now. Tata!” Joanna swept out of the office and shut the door behind her.

“That dame is pure trouble,” Mitch said aloud, tugging on the lapels of his duster.

“And what am I? Chopped liver?” the *other* dame said, hand on hip.

“Nah, you’re trouble, too. But maybe the good kind. I owe you a lot today, Miss Cattano. You’re hired.”

:Wrap it up, Players,: DesiLu ordered. :How are you holding up, Jade?:

:Not a twinge since that ‘snap’ I felt downstairs.:

:I think you’ve got Mitch down pat, too. I’m impressed,: Tallyhawk added. :Let’s wrap this Scene and have a chat downstairs.:

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HELLIR ENCLAVE - VIDEO ROOM - DAY

Down in the Enclave, an emotionally exhausted Jade lay sprawled out on the shag carpet of the Video Room. Word had spread about the Scene between Mitch, Joanna, and Jadekitty and everyone was waiting for DesiLu and Ubu to put it together. The black dog Intie had said it *begged* some jazzy music to go along with it, so he was busy composing. Even with Intie fast-time it would take a while.

Tallyhawk was very effusive with her praise. “Seriously, Jade. If you want to play Mitch again you’re welcome to him.”

“That was mostly the Script,” Jade protested. “I was too busy burning out my conditioning to do much else than follow it.”

“Think you got it all?”

“Doubt it.” Jade shrugged. “It’s a start.”

“So you should keep playing him until you do. Frankly, turnabout is fair play anyway.”

“You make a good Jadekitty yourself, though it was weird to see myself like that.”

“Heh. I know exactly how you feel, Jade.”

Clayton swaggered into the room. He used his lifters to throw himself on the

opposite couch. “Ubu’s almost ready with the Scene you guys did. I can’t wait to see it! After the big scene earlier, I’m surprised you still had any energy to keep going. I’m done for the day.”

Jade propped herself up on her elbows. “I sure am *now*, for several days at least.”

“Food, everyone!” Ambrosia announced in a singsong voice, carrying in a train of trays in a lifter field. “Popcorn, fudge, souffles, cookies!”

“Did I hear someone say fudge?” The voice came from the corridor. A short apparition in white stood there, blinking.

“Desi! You’re out of the Green Room!” Clayton said.

“I went to the bathroom. A girl has to take care of business, you know? I’d just finished editing the last Scene...when I came back, Ubu and Mark Seven locked me out!”

Ambrosia motioned for her to take a seat. “Join the rest of us and enjoy the fruits of our labor, my dear. Please. Then you can sleep.”

Everyone found a place to settle in front of the giant screen. All over the Enclave Integrates were stopping whatever they were doing to watch the Show. It started with a simple title card in black and white and a jazzy riff on a saxophone. The narration was Mitch’s and the opening monologue from before.

“Weather in the South Cavern never changes. After the unremitting heat of the Dry, the chilly air of Cape Nord was like a fresh draught of cold beer. I needed that beer. No, I needed more than beer. Something much stronger.”

Camera angles shifted as Mitch moseyed up to his wall safe. It was still in black-and-white, like a genuine Noir film from the 1940s. Nobody in the room said a word. DesiLu’s camera work was masterful as it shifted between the door as the silhouette appeared, then Mitch, then back to the door with Jadekitty’s dialogue.

Joanne’s outburst and Jadekitty’s paying the back rent was the dramatic moment of the Scene. Then came Jadekitty’s departure.

“Well, I have a party to go to, Mr. Goldman,” she said. “So I’ll be seeing you very soon. This office is a dump.”

“I consider it homey,” Mitch said, mildly offended. “Lived-in, even.”

Jadekitty turned and walked towards the door. She opened it, then looked over her shoulder. “By the way, my friends call me JadeCat, Mr. Goldman. You may use the name, too.”

“Just call me Mitch, then.”

“Okay, Mitch. See you later.” She walked out and shut the door behind her.

The Detective had nearly crushed his own hat in his hands. The closing narration began. “In the end, I’m not sure who hired who. But this catty dame saved my bacon, and a Nordsmen always pays his debts.”

The scene faded out, the credits rolled, the room remained silent. Jade, Tallyhawk, DesiLu, and Aeolia got very, very tense.

“That, my friends, is the touch of a good Director,” Ambrosia said, breathless.

“But Tally, Jade, the sheer *chemistry* between you two in that scene! Bravo, brava!”

“Well, I’m not really sure about the ‘JadeCat’ moniker, but it felt more appropriate for a noir setting than ‘Jadekitty’ does.” Tallyhawk wiggled her hand. “What do you think about it, Jade?”

“No objections then, none now,” Jade said. “If it’s ready to put out on IntieNet, go ahead. You have my permission.”

“Mine, too,” Aeolia said. “I don’t mind playing the villain. Joanna is so *delicious* to play in this polity.”

“*Antagonist*, Aeol,” Hanley said insistently. “Not the same as a villain.”

“Cut, print, that’s a wrap!” Tallyhawk said. “Publish it, Desi.”

“Okay,” DesiLu rubbed her hands together. “It’s been published! Now, we wait.”

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INT. BLIND BOAR TAVERN - NIGHT

“I’ll have another White Russian. In fact, make it a double. And use the good stuff this time, Brenda.” Private Investigator Mitch Goldman ogled the young woman behind the bar as she mixed the cocktail. He downed half of it in one gulp. “Ah, Infinium Blue. The best.”

“You gonna pay your tab anytime soon, Mitch?” Brenda asked. The foxy young woman angled herself to display some very fine assets. She was DevCorby’s regular role these days. “It’s due at midnight.”

“I’ve--*we’ve* had had a good run lately, so, here you go. A Nordsman always pays his debts.” Mitch looked into JadeCat’s eyes, and the two kissed long, deep, and passionately.

:And we’re officially off-camera!: DesiLu announced. :I’ll be there soon myself. The mundanes are gone and bar is ours for the rest of the night.:

The Players relaxed, but didn’t drop their glammers. It was just a precaution when out of the Enclave. Tonight was special. It wasn’t just New Year’s Eve, it was a celebration of months of success. Ratings were off the charts, and other Enclaves had even put their own Shows together. But mostly they were just by-rote reenactments of scenes from the creative works they obsessed over. None could quite match “Hellirwood” for originality.

Tonight was a special night. After months of beating back the Amazon conditioning, Jade could finally make an announcement.

“It took some digging in starliner records, but I found it in the starliner passenger manifests. My given name is Pietro Romanov. And I can say it aloud without getting a monster headache.” Jade downed the last of the White Russian. “And this tastes just like home.”

“With a name like that, you should be one of the X-Men or an Avenger,” Clayton

said, still in Carla guise. “And it’s a good, *stronk* Sturmhaven name for a guy.”

“I suppose it is.” Jade shrugged. “As for my *chosen* name, well, I think Clayton can answer that, can’t you?” Jade gave “Carla” one of Mitch’s trademark glares that made a number of crooks spontaneously confess to the crime.

“Um...” Clayton cringed. “Jade was...the RIDE that...I...you know.”

“And it’s the only thing *left* of her.”

Ambrosia growled. “Cut the Drama! We’re supposed to be having *fun* tonight!”

With her arm possessively around Jade’s masculine waist, Tallyhawk used her free hand to raise another toast. “Don’t worry, Ambri. Nothing can get me down. *Salud!*”

“Salud!” the partygoers echoed.

“Still homesick, Jade?” Tallyhawk asked.

“I think I always will be, Tally. That reminds me, I owe you a tour of Novy Kyiv in Nature Range.”

“And I owe you an apology,” Clayton said. He shut down the Carla glamor, leaving himself in her slinky, sparkly minidress for the cast party. He prostrated himself before Jade, DevCorby, Hanley, and Aeolia. “I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry! Oh, GOD, am I sorry! I hate what I do! But what I do...it’s *necessary*.”

“I’m not convinced of that,” Ambrosia said in Big Jim’s bass. “There used to be a lighter hand in this. The Candlejacks rarely needed to do forced Integrations. But...not anymore.”

“Even if it is necessary it’s *not* very nice,” Hanley-as-Jeanine said.

“Sadly, I’m very good at what I do. And what I do isn’t very nice. But, you know. New year and all that. I’m glad you finally found yourself again, Jade. That’s been nagging on my conscience for months.”

“This secrecy situation won’t last forever, Clay. Not by a long shot. I’m a patient woman. One day, I’ll go home. I’ll have a lot to explain to friends and family, but you’d be surprised at the tall tales we hear about Zharus on the other side of human space. They might even believe me.”

“Do you mind if I tag along?” Tallyhawk asked. “I wouldn’t mind seeing those crystal mountains of yours from the air.”

Jade smiled and let Mitch speak. “Of course. What would I do without you, dollface?”

FADE OUT

NEXT EPISODE: ANGLE ON

ANGLE ON

By Jon Buck and Robotech_Master

June 25, 156 AL

EXT. GONDWANA COASTAL RING SKIMMERWAY - APPROACHING STURMHAVEN -
DAY

Outside the window the Gondwanan landscape sped by at several hundred kilometers per hour. Since her arrival on Zharus, Kisa Romanov was continually in a state of shock of just how large the planet was compared to her icy home colony. A meter and a half to her left, the man who had picked her up on the Coastal Ring Skimmerway smiled at her in a friendly way. “Neorussian, aren’t you? I’ve seen that kind of travel kit before. You folks are really serious about your travel. What do you call it? The Grand Tour?”

“Pretty much,” Kisa said, not feeling all that chatty. She stared out the window again, then focused on the reflection of her own image in it against the backdrop of blurring scenery. A girl some had called “pretty,” with short brown hair in a pageboy cut, a small turned-up nose, and intense brown eyes used to questioning everything. Hardly the sort of person you’d expect to find the entire length of the civilized galaxy away from her homeworld. Yet...here she was.

The Grand Tour was something all Neorussians of a certain age aspired to do. Finish college, then spend three to five years seeing the rest of the Colonies and Earth. Zharus was the farthest point, 37 light-years from Neorus. But weird things happened to tourists here—they vanished without a trace at a rate an order of magnitude higher than any other colony.

Tourists like Kisa’s brother, Pietro.

“So, what do you think of Zharus so far?” the driver said.

“It’s big. I don’t think I realized how big until I was a few hundred clicks east from Aloha.” Kisa sighed. Her third-hand low-end “TravelFriend Value” Luggage simply wasn’t made to endure everything she’d pushed it to do and the cheap cavorite had given out. “Thank you for saving my stupid tourist ass, Mr. Ironstag.”

“Call me Flint, please, Miss Romanov. I admit, though, that you seem greener than the usual Grand Tourer. But that’s neither here nor there. Where’re you headed?”

“Sturmhaven. I have some business there.”

Flint Ironstag was a brawny, brown-haired fellow, with the ears of a deer and antler nubs to match. What Zharusians called “tags”. Those ears perked, as he shot Kisa a glance from steel-grey eyes. “What kind of business could you have with *that* awful place, if I may ask?”

Kisa decided there was no harm in telling. Years after receiving the announcement from the Zharus Embassy back home, it still burned. “It was there some ‘Amazon’ bitches turned my brother into my *sister* against his will. The last place he was seen before he vanished.”

“Oh, *Lord*. I’m sorry to hear that,” Flint said. “I was going to tell you to steer clear, but I can see you have a good reason. Since you’re already female you don’t have anything to really worry about. I’m willing to take you as far as the border, but you couldn’t pay me enough to step inside. Yeesh.”

“I appreciate you doing that much, Flint. Thank you. I’d pay you for the ride, but I’m a little short of cash right now.” All Kisa had, after upgrading the batteries on her Luggage with sarium versions, was 55 monetary units. She’d planned on subsisting entirely on the food, clothes, and other items the onboard fabber could make, and

camping on the roadside using its pop-tent mode. It also had a basic skimmer mode, though without an aeroshell it maxed out at 120 kph—*horribly* slow by Zharusian standards. The best Luggage even had basic AI, but not hers.

“Pay *me*? Please, I’m a Gentleman. Hell, I was going to offer you a couple hundred *mu*. You look like you need it.”

Under the circumstances Kisa could hardly say no. She put her pride aside. “Thank you, Flint. I...really need it to fix my Luggage.”

“A Gentleman always helps a Lady in need. There’s a bunk and galley in back if you need shuteye or some eats. I have to make a few stops before we get to the Sturmhaven border.”

“Well, I’m not in any hurry. Thanks again.” Kisa swiveled the passenger chair and went into the skimmer-rig’s living area.

The Zharusians did things very strangely. Flint operated a fabber supply delivery service, driving a sleek rig that was about forty meters long. There were many places on the planet where there were small settlements, or even isolated homes, where no pipelines were possible; so they needed their fabber matter shipped in. On Earth or the other colonies it would be an automated process. Here, they seemed to prefer a human touch with everything.

Back home we don’t have that luxury. We’re just trying to make the planet livable. Everybody was needed for that titanic job, so everything else was as automated as possible. Ideally, once the situation regarding her brother-now-sister was resolved, she’d return to Neorus and work as a Terraforming Technician. Of course, there was the not-insignificant chance she’d just vanish like Pietro had. It didn’t bear thinking about.

Kisa settled into one of the bunks. The living area was the size of a decent RV. After a few weeks of camping, the bed felt good and the net connection solid. It was time to do more digging on Sturmhaven and the Amazons.

The first thing Kisa reviewed was the announcement the Amazons had sent the local Neorus Consulate of Pietro’s “prize” for winning the Amazonian Games. Apparently the men of Sturmhaven could compete for “honor” of “shedding boorish manhood” to take their rightful place amongst them. Seven years later the video still filled her with rage. Pietro—renamed “Fiera”—posed in front of the camera in a *ridiculous* blue-and-red costume with a golden eagle on the chest. She had stood behind the woman who had made the proclamation with an expression that could have killed.

The video had one important piece of information. The only clue Kisa really had to go on. The announcer’s name was Promethea Sorovna. It took a while for her netferrets to find information about her current status. For the first time Kisa had something to smile about. For doing what they had done to Pietro and numerous other men, Promethea had been sentenced to a *lengthy* prison term. *Maybe I can get an interview with her...*

“Miss Romanov? I’m about to make a delivery, if you’d like to watch,” Flint said from the driver’s seat.

Kisa looked up from her reverie. “Huh? Oh, of course. I’ll be right up.” Flint was being so kind to her, she felt she owed him some polite expressions of interest. Besides, she really didn’t know how anything worked here, so who knew what might prove useful in the end?

As Kisa slid back into the passenger’s seat, the rig pulled in at a small service station alongside the coastal highway. Well, if “alongside the coastal highway” meant

“floating in mid-air next to a mid-air marker beacon that was itself floating over a wide, unspoiled wilderness area. Other such beacons floated a couple kilometers in either direction.

For all that the architecture was unusual and it was a bit of an odd location—service stations tended to be properly on the ground, back home—it was immediately recognizable for what it was—a station where weary travelers could get out and stretch their legs, obtain some inexpensive food, and recharge their vehicles. Such things were more or less unchanged the galaxy over, even if here they tended to have a decided twentieth-century-Earth flair to their décor.

Flint’s huge transport skimmer settled onto a utility pad connected to the station’s loading docks, away from the public landing areas. The wide cargo door adjoining the pad was already open, with a coverall-clad young man with goat ears and horn stubs leaning against the frame.

Flint nodded toward him. “That’s Reuben. Assistant shift supervisor. Runs the maintenance bays and keeps the fabbers in working order. They run through their monthly fabber supply regular as clockwork, so this is the time of month they get a refill.”

“Reuben? Like the sandwich?”

Flint nodded. “Sure, one of his distant ancestors invented it,” he proclaimed with the too-straight face that Kisa was pretty sure by now meant he was telling a whopper.

Kisa warmed up one of the odd 20th-century colloquialisms she’d been bombarded with ever since arriving here. “You wouldn’t be trying to ‘get my goat,’ would you? The only one I see around here is over there.”

Flint laughed. “Ouch. Touché. Anyway, this’ll only take a second.” He tapped something on his dashboard, and the panel in front of Kisa lit up with a menu display—food and beverages in the main section, with links to clothing, accessory, souvenir, tool, weapon, and machine part menus at one side. “Hungry? Thirsty? For that matter, anything else you need, within reason, it’s on me. I get a good discount. They’ll fab it and run it out here while I’m getting him set up. Just don’t dial up a sports car or something, my bank account only stretches so far.”

Kisa stared at him, trying to judge the straightness of his expression. “Dial up a *sports car*? Seriously? They can do that here?”

“They don’t do as much at fabberies on Neorus, do they? Suppose they’re still too busy terraforming and most resources go toward that.” Flint chuckled. “Out here, we’ve already made our peace with the planet staying more or less the way it is, so we’ve got more to spare. Yes, you can get most anything at the fabberies here, even up to a small passenger van.”

Kisa blinked. “How does that even work? I know I’ve seen actual skimmer dealerships, too. They were the first thing I saw when I stepped off the shuttle, in fact.”

“Oh, nothing you get here will exactly be top-shelf quality, especially something as big as a skimmer, but it’ll last you a while. A lot of people treat their fabbed buggies as disposable—drive them until they wear out, then recycle them at the next fabber for a discount on the replacement. It’s a cheap way to get by if you just care about getting from Point A to Point B, not so much about style or permanence.”

“I see.” Kisa cocked her head. Even with the funds she’d arrived with it wouldn’t have been an option. “It’s a different sort of culture than back home. Everything on Neorus is built to last. Even the Luggage we take with us when we leave—or perhaps

especially that.”

“Oh, sure. On worlds like that, you make do. Here—well, there are fabberies, but there are also dealerships for people who want something a little more durable.” He chuckled. “Though five will get you ten, that ‘dealership’ you saw on landing was actually just another fabbery. They’re big on slapping tourists with cheap wheels or floaters, because they won’t be here long enough for them to wear out. And when I say ‘cheap,’ I’m only talking about how they’re built.” He waved a hand toward the buildings. “At least anything you get here won’t be *that* overpriced. *Some* overpriced, maybe—it’s the only station on the highway for clicks, after all—but a tourist trap, this ain’t.”

“Well, we *actually* get a few offworld tourists back home. Other than the Crystal Ranges there really isn’t much to see yet. Anyway, I just need some replacement cavorite rotors for the Luggage. I can install them myself.”

“Mm. Well, this is a decent spot to get them. Service stations like this with industrial fabbers specialize in that kind of vehicle part, and there’s not a lot of room to pad something that simple. Second panel from bottom on the right; there’s a space to input the specs you need. Have them loaded aboard, and we can handle that before we get you to Sturmhaven.” He powered down the lifters and the transport settled onto the pad.

Kisa nodded. “Thank you. I will.”

“Sure. And don’t forget some food and drink, too. This place is near enough the coast that the kraken actually isn’t fabbed. Don’t worry about me, I’ll punch my own order in when I have a spare moment.” He slid the driver-side door open and stepped down to go speak to Reuben.

Kisa nodded as he left, then settled down to consider the panel more seriously. She wasn’t going to try to take advantage of Flint too badly, but she was curious about what sorts of things could be obtained here. Could you honestly just...buy a gun here? She tapped curiously at the screen and discovered she in fact *could*. For someone from the staid, *safe* world of Neorus, this was a bit of a shock. *Anyone could be packing a weapon here and I’d never know it. Flint could be packing a weapon.* She sternly controlled herself against the urge to look under or behind his seat for signs of a concealed holster.

She took a stern grip on herself. *This is a frontier world, Kisa. It’s not safe. So of course they would sell things so people could keep themselves safe.* There actually *were* some controls, she was pleased to note on clicking through the fine print. Her embassy would be informed if she purchased any weapons while she was here, and she would be required to certify she was leaving them behind if she returned to her home. *If I buy one legitimately, at least.* She had little doubt there were other ways. She shook her head sadly. *Ah, Pietro—Fiera—what kind of a world have you gotten yourself involved with?*

Kisa hauled herself back on track. She did still need to order those cavorite rotors, after all. Fortunately, they were easy to fab. Neorussian Luggage had been designed to use parts that could be easily obtained anywhere. Even if she ended up on some poor benighted world without public fabbers, there were only a few of the most very exotic parts that could not be made or jury-rigged in a qualified machine shop.

With that job finished, Kisa turned her attention to the food menu. About half the items were staples common to the human experience, like grilled cheese sandwiches or hamburgers, and a few were ethnic specialties she recognized from Neorus or other

colonies. But there were a few—including that “kraken” Flint had mentioned—that were unique to Zharus. As Flint had said, they were marked with the indicator for non-fabbed, which meant it could take a little extra time to prepare. She considered, then punched for a small order of the stuff. Non-fabbed food *was* generally accorded better—plus when it arrived, Flint would see she’d taken his suggestion, which he could take as a compliment. She certainly owed him that much after he paid for her meal and the new rotors.

Plus, of course, she was curious about the stuff, which was enough of a reason by itself—but Neorussians tended to like to do things for more than one reason. It was more efficient that way.

Kisa spent the rest of the time before Flint returned exploring the different fabber submenus. Most of the machine part selections didn’t mean a whole lot to her, though she noticed a disproportionate amount were devoted to RIDE replacement parts. *Ah yes, the mysterious technology that they’ll let anybody use but nobody can export.* Well, no surprise there that it got the lion’s share of the part selection. (Especially since, as she understood matters, some of them might actually *be* lions. Kisa chortled at her little joke.)

There were a remarkable number of unimportant little gewgaws on offer in the accessories section. They even had tampons in multiple different formulations—for tourists not comfortable enough with nanotechnology to use that sort of solution while they were here, Kisa assumed. Most items were available in several different recipes—different “brands,” apparently. There would never have been this much space devoted to that many similar products in a Neorus fabber.

Now that I think about it, I wonder why? Kisa mused. *It’s not as if the extra space on an option page costs that much, or the additional storage for alternative recipes. It doesn’t cost extra to offer something, or even cost more in material if you make it slightly differently. Something in the Neorus mindset, I guess. We don’t want to be “confused” by having too many options.*

Might that be one reason so many Neorus expatriates never went back? Discovering they enjoyed having more choices? Was that why *Fiera* had broken off contact? She enjoyed being who she was now and didn’t want to have to explain it? Or was there some other reason? Kisa turned the thought over and decided to give it more consideration later, when her traveling companion wasn’t expected back at any time.

Kisa glanced out the window to see Flint accompanying a large modular tank on a lifter-powered hand truck as it entered the wide-open door in the building. As it moved on, Flint turned to Reuben and they appeared to be having a friendly conversation. Then they shook hands, Flint nodded to the goat-man, and then he turned and headed back for the transport.

A moment later, Flint opened the door and swung himself back up into his seat. “Hey. Get your business taken care of?”

Kisa nodded. “They say my stuff should be here in a few minutes.”

“Good. They’ll let us hang around that long.” Flint tapped his own display, then nodded. “My stuff’s on the way, too.” He leaned back. “So, thought about where you’re going next?”

“As I mentioned, I need to stop in Sturmhaven. You don’t need to come along, and I appreciate you bringing me this far.”

Flint shrugged. “It’s not a problem at all. Anyway, the odds are pretty good

Sturmhaven won't be your last stop. My delivery route circles the continent, and I'm cheaper than airfare, if a little slower. So why don't I wait for you outside, and you can let me know if you'll need a lift further on?"

"Oh, you don't have to do that—"

"No, I'd like to." Flint grinned. "Being alone is nice, but sometimes I do like to have company for a while, and you seem like a safer option than picking up another random hitchhiker."

Kisa smiled. She'd just been one of those random hitchhikers. "Well, if you're sure..." She glanced around. "Is your truck actually your home, too? I get that feeling."

He laughed, a little awkwardly, and scratched behind one ear. "Ayup! I don't have a set address. Never one to settle down, me. If this was the twentieth century for real, I would've been a trucker on those Interstates they had. Won't hear any of that ridiculous CB lingo from me, though."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about, but I'll take your word for it." Kisa smiled. "Not sure what's going to happen after Sturmhaven. My brother left there and then poof. He could be anywhere, if he's still alive."

"Well, on Zharus you never know. The way things change here. People, too. You already said those bitches changed him into a woman. Would've had to stay one for three years."

Something had been nagging at Kisa since meeting Flint, now it finally connected "Where is your RIDE, Flint? I'd like to meet him."

"Ah...heh." More awkward scratching behind one of his big deer ears. "Well, I don't really 'have' one presently. It...doesn't always work out in the long term, you know. Just like relations between any two people, you get right down to it. Kept the tags, though. Kept more than that, really. But that isn't here nor there."

"I see." She didn't, exactly, but people could be sensitive about things, and it sounded like he was sensitive about this one. She looked for a way to change the subject. "Is it true what they say about RIDEs? They can actually simulate thinking?"

"*Simulate* thinking? Oh, wow. No more 'simulated' than the average person. I know that's hard for a lot of offworlders to really understand. But, what can you do? Anyway, I've got two more stops before we get to the Sturmhaven border. Like I said before, I'm not going to follow you inside. They don't like my type there at all."

"I've figured that out." *After what they did to my brother.* "It shouldn't take me long, I hope. Now that I can fix my Luggage."

"There's a bus line to the city proper just inside the border station. Won't cost you much. I hear they like Neorus women. Comm me when you're done and I'll meet you at the nearest border crossing."

Kisa nodded. "After we lift, I'll go and get my Luggage ready. Should be done by the time we get there."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll be happy to help, if you like. Oh, there's our food." A small lifter drone was approaching, carrying a pair of sealed containers underneath. Flint reached through the window to take them, glanced at the labels, and passed one over to Kisa. "I see you got the kraken, too. Hope you like it."

"I'm looking forward to trying it, at least." Kisa opened the box. "It smells interesting."

"Wait'll you taste it." Flint grinned. "This is one time I'm glad I'm not actually a herbivore."

The kraken was interesting. The taste was not unpleasant, and the texture was unlike anything she'd ever had on Neorus. It did take a little getting used to, the idea that she was eating the flesh of a formerly-living creature, but then eating real meat wasn't exactly unheard of on Neorus—it just tended to be rare and expensive. Not a common treat, given that fabbed or vat-grown food was a lot cheaper.

Midway through the meal, another drone had arrived with Kisa's Luggage's favorite rotor, which she'd tucked under the seat until she finished her lunch. It didn't take too much longer for them to get done eating, then Kisa took her purchase back to the workshop where her Luggage was parked while Flint got the transport in the air again.

Changing out the old favorite rotor was a simple procedure, but then most everything about the Luggage was. It was built not to require much in the way of tools, because you never knew what you were going to have handy. Effectively, it boiled down to undogging a panel, popping the old part out, and seating the new one. The entire operation took only a few minutes, and she dropped the cracked original part in a bin fastened to the wall marked with a "recycling" logo.

She had been mildly surprised to notice that the original part was several shades darker than the fabbed replacement. Generally, the lighter the shade of favorite, the purer it was. The really pure stuff required high-end fabbers, which tended to be reserved to government or big industrial outfits back home.

But reading between the lines of the colonial news and tourist brochures she'd seen since coming here, she was starting to get the idea that fabber tech back home was a few years behind places like Zharus. Which wasn't really surprising, given that there were other places that were a few years behind Neorus—they'd *never* catch up on data storage. And the Luggage was designed to work pretty much anywhere.

As Kisa finished closing the Luggage back down, Flint stepped back in while the rig flew itself on autopilot. He leaned against the wall and regarded the gizmo thoughtfully. "I've seen gear like that with most Neorussians. Nice idea, well-executed." In compact mode it was about the size of a large trunk. The exterior surface was crisscrossed by seams and separation lines for mode changes and access to storage. "It's kind of a RIDE...ish thing."

"Never really thought of it like that." Kisa shrugged. "It was originally intended to be a sort of...universal traveler's trunk. Then when favorite lifters got cheap, later models incorporated them so they could be bigger and carry more, yet still be moved around easily—like those whimsical little suitcases with the wheels on that some people seem to like to use here. Then other designers realized that with favorite's power-efficiency, there was no reason to stop there, and they became their own sort of mini-vehicle." She chuckled. "Never say that Neorussians cannot have their own excesses. Some of our so-called 'Luggage' is as big as your transport, and unfolds into a multi-room hab. But you have to be ridiculously wealthy to afford one of those. Mine's about as basic as you can get."

Flint nodded. "I wouldn't try to cross the Dry with it, but for city use it ought to be just what you need."

"And it folds up small enough to pack on the bus, too." She smiled wryly. "It had *better* be just what I need. It's effectively all I have."

Flint pursed his lips. "We might be able to do something about that later. But for

now, let's get you to Sturmhaven and see what you can find.”

The “Haven of Storms” was busily living up to its name. Even after Aloha, Kisa hadn't acclimated to the the hot, humid climate. During high summer, equatorial Novy Kyiv was lucky to average ten degrees Celsius, even with the reflected sunlight from the Central Crystal Range. Sturmhaven greeted her with the echoes of thunder and pea-sized hail.

At the border station the guards (all female) spoke in an odd Russian dialect sprinkled with German. They ranged from the solidly-built “Mother Russia” stereotype to a busty heavily Germanic blond who looked as though she belonged on a bottle of that “St. Pauli Girl” beer they had sold at the spaceport duty-free shop. As for the men, well...

It was easy to see why Flint refused to step over the border. But it was even harder to see why Pietro *would* have. There were numerous warnings about the place in Neorussian travel guides. On top of all the unpleasantness, Kisa's destination was the Nova Siberia Prison—located under a climate dome that turned the hot savannah into tundra fit for a Soviet gulag. For Kisa the weather would practically be balmy, but enjoyment was the farthest thing from her mind.

In scooter mode the Luggage was fast enough from the nearest point the bus dropped her off. They were expecting her. When she trundled up to the security booth (really, that was the most appropriate word for how the Luggage moved—it “trundled”), the guards waved her through without even a pause. The guide she'd been sent directed her to Visitor Admissions, where there was secure parking for the Luggage and a woman in a subdued uniform with a media tablet waiting.

“Your interview request has been approved,” the woman said in careful Russian. She actually sounded sincere. “We...regret what happened to your sister, Miss Romanov.”

Kisa almost corrected her, but after what she'd seen in just the space of a few hours she knew it would be counterproductive. *Besides*, she thought gloomily, *whatever he was before, she's certainly my “sister” now*. “Thank you, ma'am.”

“If nothing else, I hope you find closure. You'll find Promethea in Booth Six.”

“Thank you.” Kisa walked the way the woman indicated, and paused outside the door marked with the big number 6. She took a deep breath to steady her nerves, then hit the button to open it and stepped inside.

On the opposite side of the hardlight security field, Promethea sat in the uncomfortable-looking chair as if it were a throne. She didn't look disconsolate or even unhappy, like to Kisa's mind a prisoner ought to. She looked...*pleased*, like a queen granting an audience. Kisa's pleasure at the external appearance of the prison started to evaporate. *She's even got makeup on. What kind of prison is this?*

“Greetings, Kisa Romanova. I am glad you came. Did you have a pleasant journey from Neorus?”

“Tolerable.” Kisa had spent the trip in cryo—and had gone straight from Neorus to Zharus rather than stop anywhere in between, which was why she seemed so green to Flint. She was green. Really, this wasn't so much a Grand Tour as a Where-the-Hell-is-my-Brother Tour. “Let us dispense with the pleasantries. I am trying to find my...sister's whereabouts after she left Sturmhaven. I have reason to believe that you may know something.”

“Ah, Fiera,” Prometha said. “The moment I saw her birth-form I knew there was a woman within that must be brought out. It was a waste—”

“*Spare me* your idiotic misandry,” Kisa growled. “I *grew up* with him, and there was *never* anything womanly about him, until you somehow tricked him into entering that stupid contest.”

Prometha smirked. “It’s always the closest ones who see the least clearly, isn’t it? Not that it should be so surprising. With *that* figure, you’re practically male yourself. You should take advantage of the free biosculpt while we’re here. *Real* women have curves.”

Kisa forced open clenched teeth and forced herself to speak pleasantly. “That depends on what you think of as ‘real.’ *Where did she go?*”

The Sturmhaven woman’s smirk broadened. “You can’t *force* me to tell you, you know. I *should* require you to get a ‘sculpt before I say anything.’”

As Kisa stared, jaw dropping but no words coming out, Promethea sighed theatrically and continued. “But they’d never let you in to see me a *second* time, and what I have is so little it would hardly be worth the bother, so I suppose I’ll have to content myself with the knowledge that you’ll get what’s coming to you sooner or later.”

Kisa clenched her teeth again and spoke through them. “So what. Is. It.”

“Just as soon as the sculpting was over, she caught the first suborbital out of town. To Cascadia, as it turns out.”

“*Thank you.*” Kisa got up and turned to go.

“You might as well not bother!” Promethea called after her. “Some of my sisters went to try to bring her back, but after she hit Cascadia, she simply vanished. You won’t find her! You might as well stay here and—”

Kisa slapped the door button as she passed, and it shut behind her, cutting Promethea off altogether. *I can’t stand it here. I’m getting out before I punch somebody in the freaking face.* She used her implant to call Flint.

“Hey, done already?” he asked.

“Yeah. Flint, I’ll be at the eastern border station in maybe six hours, if I’m reading this bus schedule right. Can you meet me there?”

“Of course I can. I think you’ve seen why I won’t set hoof inside that damned place. They’d un-Man me in an instant. Did you at least get some useful info from that bitch?”

“My brother was last seen in Cascadia.” Kisa called up a map of the supercontinent. Cascadia was almost exactly on the opposite side from where she was—well over ten thousand kilometers if she didn’t hop on a suborbital over the Dry Ocean. She weighed her options. “Mind if I catch a ride with you?”

“Well, I won’t be up that way for two or three weeks. Still, we’ve gotten along so far. And I’m a Certified Gentleman, no need to worry for your virtue. I’m not that kind of buck—man. That kind of *man*. Can’t promise I won’t pick up other hitchhikers, though. It’s what I do. See you in a few hours, eh?”

Kisa jogged up towards the Prison Security Office to retrieve her Luggage. “Yeah. See you.”

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EXT. APPROACHING CAPE NORD - DAY

“You can’t be serious. Really?” Kisa stared at Flint. “This is a joke, right? From the land of straw feminism to the realm of macho bullsh—uh, Manliness?”

Flint grinned at her. “What is it they say about turnabout and fair play? Seriously, though. You’re an offworld tourist, so different rules apply. The City Fathers aren’t stupid.”

“No threats to bodysculpt me without my permission?”

“Wouldn’t think of it. The Cape Nord of ten years ago, *maybe*. But not anymore. We have a much greater appreciation for the variable female form than we used to. I can still drop you at the Cascadia border if you want.”

Kisa shook her head. “I came this far, I might as well see it once.” She shrugged. “Besides, if it’s as Manly as it’s supposed to be, maybe they’ll have a private investigator I can hire to scout ahead for me. A...very *cheap* private investigator.”

“Very Manly profession,” Flint agreed. “Besides, as a Gentleman I will defend you from unwanted advances—unless you’d rather handle that yourself. If some manling is a little *too* uncouth, you can always deduct points from his Man Card. There’s an app for that you can download to your implant.”

“I think I’ll stay out of that game, whatever it is, if you don’t mind.” It just seemed like Zharus was like this. Some of the polities they had made stops in along the way had a very distinctive character. Nextus was Bureaucracy, Uplift was Academia, Aloha was Free Spirit. Most of the rest were just places to live. Flint would fill up the fabber matter tank in one of the big cities, then make his stops along the way. She’d met with people living in tiny towns and a hermitage or two. At least she felt like she was seeing the real Zharus, traveling like this.

“Hey, no pressure. No pressure. Just stick close to me, okay? It’s not like you’ll be unsafe in Cape Nord, but as long as I’m with you there’s less chance of, shall I say, unwanted attention.”

“I’ll bear that in mind. Thank you.”

Entry into Cape Nord was through one of a number of large cavern mouths scattered around a section of otherwise unremarkable tundra. They followed the trail of flashing beacons down into the gulf, then glowing arrows along the wall. A bright green stripe along the floor served to keep them vertically oriented as the passage went through several twists and turns.

Kisa gripped the seat rests nervously. “Is it safe to go this fast?”

“We’re actually on automatic guidance. I could even take my hands off the controls, but I won’t scare you like that.” Flint flashed her a quick grin. “Besides, I never completely trust the automatic guidance.”

“How reassuring.”

“Keep your eyes open—we’re almost through, and I want you to see this.” The cavern leveled out, and they passed through a glowing ring, then they were in within a huge open cavern with a city spread out beneath and all around them. “Welcome to Cape Nord!”

The cavern walls were obviously artificial, with equally massive skylights to let some natural light in. Some of the skyscrapers went right through to the surface, and likely well beyond it. She tried to sound less impressed than she was. It was an adaptation to the climate outside, a lot like Uplift’s own hardlight domes. “This looks like NeumonFormer work. One of the original TF-1 designs, if I remember. We use TF-5C units on Neorus. We have a couple dozen stationed around the planet.”

“Uh, yeah. Used to be some of the bigger metal deposits here in these caves. Mostly rare earths. Founders thought it made a good place for Men to settle.”

“I can see why. Very practical.” *Very Neorussian*. Kisa was certain the government back home knew about this place, but she could think of a half dozen reasons why it wouldn’t really be practical back home. “I’m going to start looking for a cheap PI.”

“Yeah, about that...” Flint glanced at her. “When you brought it up earlier, I started a search agent of my own. I know the place, and I know some people...anyway, I found one you might want to look at first. If they don’t pan out, you can still do your own search, but—”

“Please, show me!” Kisa smiled at him. “You have the local knowledge I don’t. I’d be stupid to turn down your help.”

“Here, I’ll send it to your display.” The screen in front of Kisa lit with a comm directory listing: G&C, Mitch Goldman (with “True Nordsman” in big neon letters) & Jade Cattano (“Feminine Matters”). The man looked like he’d been hewn from the Crystal Range itself, while the woman had tigress tags—even down to her legs and feet, which seemed extreme even for Zharus.

The rates for missing persons cases seemed surprisingly cheap, which made her a little suspicious. Kisa looked up their public records on missing persons cases and found their success rate was rather lackluster—though they did seem pretty good at the administrative side. But they *were* cheap. Thing is, they weren’t quite cheap enough. She had 215 *mu* to her name after paying for the replacement cavorite and bus fares out of the money Flint had given her. There was the little matter of needing food and shelter before she could use her return cryo ticket home. *I need more money...*

Her Luggage.

Many of the Grand Tourers who ended their voyages at Zharus ended up selling theirs to collectors, handily financing the return ticket and reducing its cost in cargo fees at the same time. Even a low-end model like hers could fetch a few thousand *mu* to the right person. That would be enough to employ the investigators for a week or so. If they didn’t find any further signs of Pietro there was no point in staying anyway...and it wasn’t as if she was going to need it for moving on to other worlds in her “tour.”

To return home in failure, to so much gloating, would be humiliating. Her parents thought she should let her brother go. Her parents didn’t provide a single ruble for her journey. Her parents thought she was throwing away years of her life at a futile effort. They hadn’t directly stopped her from going, they’d just refused to support her in doing so.

Kisa sighed. It wasn’t as if she was really attached to the vehicle, having only just bought it for the sake of the trip, but it *was* the one tangible piece of home she had with her.

Flint glanced over at her. “Hey, what’s wrong? Still too much? You know, I can kick in some money...”

Kisa shook her head. “I can’t let you do that. You hardly even know me, and I couldn’t owe you *that* much. But I can sell my Luggage. Tourists who’ve returned tell me they often get a good price for it here.”

Flint nodded thoughtfully. “That’s true. There are people who collect damned near anything on this rock. Everything from Earth cybernetics to unopened cans of beer. You’ll probably get a lot more for it than you paid for it back home. Still...you should

have something to let you get around without me. Or...*someone*.”

Kisa raised an eyebrow. “A RIDE, you are saying?”

“They’re pretty cheap here—just as your suitcase on lifters would be back home. And as dangerous as the place is, it’ll help you to have a survival suit who can think for themselves—especially if your search takes you somewhere away from civilization.”

Kisa regarded him neutrally. “I wouldn’t even know what to look for.”

“I would. And I think I could find someone you’d get along with. On one condition.”

Kisa hadn’t exactly been born yesterday. “That you pay for it?”

“That I pay for *her*, yes.” Flint grinned. “I promise nothing expensive. War or mining surplus, most likely. But she’ll be sturdy enough—and glad to be off the lot. And that way you can use whatever you get from your Luggage for finding your sib.

“Besides, it’s one of the most Zharusian things a tourist can do here. You’ve come all this way for to find your brother, but this is a unique experience you can’t get anywhere else in the galaxy.”

“And, if you can be believed, it is also a *person*.” Kisa frowned. “I am still skeptical of that, but if it is true...how can they just...sell *people* here?”

“Well, Kisa, believe me when I say that sad state of affairs is not long for this world.”

Kisa considered this. “Well...I will at least *meet* anyone you recommend to me. If we...get along...and I can’t believe I’m saying this about a vehicle...well, we’ll see.” She shook her head. “But that can come later. For now...I suppose I should see what I can get for the Luggage.”

“That can come later, too. For now, maybe you should meet with Goldman and see if you want to hire him? You won’t find anyone cheaper in this burg for missing persons, that’s for sure. So if not, you might as well maybe wait ‘til we hit somewhere like Aloha where there are fatcats who might give you more money for it.”

“That’s...on the opposite corner of the whole continent. It was where I landed and began hitchhiking, before you picked me up.”

“You *would* be waiting a while, yeah. Though with the kind of money those people have, you could probably arrange for one of them to send a sub to pick it up.”

“Then I might as well post a continent- or world-wide ad now and see if someone is that interested.”

Flint chuckled. “You *do* catch on fast, don’t you? All right. So you post that ad and set up an appointment with Goldman, and I’ll check with the local RIDE dealerships between deliveries. We’ll meet up for dinner at the end of the day?”

Kisa nodded. “That sounds reasonable. I’ll get started now.” She reached out to pull up the on-screen keyboard and accessed the global network’s want-ads section—they called it a “Craigslis,” whatever that meant. A photo upload from her comm, a quick description, and her contact information, and that was that.

Then it was time to reach out to Mr. Goldman. The comm brought up a woman with decidedly feline features—tiger-striped hair, ears, and orange eyes. “Goldman & Cattano! I’m Jade Cattano, may I...” She trailed off, stared, then shook her head. “Uh, may I help you?”

Kisa tilted her head. “Is everything all right?”

“Sorry...the comm just glitched is all.” Jade smiled at her. “What can I do for you, miss?”

“I’d like to meet with Mr. Goldman. I may have a missing persons case for him.”

“Actually, you’ll probably be seeing me first—I handle those meetings myself. But I’m a full partner, so it’s not as if you’ll be talking to a secretary. Missing persons case... so, guessing you’re a Neorussian from that accent, further guessing it will be one of your sibs, cousins, or friends who disappeared while on Tour, since you’re about the right age and they tend to do that here, am I getting warm?”

“Well. You *are* a detective, aren’t you?” Kisa smiled. “You are...I believe the expression they use here is ‘batting a thousand’? Whatever that means.”

“It’s a reference to the ancient sport of baseball, and the way they used to track how often a batter was able to hit the ball when they came up to bat. A score of one thousand would mean the batter literally never missed—but you didn’t call up for Trivial Pursuit answers.” Jade grinned. “I see you’re coming from some kind of cockpit or cab, and the caller ID says you’re on the in-polity comm network, so I’m going to guess you just hit town? No need to make you wait—we’re not busy, so just come on over.”

“Thank you. I will be there as soon as I can.”

Flint glanced over as she closed the connection. “I can drop you off right down the block in ten minutes.”

“That will be perfect.”

A few minutes later, the transport swept in to ground level on the street in a slightly down-market section of town. The buildings here were of a slightly older design than the others, though Zharus being Zharus, it was hard to tell whether that was natural or artistic. The building where the detective agency’s address put it was a multi-level brownstone tenement, with an establishment called “Hooters” on the ground level. Kisa raised an eyebrow. Through the large front windows the employees were rather busty women in white halter tops with the logo on the front and orange short-shorts. *Uh...huh. Yeah.*

Flint grinned a rather smarmy grin at her. “You know, I think I’ll check and see if there’s a truck park around here. It’s been awhile since lunch, and the Yelp says this place has great wings.”

“I’ll just *bet* it does.” But she’d been riding with him too long to take any real offense. “I’ll comm you when I’m done.”

Flint nodded. “See you then.” He waited for her to step down from the cab, then lifted slowly away again. Kisa took a deep breath, then headed for the small side door that led directly to the stairs to the upper levels.

At the top was a dimly-lit wood-paneled hallway. On the right a door with frosted glass had the name of the agency in bold gold letters: Goldman & Cattano. The hallway had a musty odor and the air felt stuffy. It wasn’t exactly a welcoming atmosphere as such, but it did impart an air of mystery. Kisa turned the brass doorknob and entered.

The woman, Jade Cattano, was behind a scarred wooden desk facing the door. She smiled at Kisa as she entered. “Miss Romanov, thank you for coming! Please, have a seat. Can we offer you anything to drink?”

Kisa’s mouth felt a little dry. “I’ll just have some water, thank you.”

“Sure.” Cattano stood up and padded over to a large glass water bottle. Her movements were liquid, taking after the tigress she resembled. Her tail tip flicked idly as she filled the glass, the upturned bottle making a loud gurgle.

The entire office was that way. Replicas of antiques—desk, file cabinets, chairs—all seemed to have a theme. Kisa tried to say something diplomatic. “More twentieth

century...stuff?”

“Takes some getting used to, but it grows on you,” Cattano said. She handed her prospective client the glass then took the seat behind the desk again. “Now, the initial interview is free. I won’t quote you a rate until I have a better idea what the job could entail. But I do want to caution you, Miss Romanov. Our rates for missing persons are cheap for a reason. To be perfectly frank with you, we’re not very good at it.”

“And I can’t afford anything *else* right now.” Kisa tried not to let too much desperation creep into her tone of voice. “I’m selling my Luggage to afford even this.”

Cattano bit her lower lip. “Ahh...I, uh. I see. I’ve met a few Tourers over the years. I know what the Luggage means.”

Kisa shrugged. “It means a suitcase on wheels, as far as I’m concerned. My brother—or sister, if you like—is important. The Luggage is just a thing.”

“I gather your...sister ran afoul of something. Accidental crossride, perhaps? Or something else?” Cattano looked to be choosing her words *very* carefully. “Something possibly involving Sturmhaven?”

“They sent us an announcement. I have it for you here.” Kisa sent her a file transfer request. A couple seconds passed before it was accepted.

Jade’s eyes flicked down to a screen below a glass surface on her desk, and she adjusted an earbud in one of her tiger ears. “I...see. Valkyries.”

“Pardon me?”

“That’s one of their...I suppose you would call them political parties. Extremists who feel they can do more or less whatever they like, as long as they do it to *men*. Especially men from *somewhere else*. It will get them in trouble someday.” Her voice was artificially calm.

Kisa cocked her head. “You sound...angry. Or like you’re trying *not* to be angry.”

Jade took a deep breath and let it out. “Their kind have done bad things to... friends of mine. And since they *still* hold significant power in Sturmhaven, it is hard to get any real justice for it.”

“I got that sense.” Kisa grimaced. “When I visited her in prison, she acted like it was an inconvenience to see me, because I was taking her away from her sewing circle or whatever it is they do in there.”

“Please, tell me what happened from the beginning. Let’s see what we have to work with.”

“All right. We received this a few months ago—well, a few years ago now, but I still find it hard to count the trip time...” Kisa went over the whole sordid story, with Jade making polite listening noises and occasionally interrupting with a clarifying question. By the time she finished, her water glass was empty, and Jade got up to fill it again.

As the tiger-woman returned to her seat, Kisa sipped the water and shot her a look of expectation. “Well?”

“Well.” Jade frowned, her ears twitching. Kisa watched them thoughtfully. She’d noticed that the animal ears on people who had them actually did tend to move in time with their emotions, like the real version on an animal. It was odd, but it was also a pretty obvious “tell” that a lot of people didn’t even realize they had. Kisa often wondered what it would be like to play poker with them. “Strange as it might seem to someone from Neorus, there isn’t a lot out of the ordinary there. We can certainly take this case, at the usual rates for missing persons. I’ll caution you not to get your hopes up

too high, though.”

“Yes, you said. You are not good at this.” Kisa shrugged. “At least you have more training and experience in it than I have. I’m just looking for some sort of closure. I know my family back home would like some, too. Even if they’ve just given up on Pietro.”

“It’s not even *that*, so much as it is the way missing persons cases tend to work around here. We have a considerably higher unsolved-disappearance count than Earth or every other colony. Sometimes I’m surprised any other planet still lets its people come here.”

“You’re kidding, right? Back home, Zharus is the place everyone wants to see. The risk just makes it all the better. I’m not sure how much money my Luggage will get, but it should be enough to get started. After...I dunno. I’ll think of something. Find a job, maybe.”

“We’ll do all we can. But I will warn you now, we may reach a point where we simply can proceed no further. If that happens, we will tell you so and end our services, rather than continue charging you for a service we cannot provide.”

“That seems fair. Thank you, Miss Cattano. I really appreciate this.”

“Please, call me Jade. This is Cape Nord, and we women stick together here.”

“Is it really that bad? With what I saw through the window of that place downstairs...it seems as though we are just here for men’s entertainment, as much as the opposite seems true in Sturmhaven.”

“I’d rather be a woman here than Sturmhaven. And I live here, so I’m being honest with you. We *let* the men think they’re the ones in charge, you see.”

A sudden feeling of emotional exhaustion brought out an urge to be contrary. “Really? Or do you just tell yourselves that? From the outside, it’s hard to tell.”

Jade coughed. “Well, if you need a place to stay, I recommend the Langston Motel on Chester Street. In-room fabbers, good for a longer stay. I know the owners personally. I’ve done work for them in the past.”

“I don’t know how long we’ll be in town—I’m riding along with a jobber on a delivery loop, as it seems like the most economical way to get from place to place. In fact, that was part of why I wanted to hire you—you can be working on it while I’m on the way. But thanks.”

“A great way to see Gondwana, too. Well, I’ll be in touch. Don’t worry about giving us the down payment immediately. I can give you some leeway to sell your Luggage. I’m sure you’ll get a good price for it.” Jade held out a beclawed hand to shake. The palm and fingertips were padded, like a cat’s.

Kisa was very curious about this woman. Her tags were some of the most extreme she’d seen so far on Zharus. Yet, there was no sign of a RIDE around, much like with Flint. *A falling out between friends, maybe? Another case of not getting along?* She took Jade’s hand and shook it, then turned to leave.

Jade kept her composure for a good minute after Kisa had left. Then she slowly facepalmed, lowered her face to the desk, and groaned. “Well, *that* went well...”

Kisa stopped outside the Hooters franchise. Despite what Jade had said she just couldn’t bring herself to step inside. Flint was sitting at the counter with a plate piled high with wing bones. Kisa waved enough to catch his eye, and he nodded and gestured to the waitress to get his check.

When he came out, he seemed uncharacteristically subdued. Kisa raised an eyebrow. “Is everything all right?”

“Oh, sure. Just one of those things where...you ever try to do something nice for someone, and have it backfire and blow up in your face?”

Kisa blinked. “This isn’t about what you were doing for me, was it?”

“Oh, no, nothing to do with you. Just...something. Someone else’s business.” He shrugged. “People are complicated, and life is full of weird coincidences. Nothing I coulda known about, just that I was trying to help some people but made life a little harder for them by accident. But they’ll get by.”

“If you’re sure it’s all right...”

“Nothing to worry about. C’mon, the truck park’s this way.” He waved a hand. “While I was eating, I commed around to the local RIDE dealerships. I may have a line on just the one, but we won’t know until we meet her.” He paused. “Assuming you want a ‘her,’ that is. You could always crossride—y’know, just for symmetry.”

Kisa rolled her eyes. “No. Just no.”

Flint grinned at her. “You sure you don’t want your parents to still be able to say they’ve got a daughter *and* a son?”

“I’m the youngest of four children. They still have a son. Now please, I’m *not* in the mood.”

“All right, all right. I was just saying, y’know, going back and changing your answers on the census can be—” Kisa favored him with a glare, and he cut off in mid sentence. “Right, right, giving it a rest, got it.”

The truck park was just a block away. It proved to be an elevator down to another subterranean cave level that made an ideal parking garage for larger vehicles. Flint opened Kisa’s side of the cab first, then went around and climbed up into his own. “All righty, then. We’ll be at the RIDE shop in ten minutes.”

“Uh, great.”

Flint glanced at her. “Having second thoughts?”

“Not exactly, it’s just...the idea of buying a vehicle who is also a *person*...the closer I get to it, the more it seems uncomfortably like slavery.”

“I know what you mean. A lot of people have trouble with that. And maybe you’ll decide it’s not for you after all. But you should talk to her anyway.”

“Oh, I will. It’s just...weird thinking about it.”

“So put thinking about it on hold for...eight more minutes. We’ll be there soon.”

INT. “RIDE SAFARI” DEALERSHIP - AFTERNOON

“So. Who are *you*, then?”

Kisa considered the elk standing in front of her. She had a perfectly natural-looking pelt, and liquid brown eyes that were currently peering at her along a long, wedge-shaped face. The odd whisker poked out of her muzzle. She looked as if she should be roaming the high plains back on old Earth. Except that she had just spoken aloud like a talking animal from a Disney movie—a talking animal with a bit of an attitude.

“My name is Kisa. I’m from Neorus.”

“Well hello, Kisa from Neorus. What brings you to our fair hole-in-the-ground?”

“Well, Flint here thinks I could use a new friend. I’m honestly not sure how much

longer I'm going to be on Zharus. Could be anywhere from a few days to a few months. He thinks we might get along in the meantime."

"Yeah, maybe we could at that. If it gets me off this lot, sure." She snorted. "You came to the right place if you're looking for a sale. They've had me around long enough they're just about ready to give me away. Don't know quite what to do with me, the poor lunks. I'm not exactly the 'delicate flower' type they're used to around here."

"I've seen enough of that, myself. As long as you're not the overbearing she-woman type either, I think we'll get along."

The elk wrinkled her muzzle. "Sounds like you lifted up a Sturmie rock, and weren't too thrilled by what crawled out. Yeah, join the club. Hate those bitches. Real pity they made me twenty years too late to do anything about it."

"Dolores is one of the last models from an outsourcing program for NextusMil." The RIDE dealer, a fellow by the name of Bill who was dressed like a Victorian jungle explorer in keeping with the lot's "Tarzan" theme, spoke up. "Made by a Cape Nord RIDEworks, during a time when their usual Nextus supplier was unavailable due to factory renovations. When they aged out of service, the surplus units ended up back here."

"Yeah, ain't that just a hoot? Nordie soul with a Nextus attitude, a born soldier who never got to fight anything—I'm just a mess of contradictions, I am. A little too *uncouth* for their usual clientele."

"Not exactly ladylike, by our standards," Flint said, though not with any apparent disapproval.

"Yeah, well, your standards *suck*. I'm sorry, but they do." She snorted. "Really, I was a dumb idea from the outset. Their little cold war was undergoing one of its periodic thaws, and some genius Nextus pencil pusher thought RIDEs from He-Man Land would be just what the doctor ordered to take on the Polity of the Amazons. Which...never happened, and then we got too old for 'em and they sent us back here. Yay us. I think most of the dealerships finally just gave up on us and traded us to shops in other polities, but this one's just too stubborn for some reason."

Bill snorted. "Give me a *little* credit, Dolly. I don't sell a RIDE to anyone I don't think will treat you right. Like that last joker...what was his name? Said he needed something cheap for his girlfriend. Doesn't really matter. Miss Romanov here looks like a good egg."

"Oh, sure. These ears have directional mics, you know. I know *all about* the running bet you and the other boys have on which one of you will be the one who *finally* gets me off the lot."

Bill sighed. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by now at you listening in on Man Talk. It certainly wouldn't do me any good to act shocked, would it?"

"Fraid not, no."

Bill grinned at her. "So...you think I've got a chance?"

"You'll have to ask her." Dolores nodded toward Kisa.

Kisa glanced from Dolores to Bill and back. "How can you just...*banter* about this? You're casually discussing selling a *person*."

Bill shook his head. "A lot of tourists ask us that. There really isn't any good answer. Things are changing, but...very very slowly. Not enough people trying to push it forward, I guess."

"Blame the system. I do. All the time." Dolores pawed the ground thoughtfully.

“We’re all stuck where we are, and most of us try to be nice about it to each other. Because if we don’t, that way lies crazy-town, and its out-of-his-core-housing wolfy mayor.”

Ugh... Kisa came to a decision that felt as exploitive as it did compassionate. “Well, Dolores, if you’re willing to take a risk with me, we could be partners. What do you say? When I leave Zharus I’ll do my best to make things as right as I can for you before I go.”

Dolores jerked her head up and down in a quick nod. “Well! Now you’re talking.”

“You’re sure, Kisa?” Flint said.

“Sure as I have been of anything on this planet.”

The dealer rubbed his hands together. “I’ll get the paperwork started. I’m sure we’ll come to an agreeable price. A Lady’s first RIDE is important. Follow me into my office.”

“No fast ones, Bill. I know all your tricks,” Flint warned.

“Oh, don’t worry, you’re going to get a *great* deal.” He grinned. “I’m going to be making most of my profit on this one from when the rest of the boys pay up.”

Dolores leaned her head forward and gave her future partner a friendly lick.

“*Thank you*, Kisa. Really, I can’t express my gratitude. At least, not until we Fuse.”

“Is that...slobber? How can you even do that?” Kisa smoothed back her wet hair.

“I’m a ‘GSA’ frame. General Support Armor. I have an onboard multi-fabber. A lot like the Luggage you Neorussians haul around with you.”

“Which is one reason I thought she’d be just right for you,” Flint added.

Kisa blinked. “You have an onboard fabber and you use it for *slobber*?”

“Hey, details matter. Have to be ready to fab anything out in the field. They didn’t remove much gear when they decommissioned me. What a deal, eh?”

Flint grinned. “You two get acquainted, and I’ll go get all this cleared up and bring the truck around. See you soon.”

EXT. GONDWANA COASTAL RING SKIMMERWAY - LEAVING CAPE NORD -
EVENING

“Gotta admit, this beats hell out of being stuck in a lot staring at my hooves.” Dolores leaned on the armrest and peered happily out the windshield. She and Kisa were sitting together in the passenger seat, which had been reconfigured to support a Fuser form.

Flint chuckled. “Glad you approve. Kisa doing okay in there, too?”

Kisa replied. “Oh, sure! Just a little distracted is all. Dolly’s been showing me her virtual reality.” She paused. “Uh...I think I’m lost.”

“Mwahaha, you fell victim to my evil scheme—uh, I mean, backtrack fifty meters and take the left, you’ll come back out to the clearing.”

“Thanks. It’s bigger than it looks in here.”

“Hope you like rain,” Flint said cheerfully. His demeanor had changed since they’d left the dealership. “In just a couple days, we’ll cross the Wet Line into Cascadia.”

“Rain? I’ve heard of that. We hope we will have some, someday, on Neorus.” She chuckled. “Well, actually we do have a few centis per year in sprinkles, but not what you might really call a shower.”

“Just consider this a sneak preview of what you have to look forward to, then.”

Flint chuckled. “Frankly, I’d be happy to box about half of this up and send it to you with a little bow on. Two thirds, some days. Know why they call it the Wet Line?”

Kisa remembered what she’d read. “It’s where the orographic uplift effects from the Western Wall really kick in. A bunch of ten-thousand-meter peaks will do that. It’s at least a few hundred centis of rain per year from there south. Can’t imagine there’s much topsoil in places. It’d get washed away.”

“Hey, gold star for the tourist. I guess you don’t have that effect on Neorus?”

“We get some orographic snow, but in general the atmosphere’s too cold to hold much moisture. We’ll have to pump almost two hundred parts per million of carbon dioxide to get where we need to be, climate-wise. There’s barely enough CO₂ to support photosynthesis as it is.”

“Really?” Dolores said. “How do you plan on doing that?”

“There’s *vast* fossil fuel deposits formed before the snowball effect killed off most plantlife. Kind of the opposite problem Earth still has. We’re still figuring out how to use it without getting the atmosphere too dirty.”

“You oughtta see if there’s any methane deposits you can heat up. If there’s one thing we ruminants know about, it’s methane.”

Kisa laughed. “Oh, that’s the truth.”

The elk’s ears raised. “Hey, got an offer on your Luggage, Kisa. 3,500 *mu*. That’s not too bad...”

“Could be better. It’s enough to get me ten days of investigation time. I’ll take it.”

“Sure you don’t want to hold out for more? The auction research I did for giggles shows three of the same model going for about four point eight K in the last six months, and a couple for a full five.”

“See if you can chivvy him up to 4? If so, take it. If not...well, take it anyway. I’d rather just have the money now so I can pay the gumshoes.”

“Fair enough.” Dolores was silent for a couple more minutes. “Looks like I can get him up to three and eight. So you’ve got eleven days for your gumshoes.”

“Done and done. Ask him where he wants us to drop it off.”

“There’s a shipping drop at our first stop, coming up. Got anything in there you want to keep?” Flint said.

“Nothing I haven’t already transferred over to Dolly’s cargo compartments,” Kisa said. “Frankly, it’s kind of a piece of junk. It works, but I honestly didn’t expect to get as much for it as I did. When the money runs out, I’ll think of something.”

“You never know. Something might turn up,” Dolores said. “If nothing else, we could go prospecting for Q. Always wanted to try that.”

“All I’m really here for is to find my broth...my *sister*. I don’t really care about touristy things.”

“Whoa there,” Flint said. “Dolly’s not saying you should ignore that. But you’ve already admitted you can’t do it on your own. Let the gumshoes do their job, and in the meantime, do something interesting. You’ve come all this way, Kisa. My rig’s Dry-hardened. All I need is the right trailer for prospecting.”

“Yeah. Don’t stress yourself out,” Dolores said.

“I’ll think about it.” A kind of listlessness was settling in. Kisa lacked the emotional energy to feel strongly one way or another. The last few days were catching up with her. The awfulness of Sturmhaven and Cape Nord weighed her down.

:*Hey, buck up,*: Dolores said privately. :*You’re making new friends. Flint isn’t*

really a that bad, as men go. Nordies, that is. And hey, you've probably saved me from a life of sheer boredom.:

:Yeah, I guess. I just...now that I'm here, it all kind of feels anticlimactic. There was supposed to be some big dramatic reunion. Swelling strings, slow motion, and all that. People don't just disappear. But...:

:Some of my own friends—RIDEs, of course—have disappeared, too. Hell if I know what happens to people on this planet.:

"I'm going to go check over the Luggage one last time and make sure it's prepped to ship," Kisa said aloud, releasing the restraints that clamped Dolores's Fuser form in place to the seat. "Let me know when we're ready to drop it off."

:Ready to see the new, improved you?: Dolores said as they made their way back.

:I'm not that out of shape, am I?:

:No. I've just cleaned house a bit. You had some liver damage from some of the chemicals you worked with back home. I haven't changed your body type, if that's what you're afraid of. I haven't touched any deeper memories than you've given me permission to, either. Okay?:

Some of the Grand Tourers brought back their Zharusian "tags" as a badge of their journey. It wasn't unusual to see people older than Kisa was with the ears and tail of some canine or feline. She even knew a woman who had kept feather-hair. She'd never really asked them about their experience, and had just assumed the tags were some kind of local fad to show solidarity among RIDE partners. But now she was starting to get the idea it was more than that. *:Okay. As long as you didn't turn me into a Valkyrie or something, we'll probably be fine.:*

The de-Fuse process left Kisa a little breathless. Her skin felt chilly, giving her goosebumps. Her pale skin was now slightly tanned. Neorus was, by and large, an indoor colony. Even when she went outside she put on an undersuit that kept her body at the right temperature. The only tropical environments were completely artificial hardlight climate domes. Basically the polar opposite of what much of Zharus used them for.

"My butt feels a bit fuzzy," Kisa said.

"Well, elk—or 'wapiti' if you prefer—don't have much tail to speak of. So you get a fuzbutt," Dolores said cheerfully. "Check out your cute ears."

Kisa reached up to feel the side of her head. "Wow. I've got ears like Flint now."

"Well...broadly. They are cute, though. Make your friends talk when you get home. You know, eventually."

So, what would I do if the gumshoes ran into a dead end? Stay here? For the first time she seriously considered doing that. She had reason, though her family would be disappointed. She would also have to pay back a percentage of her education. Trained TerraTechs like her were a valuable resource.

But she was pretty sure she could find work here in that field. They might not be trying to reshape the whole planet, but any individual settlement trying to survive in the harsher climes needed the same sort of expertise. She'd spent quite some time in Punta Sur, looking at Gondwana's own terraforming efforts, and met some of the Neorussian experts who worked there.

"I know that look," Dolores said. "You're doing some heavy thinking. 'What if they don't find her'? That sort of thing."

“You kind of have a direct line right into my head, even unFused,” Kisa pointed out.

“It’s just a thing we do. Hope you don’t find it *too* disturbing. Some people do.”

Kisa waved a hand. She slid open various drawers on the Luggage, making sure there was nothing left behind. “Not exactly. More the idea of someone understanding me so well so quickly. Being close to someone...I haven’t really been, since my brother left. My other two siblings are more than ten years older than we are. They were already away from home by the time we were old enough to do more than toddle around.”

“I do hope you find him...her.”

“Yeah, me, too.” Kisa sighed. “But I have to face up to the possibility that it’s not...what is it you say here...’in the cards.’ I may go the rest of my life never knowing what happened.”

Dolores reached over to nuzzle her shoulder. “Who knows, maybe something will come up. You can’t give up the battle without firing a shot.” She snorted. “Not that I’ve ever *been* in a battle, or fired a shot that wasn’t at a practice target, but still, it’s what they tell me.”

Kisa closed the last drawer. “Thanks. I wish I could believe that.” She shrugged. “Well, I think I’ve gotten everything I need. I hope the new owner gets hours of enjoyment out of this turkey.”

“They’ll probably hotrod it out,” Flint added from the cab.

“Hotrod *Luggage*?”

“Well, sort of. With the right mods they’re a RIDE alternative, in a sense. Except we can’t quite get them right on Zharus and they’re hard to export from Neorus for some reason.”

“Zharus, planet of the leftovers. Leftover Luggage from Neorus, leftover cyber from Earth, and us leftover RIDEs from the army. If it was used somewhere else, we got it here!”

Kisa chuckled. “So, who gets *your* leftovers, hmm?”

“That’s where the metaphor breaks down. I’d say that it ought to be the cockroaches, but the Keplers don’t usually get anywhere near here.”

Flint looked back from the cab driver’s seat. “Kisa, we’re on approach to the cargo drop now. ETA, five minutes. I’m sending along the particulars for your shipment now. They’ll be ready for it when we touch down.”

“Great! The sooner, the better.”

A few minutes later, the transport landed at another platform like the one where Kisa had purchased the new favorite rotor. They all seemed to be built around the same general plan, save for different cosmetic touches here and there. *Maybe they fab them and then just plop them down?* The idea amused Kisa, all the more because for all she knew it was probably correct. *The thing about recursion is that it’s just so...recursive.*

Dropping off the Luggage was just the work of a couple of minutes. She drove it out onto a cargo elevator, then stepped off. As it lowered out of sight, Dolores reported getting a digital receipt, and as soon as she forwarded it on to the buyer, she got an ack that the payment had been released from the escrow account. “Ka-ching!” the elk reported.

“I have a few days to kill after my deliveries, so we can do the tourist thing in Cascadia if you want,” Flint said. “It’s a lot like Uplift. Life under hardlight domes to keep the rain off. It rains 250 days out of the year there. Couple thousand centimeters.

Best water you'll ever taste, though."

"I'll have have some, then." Kisa tried to pull her mood out of the doldrums, but failed. *And where Pietro disappeared. Maybe I should do a little gumshoeing, myself.* "But first, why don't we try their police headquarters? I'd like to get the reports on my brother right from the source."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll comm ahead and get things set up."

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INT. DOME ST. HELENS, POLICE CENTRAL, CASCADIA - FLUORESCENT LIGHTING

The policeman behind the Cold Case Department desk had the ears of a zebra and striped hair that stood right on end. He listened to her story carefully, the zebra standing in an alcove behind him also attentive. Once Kisa finished he slid over a hand scanner to verify she was genetic next-of-kin.

"Now that the formalities are taken care of, I can confirm that we do have your brother's personal effects in storage here," Officer Colter said. "It's been some years, so they're in a long term facility. It'll take a couple days to get them out. Is that okay?"

"Better than I'd hoped!" Kisa said. "It's a wonder the motel didn't just sell them off."

"Nah. Most folks here are stand-up enough not to try and pull a fast one like that. The inventory I have has...well...it's almost the size of Yipes back there."

"Pietro didn't skimp when he bought his Luggage."

"I guess. In the meanwhile, I do have the set of holograms they took when they stored it. If you'd like to look it over, I'll shoot it across to your RIDE."

"Thank you. We'd appreciate that."

"No problem. We'll ping your comm when they're here. Will you be in the area for a while?"

"We should be, thank you. I'm planning to see the local sights."

"Be sure you stop by some of the local microbreweries. We have great beer here. It's the water, you know."

"I guess it always comes back to that here, doesn't it?"

"Well, it's not the only thing we do. It's just what we're known for. Have a good afternoon, Miss Romanov."

Flint and Dolores awaited her in the lobby. He stepped forward. "Nice to see a smile on your face for a change, Kisa. Looks good."

"The gumshoes are probably going to get a good laugh when I tell them. At least I can have them spend the money on other leads. We'll hand it over to them along with the police's forensics data, of course. See what else they can figure out from it."

"Sounds like a plan. Have you thought about what touristy things you want to try first?"

"You know the local territory, so what do *you* think I should try first?"

Flint grinned. "Well, if you're leaving it up to me...how about trying a little fishing?"

Kisa raised an eyebrow. "Fishing? You have that here?"

"We surely do. I guess you don't on Neorus?"

Kisa chuckled. "We'd need to have fish for that. Maybe in a few decades. Why

not? If nothing else, it will make for amusing videos to send back home.”

“That’s the spirit. Besides, they’ve got real salmon here, descended from specimens imported live from Earth. Them’s good eating.”

Dolores snorted. “Ugh. Include me out on the eating. If God had meant for elks to eat fish, he’d have given us dorsal fins.”

A couple of hours later, the three of them shared a secluded spot on the bank of a small river. A series of stepped waterfalls gently roared a few hundred meters upstream. Flint demonstrated the finer points of attaching floats and lures to the end of the line, then casting out into the water. It only took Kisa a couple of tries to make a passable cast herself.

Kisa peered at where her float bobbed out in midstream, a few meters away from Flint’s. “So...now what?”

Flint grinned. “Now...we wait.”

“We wait? For how long?”

“Until the fish deign to notice our humble offering. Could be minutes, or it could be we don’t get so much as a nibble the whole time we’re here. You never know. It’s kind of like playing the lottery. A *fish* lottery.” He leaned back in the folding chair he’d brought from the transport, and reached down to the portable cooler stocked with a couple of six-packs from local breweries.

“A...fish lottery. Right.” Kisa frowned. “That doesn’t seem very efficient.”

“Well, you know what they say. Give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, he’ll sit out by the river and drink beer all day.” Flint popped the top off one of the beer bottles with his thumbnail and happily drank. “You want one?”

“Thanks, but no. Perhaps later.”

“Fair enough. They’ll go well with sushi, if we do manage to catch something here.”

They sat in companionable silence for a while. Dolores grazed nearby—or pretended to graze, Kisa didn’t know which, and wasn’t entirely sure it would be polite to ask. Flint’s line bobbed a couple of times, but there was nothing resembling the strong tug he’d told her to expect if something took the bait.

The sounds of the river and the distant calls of birds and other animals were calming. Kisa let her eyes half-close, and after a while, she felt so relaxed that before she even knew it, she opened her mouth and said the first thing that came to mind. “What is it with you and meat, anyway? I mean, the kraken, the wings...now sushi?”

Flint chuckled. “What do you mean? I’m a human, after all. We’re omnivores.”

“But you were partnered with a deer...weren’t you?”

“Just because you’re partnered with Dolly now doesn’t mean you’re considering going vegetarian, does it?”

“Well...I’ve been kind of thinking about it...if it makes things easier for her...”

The elk in question gave her head a shake, ears waggling. “Eh, you don’t need to do that. I don’t really mind. Not like I’ve even got a real stomach to begin with. It’s all just programmed instincts, but they’re also programmed not to get in the way of whatever humans want to do. Pretty stupid, really. It’s not like any part of me was ever a *real* elk, anyway, except for the few little strands of DNA they based my core on for God only knows what reason.”

“See, that’s just how Mikey felt. Only stronger.” Flint grinned. “He downright *resented* having instincts imposed on him by people who made him, and determined to

do everything he could to *rebel*. Which included developing a taste for meat. Like Dolly there said, *he* didn't have a stomach, so what did it matter what the heck he ate?"

Kisa raised an eyebrow. "That sounds like an...interesting point of view."

"Oh, you have *no* idea." Flint shook his head. "The hell of it was, my—*his* first Army partner, *my* predecessor, was a strict vegetarian, who thought asking for a nice herbivorous deer RIDE for a partner would be just the thing."

"Oh, no!" Kisa laughed. "Really? What happened?"

"They got the RIDE equivalent of a divorce. Irreconcilable differences." Flint chuckled. "Confused the hell out of the CO. He'd seen it happen a few times when the human wanted to eat meat and the deer just couldn't stand it, but never the other way around. Anyway, they both ended up with new partners after that. As it happened, I had no problem at all with eating meat, though up 'til then I could just take it or leave it. But even long after my partnership with Mikey, uh, ended, that's one thing that's still stuck with me."

"Wow. That's some story."

"The beauty of it is, it's even true. Mostly."

"Mostly?"

Flint winked. "What's any good story without a little exaggeration and shading the truth? Oh, hey, think I've got a bite!" His line went taut, and the rod bowed as a fish started fighting the line. Flint began cranking it in, and finally jerked a squirming silver form free from the water's surface. He cranked it the rest of the way in and held it up. "Hey, would you look at that? Must be four or five kilos!"

Kisa applauded with one hand, while keeping a firm grip on her own rod with the other. "Nice! Where are you going to—hey, what're you doing?" Flint carefully detached the hook, blew through the fish's gills, and threw him back. Kisa blinked. "I thought you said we were going to have sushi afterward?"

"Oh, we are! It's just that I've found from experience it tastes a lot better when someone *else* makes it, so after we finish up here, there's this great little sushi place back by the park entrance..."

Kisa laughed. "You incorrigible—hey, I think *I've* got one now!"

Altogether, they managed five catches between them—two for Flint and three for Kisa. Flint credited it to beginner's luck. They let them all go again afterward, then headed down to the sushi shack to place their order. The restaurant used fresh-caught salmon from the same river, but the difference was that *they* didn't have to clean it themselves. "Which, I mean, eww," Flint explained.

Kisa peered at him. "Are you *sure* you're from Cape Nord?"

"Yes, but I'm not *in* Cape Nord. Which means I have some leeway."

Kisa peered suspiciously at the sushi as it arrived. "Is that fish *raw*? Aren't you supposed to cook it first?"

"Does sushi mean something else on Neorus? Or do you just not have it?"

"We don't have actual *fish* on Neorus yet. And any that comes in on ships... doesn't exactly resemble actual fish anymore. Pre-cooked, flash-sealed—like the canned tuna they sell here. Sushi...we've heard the word, but I guess we don't really understand what it means." She poked at a strip of salmon with the tip of a chopstick. "Eww. It's so...*squishy*."

"Try it. You might like it. Ancient Japanese delicacy."

“Ancient? As in, ‘from before they learned how to make fire’?”

“We can always get the standard cedar plank salmon if you prefer. No pressure here. Pacific Northwest delicacy.”

“No, no, I’m going to try this. If your friend Mikey could bring himself to eat meat at *all*, I can darned well eat this raw.” Kisa picked one up, popped it in her mouth, and forced herself to chew and swallow.

Flint raised an eyebrow. “Well?”

“It’s...interesting. Not what I expected. Flavorful. I didn’t expect it to taste like that.” She peered at the plate. “What’s this green stuff?”

“Uh, you *really* want to be careful with—”

“Aaaah!!!” Kisa grabbed for and drained her glass of water.

“—oops, too late.”

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EXT. DRY OCEAN, PARSONS PROJECT FLAT - DAY

Most of the Tourers Kisa had spoken to were at a loss to describe the vast, desiccated landscape of the Dry Ocean. Holos, photos, and video weren’t really enough to capture the sheer beautiful desolation. The Dry Ocean was just a shade smaller than the combined land area of Neorus. In its way, it was as gorgeous as the Crystal Ranges back home—which happened to be the source of raw neoquartzite crystal, then refined into their own metamaterial, Infinium.

During their time in the Dry, Flint seemed rather preoccupied. He was less talkative than usual, a distant expression on his face, lost in thought. The rented Q prospecting rig wasn’t all that successful—they would be lucky to break even on this trip. But since most Tourers didn’t even do that, Kisa was satisfied. “Really, it’s a mug’s game this close to the major polities anyway,” Flint explained. “The really rich deposits are hours or days deeper into the Dry. But that’s a little far for tourists to go.”

“Hmm.” Kisa stared off into the distance. “It seems simple enough to pick up—especially with what I know of geology from terraforming school. Perhaps some other time we can try our luck deeper in.”

“That’s something you two will have to work out between yourselves. My rig doesn’t usually leave the coastal ring.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem if you mean it, though,” Dolores put in. “There’s a whole cottage industry devoted to giving freelance miners a starting stake loan. Kinda like bail bonds, but more optimistic. Or you could go to work for one of the mining corps for a year or two, like Walton or Brubeck. They have pretty good terms and they can always use peeps with training like yours.”

Kisa frowned thoughtfully as one of the names jogged a memory. “Didn’t I see something about Brubeck, on the comm display at the mining rig rental? They had it tuned to one of the mining news channels.”

“Yeah, something about a big press conference coming up tomorrow. Something happened on their main drilling rig out in the Dry and they had to abandon it. Brubeck’s going to talk about why. We can catch it, if you want.”

“Sure, why not? Remind me when it’s almost time. For now, let’s get this thing turned back in and cash out, then go pick up Pietro’s Luggage. They should have it ready by now.”

Turning the mining trailer back in didn't take long. They left with nearly all the money Kisa had paid in, plus a souvenir—a small blue pebble of raw qubitite, coated in an acrylic sealant to keep it from crumbling and contaminating any machinery. It was kind of a silly thing, but collecting souvenirs was sort of what you *did* on a Tour. Lacking any real Luggage to put it in anymore, she tucked it into one of Dolores's cargo panniers where she kept her stuff. *But speaking of luggage...*

When she got to the police impound lot, Kisa found a small crowd had gathered around the newest arrival. When she and Dolores made their way through them, they immediately recognized the vehicle she'd last seen years before on Neorus. Pietro's up-market Luggage, which she'd always envied just a little. Now...it was kind of hard to look at it and know her brother *wasn't* just about to step out from behind it and tease her for her avarice.

In compact mode it was as large and roughly the shape of a full size bed. Aesthetically the locals would think of it as moderne or art-deco. A silvery surface with red lines where the modular sections could be removed from the framework or indicating mode-change segments. As a vehicle it was a two-person convertible. It could extend a pop tent that comfortably slept ten people—a dozen in a tight squeeze. Kisa herself had slept inside it several nights prior to Pietro's departure, and ridden with her brother in its vehicle mode. She'd been fourteen Earth Standard Years old at the time.

She reached out and ran a hand along the smooth surface. So here it was. It was the first physical evidence she had that her brother actually had been here. Yes, she'd *known* it before, but still, this was the first proof she could reach out and touch. It was... sobering.

"Miss Romanov?" the yard's officer said. "Thumbprint here and you can claim it. Far as we could tell it hasn't been opened since your sibling arrived at the motel."

Kisa gave her head a shake, pulling herself back to the present. "Sure, sure..." She went over to the woman to press her thumb on the tablet.

"That's actually kinda neat," Dolores said. She read the nameplate. "Airstream CarryAll 300'. A company on Earth had that name. Made travel trailers."

"Zharus actually does not have the monopoly on nostalgia." Kisa came back over to regard the Luggage again. "Some of it occasionally leaks out to other systems."

"It's pretty big." Dolores walked around it, peering at it from all sizes. "Your brother prone to throw slumber parties or something?"

"He did enjoy his space. Just a touch of claustrophobia, I think."

"So what're you planning to do with it? Sell it, too, to finance the detective work?"

"No! No no no. I won't do that. No. But I will send it to the gumshoes for a once-over. Who knows? They might find something."

"Fair enough. We gonna go ahead and take care of that now, or you wanna spend more time with it?"

"Let's just get it to the drop ship point." Kisa looked over the surface of the Luggage, then found what she was looking for. Another thumb press and a panel slid open. She connected to it via her implant, then sent a command for Follow mode. It lifted a few centis off the ground. "Let's go. I think Burnside was next on the sightseeing list, Flint?"

His ears were folded back a bit. "Uh, yeah. Yeah. Some of the best soil on the planet. Volcanic. Artsy sort of place. Yeah. Sure."

Kisa supposed Flint was in another one of his moods, but she figured it was

probably best just not to ask. Cape Nord men didn't seem to be terribly talkative when something was bothering them. "Great. This'll just take a few minutes, then we can be on our way. No more reason to hang around, I guess." She'd tried asking around the motel, feeling she might as well since she was here, but of course nobody even remembered her brother/sister all these months later. She'd let the detectives do their job—after all, that was what she was paying them for.

Flint nodded absently. "I'll go warm up the rig and meet you out front of the post office."

"Good. I'll see you then."

:That man is really preoccupied with something, : Dolores sent. :Wish he'd own up to what, but Nordies are Nordies.:

:It's probably none of our business, and he'd tell us if it is.: Kisa drove the luggage carefully up the street to the local post office, adjoining one of the municipal aerodromes. She was still a little amazed at how easy it was to ship large objects here. It probably had to do with suborbital shuttles being so common. She'd seen more of them launching or landing just in the polities they'd visited than she thought they had on all of Neorus.

Getting the Luggage set up for shipment was surprisingly quick and painless. It cost a little more than she would have liked, but less than she would have expected given the exchange rates between here and Neorus. She couldn't shake a slight feeling of wistfulness as she watched the Luggage disappear into the back of the post office—she'd only just gotten it back, after all—but if something in it could give the detectives something to go on, far better that they have it right now than she.

Kisa tucked the receipt away—it seemed to be part of the planet's 20th-century fixation that they gave paper receipts as well as the digital copy—then Fused back up with Dolores and headed out to climb into the cockpit of the transport. As they settled into the acceleration couch, Flint lifted the transport up into one of the outbound lanes and headed them for the nearest dome exit.

Flint seemed to be back to his usual jaunty self. "So, how'd you like Cascadia?"

"I want to go fishing again before I leave Zharus. *If* I leave. I guess I'll just call it 'next time'."

Flint chuckled. "There are other places with good fishing spots. If you're still aboard when we hit Califia, I'll have to take you trawling for kraken."

"Oooh. Sounds...uh, manly."

"I'd say the ocean air would put hair on your chest, but given that you've already got fur all over right now, that would probably be redundant."

"Well, you haven't steered me wrong yet, so why not?"

"Uh, yeah..." Flint cleared his throat. "Anyway, you'll like Burnside. It's kind of like an art commune, on a grand scale. They've got this thing where they mold statues out of actual lava...seriously, you gotta see it."

"Sounds interesting. When do we get there?"

"Sometime tomorrow afternoon at our usual cruising speed. Once we get on the road, I'll set the autopilot and maybe we can play a board game or something, what you think?"

"Sounds like fun. I'd like to try that 'Settlers of Catan' one again. It seemed like I was just starting to figure it out."

Flint grinned. "Works for me. If there's one thing I've always got, it's—"

“—wood for sheep,” Kisa said in unison, rolling her eyes. “Yes, you *have* mentioned. We’ll just go get the board set up.” The elk Fuser arose and headed back into the transport.

Flint turned his head to watch them go, his ears drooping a little once they were out of sight. He took off his hat and fanned himself with it before going back to join them.

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EXT. GONDWANA COASTAL RING SKIMMERWAY - APPROACHING BURNSIDE - MORNING

The next morning, Flint was in the cab watching the terrain scroll by as Kisa and Dolores came forward again. “It’s almost time for that news conference,” Kisa said, tapping the controls on her board to open a media display. “We thought we might as well watch it up here, unless you aren’t interested.”

Flint waved a hand airily. “Oh, sure, no problem here.”

Kisa cocked her head, Dolores’s ears flicking. “Are you all right? You’ve been out of sorts lately. It’s odd.”

“Eh...it’s just a little ennui is all. It’ll pass.”

“Is it Manly to have ennui? Aren’t you just supposed to be ‘bored’ or something?”

Flint just shrugged and grunted.

The screen lit up with a view of the podium at the Brubeck campus in Uplift. A brown-haired, clean-shaven young man had just come to the podium, and was beginning to speak.

Kisa cocked her head. “What’s he talking about? ‘Integrates’?”

Flint raised his ears with alarm. “Uhh...well...”

Dolores snorted. “They’re like chupacabras. Some kind of mythical critter they make up to scare the tourists.”

“Chupa-what?”

“Baba Yaga?” the elk offered. “Cryptids. Bigfoot, Yeti, Loch Ness Monster?”

“Are you sure you’re speaking English?”

Then the image of the young man on the screen flickered, and he was replaced by...a human-shaped tiger, basically. Like a Fuser form, only a lot smaller. Dead silence came over the air for a few seconds, then he spoke. “Hello, my name is Zane Brubeck, and I’m an Integrate.”

Kisa blinked. “Are you sure you’re on the right channel? This was supposed to be a press conference, right? Not a science fiction movie?”

“We’re getting the live feed.” Dolores stared at the display herself. “This is seriously new.”

Flint stared at the screen, reaching out to flip the autopilot on entirely by touch. He slowly leaned back in his chair, still staring. “Seriously? Is this some kind of a prank?”

“Doesn’t look that way. Huh.”

“...Now, there’s a lot I can’t tell you, because the other Integrates value their privacy and I’m encroaching enough on that already just by proving we exist. Nobody really understands exactly how or why it happens. But the net result is, a human and

RIDE become one single being, closer together even than Fuse. And—”

Flint shook his head. “Shit, that crazy son of a bitch really did it.”

Kisa turned to look at Flint. “Huh?”

Flint waved a hand. “Oh, it’s just...you hear things every so often. ‘Integrates’ are Zharus’s own home-grown urban legend. A RIDE and a human ‘merging’ into one whole new mixed-up critter. Something the old hands make up to scare the tourists, some would say—which is why I never said much about them, you’ve got enough problems of your own already. But almost nobody actually *believed* in ‘em. There was no evidence. Any time someone tried to come out and *tell* people, they’d just...”

Kisa glanced at Flint. “Just...?”

Flint waved a hand. “You’d up and never hear from ‘em again. Bogeyman got ‘em.” Flint glanced at the screen, where a number of angry RIDES had attacked to break up the conference. “Bogeymen, those *ain’t*.”

“Shit! That’s AlphaWolf himself!” Dolores exclaimed. “That mayor of crazytown I mentioned a while back.”

“Okay, he’s at least *half* a bogeyman,” Flint admitted. “But something like this... this is *live*. Since when is that even...?” He trailed off, shaking his head.

Kisa watched Zane get herded off the stage. “Looks like the press conference is over.”

“Yeah, but not before it started. Like it would have been before.” Flint gave himself a shake and turned back to his controls. “Interesting times we live in, I guess.”

Dolores snorted. “Yeah, tell me about it. The news channels are having a lot to say right now.”

“Which one?” Kisa asked.

“*All* of them. Seems like the news that Bigfoot is real has gotten everybody talking. Oh...*that’s* interesting.”

Kisa raised an eyebrow. “That’ is? Just one particular thing is interesting?”

“Well, some people are already speculating in one of the news discussion forums that this might be why Zharus has so many unexplained missing persons cases. Nobody took the whole ‘Integrate’ thing seriously before, but now...”

Kisa blinked. “You mean...you think maybe that happened to Pietro—’Fiera’?” She frowned. “Having him turned into a woman was bad *enough*. But this...Integrate thing? I don’t even know *what* to think. Or, for that matter, who to ask about it. I mean, if Integrates are real, there must be a lot more of them out there. But where would I even find one?”

Flint coughed and cleared his throat. “That’s a...good question. Maybe we can ask around when we get to Burnside. You never know—if someone as big as Zane can go public, maybe they’ll start coming out of the woodwork.”

“I’ll run some searches and keep an eye on the most interesting feeds,” Dolores promised. “Maybe something will come up.”

EXT. BURNSIDE - DAY

Kisa wasn’t sure what she’d expected Burnside to look like—and for that matter, if she’d *really* wanted to know rather than being surprised, she could have just looked it up—but a town with a river of lava flowing right through the middle was not it. “Wait, seriously? They’ve just got...lava flowing through the city? What if someone falls in?”

“Actually, they couldn’t fall *in*, they’d just fall *on top of*. Lava’s a lot denser than water, so they’d float on top while they burned up. The *Lord of the Rings* movie was wrong.” Flint grinned. “Also, there’s really not as much lava as it looks like. Most of it’s just a hardlight illusion for the tourists.”

“Are there really that many tourists?”

“Four billion people in-system, remember. Plus, the soil is some of the best on Zharus, at least as good as the Grand Valley in Laurasia. And there’s a nice little artist colony in Southridge.”

“I guess Dolly and I will do some tourist stuff then while you take care of your deliveries.”

“Sounds like a plan. Comm me if anything comes up.” The transport slowed to let the woman and elk climb down, then headed on to take care of business.

Kisa looked around. “So. Here we are.” Not too far away was the canal where the lava flowed through town, with a proper railing along both sides and every so often some kind of enclosed staircase that seemed to go down to the lava’s edge. The stairways were appropriately decorated with hazard warnings, but when she looked critically they seemed a little *too* garish, like they were trying too hard to be convincing.

“Yep. So what do you say, want to go look at the lava up close? Or is there somewhere else in town I can take you? I don’t think I ever showed you my skimmer mode yet.” Dolores’s hardlight pelt flickered out, leaving her a gleaming silver elk-robot—and then she split apart and unfolded into an efficient-looking skimmer bike design from the prior decade.

“You’re a *hell* of a lot better looking than that stupid old Luggage.” Kisa could see a few design touches that suggested the form of a running elk, mainly in the fork holding the forward lifter and the way the battery pack in the center flowed up and over from front to back. For a military unit Dolores’s design seemed rather fancy.

“The Nordies who designed this frame wanted something at least somewhat feminine by their standards, so here I am. Hop on. I’ve got an aeroshell, too. We’ll make good time.”

“Where are we going?”

“Beats me, *you’re* the tourist. Climb on.”

Kisa put a foot on one of Dolores’s footrests and swung a leg over the saddle. It was surprisingly comfortable. “You’ve got better suspension than the Luggage, too.”

“Not too surprising. A beat-up living room sofa has better suspension than that thing.”

“Yeah.” She chuckled. “Funny thing is, this is the first time I’ve been in a town without it. I used it because it was ‘good enough,’ and it was what I had. I didn’t even think there was much difference between lifter vehicles.”

“Not much difference, huh? Bite your tongue. You still use wheels too much back home. Well, hold onto your hat!” The skimmer bike lifted off the ground and moved up into one of the lower traffic lanes.

“Since I have no idea where we should be going...where are we going?”

“I checked the local Yelp, found a park that looks like a good spot for people-watching. I figure people-watching is as good a way to spend time as any, given that I got to do so little of it back on the dealer lot and all. Apart from the people who *came* to the lot, and it doesn’t seem like they were the most representative sample.”

“That works for me. Really, I feel like you’ve got more call on doing anything you

want to do than I do. I'm just..."

Dolores snorted. "If you say 'along for the RIDE,' I *might* just dump you off." She dropped out of the traffic lane and turned toward a rectangle of greenery on the ground below. "I appreciate the thought, but I feel like you might not be getting entirely into the spirit of the thing. We RIDEs *were* made to do what you humans say. And while it might have been a bad decision at the time, and we're all learning how to move beyond it in little ways every day, it's still part of who we are. So it's okay if there's stuff you want to do. I'll be happy to do that, too."

"You...*want* me to boss you around?"

"Not going *that* far, but I'd be okay with it if you did. We're easy-going types, we RIDEs. Mostly."

"I'll, uh, keep that in mind." Kisa cast about for another topic, as this one was getting a little bit too uncomfortable. "So what sorts of things do people do in a park on Zharus?"

"If they're a RIDE, they park! See, there's the parking lot."

"You've just been *waiting* for the chance to use that, haven't you?"

"What, haven't you ever heard of a 'park and RIDE' facility?"

Kisa gently smacked the dashboard. "Bad elk. *Bad.*"

The RIDE drifted down to the parking lot to touch down, and Kisa slipped off the side and stepped back to watch Dolores fold back up into an elk. Now that she was paying attention, she appreciated all the more the efficient way all the parts slid back together before the hardlight flickered on. "It feels odd to be saying this to another person, but you're very well-designed."

"Why, thank you! So are you, I'm sure. In that organic, human sort of way."

Kisa chuckled, and walked on into the park. It seemed designed after the way of human parks everywhere—a field of open grass, paths, benches, ponds, a playground or two. Of course, given that the terrain was predominantly dry and sandy here, it was built on imported sod, and the terraforming expert part of her mind was cataloguing the tell-tale signs and grading its designers on how well they had done. She tried to turn it off and just enjoy the place.

Just as she started to relax a little, a chime announced incoming email. It was the confirmation that Pietro's Luggage had been attempted delivery to G&C, but was unable to be completed due to "Special Exception".

"'Special Exception'? What in the world does *that* mean?"

"The web site says it's a catch-all for anything that isn't covered by any of their other descriptions. Basically a 'none-of-the-above' ticky box."

"Well, *that's* helpful. Isn't there supposed to be somewhere they write in a description?"

"There's something going on in the Agency's neighborhood right now is all I can ferret out," Dolores added.

"Huh." Kisa frowned. "Is there anything on Cape Nord news channels that might explain it? And—" She paused. "—what's that going on over there?" There seemed to be a mild commotion in another part of the park. A crowd of media drones hung in the air like someone had just tripped and spilled a load of marbles but they'd decided to ignore gravity. There were also a number of humans and Fused RIDEs following along with the handheld microphones that were so popular here.

Dolores turned to look where Kisa was pointing. "That's new. Oh." She tilted her

head. “That is new. Look!” The crowd of drones parted as if someone had just shoved them out of the way.

“Please, everyone, please. There’s enough of *me* for everyone.”

Kisa stared. “Oh...uh...what?”

“Is that...?” Dolores gawked at the...dragon. It was a dragon, a small one, anthropomorphic, but a dragon nonetheless. The guy had a series of tribal-style tattoos on his scaly green shoulders and wings that pulsed in various colors—and he was also visibly, *impressively* naked. He posed, flexing his muscles for the camera and the growing crowd. “It’s a dragon. A freaking dragon!”

“It certainly is.” Kisa cocked her head. “Seems a little small for a dragon, doesn’t he? That some sort of hardlight costume, you think?”

Dolores looked at her. “Were you not paying attention to the press conference yesterday? *That* is an Integrate. A real live one. In the flesh—or whatever it is they’re made of.”

Kisa stared. “Seriously, they’re *real*?”

“That *was* rather the entire point of the press conference, you know...”

“I thought...I don’t know what I thought. You and Flint were playing a prank on me. The entire *planet* was having fun at my expense.” Kisa shook her head.

“The Brubecks aren’t known for being pranksters, and there’s that thing with their big mining rig being shut down, costing them approximately a zillion *mu* a day in lost business. This is as real as it gets. I’m as little flustered here too, Kisa.”

“Well, *he* certainly isn’t.” Kisa folded her arms, trying not to laugh at the presumed Integrate’s posing and cartoonishly arrogant voice. “But I can’t help feeling we’re being had in some way.”

“It stands to reason it would be an egotist that came out first. Hell, I’ll bet he’s a nude model or something for the local artist communities. Won’t they all just *love* to know he’s been faking it all along?”

The dragon apparently heard them. “We’ve all had to tell a few little lies to get along, dearie!” he called over to her. “But all that is *finally* over! Besides, I think you’ll agree I’m a *much* more interesting subject for sculpture now.”

“Certainly a lot har...more difficult,” Kisa corrected herself. He was rather impressively masculine despite the dragony aspects. It made her a little uncomfortable.

:*He’s giving off some ‘Manly’ pheromones. Maybe we should Fuse.*: Dolores suggested.

:*I think we should just get a little less polluted air.*: “Uh...it was nice to meet you.”

“Just think. You can say the first Integrate you ever...well, the first Integrate you *knowingly* met was *myself*. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have fans to impress and a career to stoke up.”

Dolores snorted. “Yeah, whatever. Have fun ‘stoking’ yourself!”

They watched as the dragon made his way out of the park, the swarm of media drones and reporters following him. Kisa shook her head. “That was certainly... something. What did he mean *knowingly* met? How would he even *know* who we’ve met?”

“If they can disguise themselves as regular people, we could have met any number of them and not known it.”

“No, he started to say he was the first we’d met, then he *corrected himself*. That

suggests he *knows* we met some other Integrate.” Kisa stared after him.

“Or else he realized we *probably* had. We’ve met a lot of people riding with Flint. Like that guy you had lunch with just south of Cascadia. Or the ‘Swiss Family Robinson’ on that island just off the coast here.”

Kisa shook her head. “I don’t know. Something seemed really weird about all that.”

“Well, maybe we can bring it up with Flint next time we see him. He’s a bit more widely experienced than either of us; maybe it’ll mean something to him.”

“Good idea. For now...well, let’s not let it spoil our day. I want to look around this park some more. Who knows, maybe there will be some other Integrates around. I get the feeling we’ve only just scratched the surface.”

Kisa and Dolores spent the next couple of hours looking around Burnside while Flint finished his deliveries. After the park, they made their way to one of the spots where the actual lava floes were accessible so that lava-molding artists could impress the tourists by creating souvenir statuary on the spur of the moment. By the time they were finished watching, Kisa was ready to make a drinking game out of tourists who squealed, “Oooh! It’s still warm!” when they were handed their obsidian statuette.

“What did they expect, it was going to be ice cold?”

“The funny thing is, I think the instant cooling process they use to solidify them actually chills it down to several degrees below ambient temperature.” Dolores popped up a few wiki pages describing the process on the head-up display. “Then they actually *warm it back up again* so it feels more ‘authentic’ when they hand it over.”

“That makes a surprising amount of sense. Tourists are tourists everywhere, aren’t they?”

“Yeah. Doesn’t matter if they live four hundred clicks away or forty light-years.” Dolores popped another notification up on the screen. “Flint’s done in town, and suggests we meet at the truck stop near Southridge. Next stop, Califia!”

“Sounds good to me.” Kisa leaned back in the seat. “Take us there?”

“On our way!”

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EXT. APPROACHING CALIFIA - DAY

“*I wish they all could be Califia / I wish they all could be Califia Girls...*” the radio sang cheerfully.

Kisa glared at the dashboard, it standing in as the proxy for the cab’s invisible speaker installations. “You know, I am not from Zharus, and hence not steeped in 20th century pop culture, yet I am *pretty sure* that is not how that song originally went.”

Flint waved a hand. “Local cover bands take poetic license sometimes. Especially since it can sometimes confuse the tourists to hear people talking about *California* when they’re at *Califia*. Honestly, I don’t know why they didn’t just call it California or at least New California to begin with; it’s not as if the name is trademarked.”

“Perhaps *they* wished to trademark ‘Califia.’”

Flint chuckled. “You could be right. Well, we’ll be there in a few minutes now.” He blinked. “Oh. Incoming comm request. Goldman’s office. You want to take it in the back for privacy?”

Kisa shrugged. “I don’t think there’s any need. You already know everything I told them.” She reached out to tap the “accept” button on the dashboard panel. “Hello?”

It was Jade, and she seemed flustered. “Miss Romanov—Kisa—from the itinerary you sent, you should be arriving in Califia soon. I have important news—too important to discuss over comm. I’m on my way out there now to meet you.” In the background of the image, black sky and stars were visible through a transparent canopy, slowly wheeling backward.

“Uh...very well? You know I can’t afford to pay that kind of expenses, right?”

Jade waved a hand. “This is a company sub. Expenses are negligible. Besides—but no, that should wait for in person. I will see you soon.” The signal blinked out.

Kisa blinked. “That was...abrupt. Huh. I hoped for *some* results when I mailed them to look into the Integrate angle, but I didn’t expect any so soon. Good news, you think?”

“She did sound excited,” Dolores observed.

“Who knows?” Flint shook his head. “It’ll be *some* kind of news, anyway, or she wouldn’t have jumped a jet out here.” He frowned. “Just in case, you shouldn’t be too disappointed if it turns out...well, *however* it turns out.”

INT. “THE SANDBAR” BAR & GRILL - WARM INCANDESCENT LIGHTING

The bartender was a cat-woman with large, dark rosettes and a sort of deep orangy shade to her pelt. She also had visible round hardlight lenses scattered here and there on her skin, pulsing with light in a rather fascinating pattern. Her bartending outfit was a red bikini. The Sandbar was right on the beach, so it wasn’t out of place. Kisa, in her short-sleeved blouse and pants, was the odd woman out here.

Flint stared at the nametag stuck to the top and gasped melodramatically. “*Serena*? You’re an Integrate? I always thought you were a little catty, but...”

“Don’t push your luck, Flint Ironstag,” Serena replied, nonplussed. “Now, your usual? Bacon-infused vodka martini, Bond-style?”

“It’s you alright, Serena.”

The leopardess rolled her eyes. Behind her, a martini glass, a shaker, and other bartending implements floated off the countertop and went through the motions of mixing the drink. Halfway through Serena turned to Kisa. “And what will you have, Ma’am?”

“I...” Kisa stared at the floating glasses. “How...?”

“You could call it a form of gravitic telekinesis, but with lifter fields. Just a stupid Intie trick.” Serena’s demeanor remained calm. Half of the patrons in the bar seemed to be Integrates, deep in conversation with regular people within privacy fields. “So, what’ll you have?”

“A Cascadia Seltzer, orange,” Kisa said, trying not to stammer. Her internal chrono told her Jade Cattano was still at least ten minutes away. Ten minutes of waiting. Ten minutes of thinking. Ten minutes...

Serena smiled at her. “No need to be nervous. We don’t bite, you know. Except in certain fairly obscure situations that a RIDE would be more likely to encounter than you would.”

Dolores snorted. “Nature Range, you mean?”

“Precisely.” Serena mixed the seltzer, using her her hands this time rather than

lifter fields. “We’re just people, the same as anybody else.”

Kisa stared at her again, and before she could stop herself, said, “The same? Really?”

Serena shrugged. “Well, I say ‘the same,’ but we’re obviously different in *one* way. A way we’ve been having to hide for the last umpteen years because *certain people* thought it was a good idea. But now someone’s stopped hiding and the world apparently hasn’t ended yet, so others are starting to think it’s a good idea, too.”

Kisa thought back to the Burnside dragon. “I’ve...had that impression.”

“And there are a lot of us around. Not every RIDE-rider pair Integrated, but a good chunk did.” Serena rested her elbows on the bar. “Some say maybe five percent, some think it gets into the double digits. And they made a *lot* of RIDEs. Odds are pretty good you’ve met someone like that already and didn’t even know it. Wouldn’t you say that’s likely, Flint?”

Flint blinked. “What’re you asking *me* for?”

“Well, you *are* the native she’s been traveling with...”

“What? Oh, right, yeah...” Flint shook his head. “Sorry, just been a little out of sorts the last couple days. Musta been something I ate.”

Serena smirked. “Yeah, you need to watch the salts.”

Flint started. “Huh?”

“I said, ‘watch the salt.’ It’s not good for the blood pressure, you know.” She snapped her fingers. “Oh, that reminds me. We’ve got a lunch special on, if you’re planning to stay for *din-din*?”

His ears folded back in irritation. “So, how’s Diane taking all this? I mean, her business partner being an Integrate and all.”

“She says that you’re not welcome back to Cheers until you stop butting heads with Ronno.”

“That’s *not* what I asked, Miss Kittyface.”

Serena shrugged. “Well, it’s not really a problem. We’ve got too much in common to worry about something silly like one of us being an Integrate and the other not.” She turned to Kisa. “Anyway, what I’m saying is, try not to be too surprised, and try not to get too angry, if someone you already know secretly turns out to be one. They probably had good reasons for not telling you. You never know. *Some* of them might still be too scared to come out of the closet even now.”

Kisa cocked her head. “I...see? Well...I don’t know very many people on Zharus at all, so I can’t see who any of these closeted Integrates could be, but...thank you, I guess.”

Serena shrugged and waved a hand. “Just try to remember it if it *should* turn out to be relevant is all. It’s the same thing I’m telling all my patrons these days.”

Flint twitched an ear forward. “*All* your patrons?”

“All the ones it might apply to, anyway!” Serena said cheerfully.

“And just what’s *that* supposed to mean?”

While Serena and Flint bantered, Kisa’s stomach tied itself in knots. What was the news? Why did Jade need to tell it in person? Was it good, bad? What? The minutes dragged on, then Jade Cattano herself swept through the door.

Serena raised an eyebrow. “Well, now. I can’t say I ever expected to have a celebrity in my bar. Can I offer you a drink on the house? I think I have some vodka imported all the way from...*oh*.” She blinked and paused for a moment. “Well, now. Why don’t you and Miss Romanov take that booth over there? It has a privacy screen.”

Jade flashed her a nervous smile. “Thank you, Serena. And hello, Miss Romanov. As I said, I do have news for you, and I think a private booth would be the best place to discuss it.”

Kisa cleared her throat. “That...sounds like a good idea to me.”

Jade nodded to the bartender. “Serena, that vodka actually does sound like a *very* good idea right about now. In fact, if you could send the bottle and two shot glasses over to the booth in about ten minutes...”

“Consider it done.”

“You want me to just wait for you guys over here?” Dolores asked.

Kisa shook her head. “No, no, I want you along. I’ve told you everything else so far. It feels like you ought to know whatever we find out next, if Jade doesn’t mind.”

Jade nodded. “I think it would be a good idea for you to have all the support you can.”

Kisa and Dolores followed the cat-woman over to the booth, and a toggle engaged the privacy screen. Kisa cocked her head. “What was that about being a celebrity?”

“It’s...a bit of a long story. I’ll get to that, but it’s not important right now.” She shook her head and took a deep breath. “What is important is, I have some confessions to make, and I shouldn’t let anything get in the way of that. If I let myself, I would stretch this out forever, and you’d get mad at me for not coming right out and telling you...and you’ll be mad enough already.”

Kisa blinked. “All...right? I’m not sure what you’re talking about...”

“First of all, just so we’re clear...I know I look like I’ve just had extreme biosculpt, but actually...I’m an Integrate, just like Serena over there. It just takes some of us this way—I can pass for nearly-human, so I usually do. It’s important to be clear on that, because it underlies everything else I’m about to say.”

Kisa blinked again. “Uh...okay?” She took another look at Jade. Of course, she didn’t seem any different now than she had the first time they’d met, so it was difficult to know what to think about that. Except...there *was* something different about her face. Something *familiar*...

“Now for the big one.” Jade took a deep breath. “I have misled you. I have misled you and I have lied to you. I’ve just now refunded every centi-*mu* you spent on our agency, because it was paid under false pretenses. Also, I’m the one who bought your luggage—I’ve got it in storage back in Cape Nord if you should want it again, though I think you’ve already found a much better replacement for it.” She smiled faintly for just a moment, then went on into the silence while Kisa’s mouth worked with no words coming out. “I had good reasons for it at the time, and if weren’t for that wonderful idiot Brubeck I might still be having to keep up the pretense. But he just turned the world upside down, and suddenly there’s a better way.” She took a deep breath. “It’s a long story, and I’ll tell you all of it if you’ll listen, but the punchline is that my name isn’t just Jade. It’s *Pietra Jade Romanov*. The brother-*cum*-sister you’ve been looking for...is me.”

Kisa stared at her. Of all the possible news Jade might have had for her, she hadn’t expected *that*. “...seriously?” she said weakly.

“Remember the time you were 14, the month before I left? You took the ice sledge out on Lake Vladivostok but didn’t know the spring thaws had begun early? I had to come rescue you, and you were so embarrassed you begged me not to tell Mama and Papa...so I didn’t. Or anyone else. But you know that.”

“Oh my God. *Seriously.*” Kisa stared at her for a long moment. The familiarity about her face made sense now. Her facial features were more like those in the photos of her new “sister.” Had she been...disguising herself somehow when they’d met back in Goldman’s office? “But...you...how...why? All this time and you didn’t *tell me?*”

“You have no idea...*no idea*...how much I wanted to blurt this out when you called that first time. But I couldn’t risk you—or Dolores. If I had, someone might have come along and made you two into one of us against your will. That’s what happened to me, years ago, just after the Sturmys made me into Fiera. I was at the wrong place at the wrong time. *Again.*”

“Sounds like you had a hell of a bad week,” Dolores quipped. “I...appreciate you thinking to protect us like that, really.”

Kisa frowned. “You couldn’t just have...not *told* anyone you told us?”

Jade shook her head. “Very few people are good enough actors to carry that off. They would already be keeping a close eye on you because they knew who you were. If they saw you were suddenly relieved or angry with no clear reason...” She sighed. “The most I could do was try to get you quickly off-planet, maybe send along some kind of hidden message that wouldn’t decrypt until you were safely in jump. Then at least you’d have months to get used to it before you came back again.”

“And they can get away with this crap *how*, exactly? It’s nobody’s business—”

“Under threat of force and bodily harm, *that’s* how. But it’s over now, thanks to Zane Brubeck. He’s made it so we don’t have to hide anymore, because the cat’s out of the bag. So here I am. And here you are. Having this conversation in a Califia bar.” Jade’s eyes filled with tears. “I never thought I’d see you again, Kisa.”

“I always expected...well, I don’t know *what* I expected. I...can’t even *remember* what I expected anymore.” Kisa shook her head. “I had time to deal with the whole crossriding thing. Compared to that, the rest of it almost seems...anticlimactic. But at least you’re here now.”

“I would have come and found you days ago, but things have been so *chaotic* in Hellir since Brubeck’s announcement—I just haven’t been able to get away until now.

“I’m *so sorry*, Kisa. For the life of me I *never* expected to meet you like this. I knew you’d planned on your own Grand Tour, but I never... the odds of our meeting were so small...and then there you were on the comm...” Pietra broke down, sobbing, grasping her sister’s hands across the table with her beclawed fingers.

A multitude of feelings warred in Kisa. Relief and joy that she’d found her sister clashed with anger and frustration that, if tiger-guy Brubeck hadn’t said anything, Pietra would have *had* to maintain the charade. In the end, Kisa would have left Zharus without ever knowing she’d found her sister. But for Pietra, it would have been pure torture knowing she was literally within arms reach of Kisa and couldn’t act.

Serena chose that moment to open the field and put a bottle of Neorussian Blue Vodka on the table, along with two lowball glasses. She smiled at them, then closed the field again.

“Impeccable timing,” Kisa said. “Is that...Blue?”

Jade nodded. She wiped away her tears. “The real thing, straight from home, yes.” She looked at the bottle for several seconds before it floated in midair and poured each of them a glass. “I hadn’t thought about home in years, until I saw your face. Now I’m homesick.”

“Then *come home* with me, Pietra.”

Jade smiled. "I'd like to, but...aren't you forgetting someone? Even if I could—and there are some things in the way, but forget that for now—your new elk friend couldn't."

"Well, that is a thing," Dolores said. "I know we haven't known each other for very long. But I wouldn't mind seeing Neorus in person."

Kisa frowned. "But surely there are smugglers. There are on every planet."

"You haven't been here as long as I have. Zharus fears for its sovereignty if anyone in the rest of the galaxy discovered how good Qubitite really is. So they do their best not to let it leak out. I would have a hard enough time getting *me* offworld, and I can cloak."

"So, what? We wait?" Kisa said. "For how long?"

"Until the legal situation resolves and I can leave with enough sarium and Q to fill my nutritional needs. See, that's the other thing. I need sarium salts like normal humans need Vitamin C."

Kisa frowned. "Oh. And even if you could sneak out, they're pretty good about spotting when someone tries to smuggle out the raw materials...like your sarium salts..."

"That's right. But once things are more settled, and they understand our dietary requirements, maybe we can take some along."

Dolores nodded. "And if they let you take along the raw stuff, they'll probably not object to some getting up and walking along with you."

"Besides, you still have a lot of Zharus left to see, and I want to introduce you to the folks I've been living with. And I just want to spend time with you."

Kisa smiled. "Well, I don't seem to have any other demands on my time right now..." Though there *was* something niggling at the corner of her mind. Something Jade had just said. What was it...? Well, it would come to her.

The sisters shared a smile. Jade took a sip of vodka. "Ah...good, as usual. If I can't go home right now, at least I can enjoy a taste of it." She set down the glass and regarded her younger sister. "So...how's the family been since I left? I really want to know everything."

"Only if you tell me how you ended up running a detective agency in a place like Cape Nord. Ugh! How do you stand it? It's as bad as Sturmhaven!"

"That is a very long and *very* complicated story. I don't believe there is enough Blue on the planet to give it justice yet. But I promise I'll tell it to you eventually. For now, I guess we should figure out what to do next."

"Good question. I... Well, if I had to, I could go back to Cape Nord for a bit I suppose. I don't want to leave you again after finding you after all."

Jade shook her head. "No need for that. With the recent revelations, I think I could use some distance from those caves. Where were you planning on going to next?"

"I don't know. Back to Aloha's next, and that would have completed my tour technically. But since I found you, the tour is finished anyway. We could go anywhere now."

"As long as it's in system... or to Wednesday." Jade looked pensive and savoured her drink. "It's bad luck to not finish a tour. How about we go to Aloha, take the time to catch up, and figure out from there."

Kisa nodded in agreement and lifted her glass. "To Aloha then."

Jade lifted her glass without hands and clinked it to her sister's. "Aloha it is. If your friend is up to it, he could come too. That's quite the stag you hooked up with."

“Flint? He’s... yeah, he’s been a huge help. I wouldn’t want to impose.” And then Kisa had it. “You said...you need *salts*. Sarium...*salts*.”

Jade raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

Kisa turned to glance out the privacy field, to where the distortion of the field combined with the distance to turn Flint into a wavering silhouette. “Just...something odd Serena said before you got here. *Several* things she said, that suddenly make a little more sense now.” And some of the things that had puzzled her about Flint. If not *all* Integrates had to look like people-shaped furry animals... “Now that you mention it, I think I *do* need to talk to Flint.”

“I think we can wait a bit on that. We have a lot to catch up on first. Now, spill. Did Mama *ever* get that autokitchen project of hers working right?”

Kisa laughed. “I can’t wait to tell you this one. You won’t believe it!”

Hours later, when the privacy field came down, Flint was sitting by himself at the end of the bar, well apart from the other patrons. Kisa walked up to him. “So...when were you going to tell me?”

Flint looked at the multi-layered cocktail in front of him. It was some kind of margarita, complete with umbrellas, an orange slice for garnish, and a crazy straw. “Well, I didn’t want to steal any thunder from your sibling here,” he said sheepishly. “Anyway, it wasn’t like I could have said anything before.”

“You people keep saying that. Your ‘leader’ sounds like a real prize.”

“He’s *not* our leader. Just someone who thinks he is.” Flint shook his head, ears flopping. “So what’re you gonna do now?”

“Well, that depends, I suppose. How long before we get to Aloha?”

Flint glanced at her. “We?”

“Well, you *are* going our way. Dolores’s and mine, anyway. And it looks like you have room for another passenger. Seems a shame to waste the trip.”

“Uh...Jade Catanno, on *my* rig? Wow, I mean...wow. Really?”

“I go where Kisa goes,” Jade said, coming up behind her. “Just don’t get any ideas. As a Nordic citizen, I *can* deduct Man Card points if you get too uncouth.”

“I’m still trying to understand how my *sister* could be a famous *actress*. I still remember when Pietro flunked the tryouts for the school play.”

Jade rolled her eyes. “I *have* gotten to be a better actor since then, you know.”

“Well, you *did* fool me until now, so I guess I have to give you that.” Kisa turned back to Flint. “So. If I understand this ‘Integration’ thing properly, you and Mikey did not so much part ways as...the exact opposite, is that right?”

“It’s kind of a long story.”

Kisa slid onto the stool next to him, and Jade took the next one down, placing the still-half-full bottle of Neorussian Blue on the bar between them. “We’ve got time.”

Flint shrugged, then settled himself on his stool. “Well, then. This was, like, ten or eleven years ago... Hey, can I have some of that booze?”

“Make it good and there’s a steak in it for you, too. You carnivorous deer,” Jade said.

“Well, there really isn’t that much to it, really. We mustered out of NextusMil ‘cause I couldn’t bring myself to part with Mikey. We were brothers-in-arms, you know? As bros as bros can be without being gay and the same species. Know what I’m saying?”

“I think we have some idea,” Jade said.

“Well, maybe *you* would, Miss Jade,” Flint said.

Jade’s expression hardened. “Don’t push it.”

“It was a thing of beauty, anyway. We started to start and finish each other’s thoughts. Never left Fuse. Then, one day, pow!”

“Integration goes ‘pow’?” Dolores said.

Flint shrugged. “You think it’d go ‘boink’? Whatever. Next thing we knew we were in a puddle of goo. Happened just after a delivery while in my old rig. Truck driver then, truck driver now. Fact I ended up looking up pretty much with the face I was born with this helped me just pick up and move on. Really lucky buck, I guess. Heh. Never even had any problems with Snatchers.”

“Just goes to show,” Dolores said. “Every day on the road, dozens of people in the fast lane pass the buck without even knowing it.”

Kisa grinned. “And maybe those places where you make deliveries should put up a sign: ‘The buck stops here.’”

Flint gave her a sour look. “Okay, you got your story. Now you owe me some Blue for that godawful pun.”

Kisa laughed. “I pay it gladly.” She grabbed an empty shot glass, and poured.

“I’m surprised you didn’t come home to Cape Nord,” Jade said. “You could easily have passed for ‘sculpted, like I do.’”

“Well, this was before ‘The Show’ hit IntieNet, so I didn’t even have any idea Hellir existed. Of course, once I found out, I got hooked. It was like a little taste of home for me. Then...well, I stopped by now and again, when my circuit brought me ‘round, but I didn’t want to come off like some dufus fanboy and make a pest of myself. I preferred life on the road anyway.” He scratched behind an ear thoughtfully. “Until Kisa showed up with her problem, and I thought hey...maybe it’d be a legitimate way to get a cameo on the show. Of course, I didn’t even know for sure her sister *had* Integrated...let alone have any idea that she was *Jade Cattano herself*.” Flint shook his head. “Boy, I sure screwed *that* one up. Got an earful from Tallyhawk about it while you were in the office.”

“Oh...so that’s what all that was about, about trying to help someone and screwing up.” Kisa frowned. “But you said it didn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Well, it kind of didn’t, did it? It had to do with your sister on the one hand, and me on the other.” Flint shrugged. “Anyway, as little white Intie lies go, it was one of the littlest.”

“I have to admit, seeing Kisa’s face on the screen...it was the *hardest* ad-lib of my life,” Jade said. “But ultimately, I have to thank you, Flint. All unknowing, you brought my sister to me. If you hadn’t, even with Zane Brubeck’s grand reveal, we probably would never have met. It’s a big world.”

“Heh...well, you’re welcome, but really, there’s nothing to thank me for. It was just a happy accident all around.” He shrugged. “I hope this whole Brubeck thing isn’t going to cause too much trouble for you. It’s one thing for Inties to come out when they live hundreds or thousands of clicks from the nearest human settlement. But for folks like you, living *in* a human settlement...”

Jade rolled her eyes. “You have *no idea*. They’re not exactly thrilled to learn that ‘Mitch Goldman, True Nordsman P.I.’ was played by one of two women most of the time.”

Flint winced. “Ouch.”

“But it’s a problem we’d have had sooner or later anyway. Just our good fortune it happened right now.” She shrugged. “I’ll probably have to fly back there in a few days, but for now, I want to enjoy a little taste of freedom—and spending it cruising from Califia to Aloha on a big rig with my sister is, as the idiom goes, killing two birds with one stone.”

Kisa chuckled. “Now I *know* you’re my sister. Neorussians *do* like to do things for more than one reason, don’t we?”

Jade took her sister’s hand. “We do. And...I’m glad you’re able to accept it. That I’m your *sister* now. I worried about that.”

Kisa shrugged. “I won’t say I was terribly thrilled to get the news, but I’ve had months to come to terms with the idea. I would much rather have a sister for a brother than one fewer sibling entirely.”

Jade gave her hand a squeeze. “I’m glad you feel that way. I...didn’t have the easiest time of it myself at first, but then...once I found a role in the show that suited me, it was as if I was finally the person I’d been born—or reborn—to be.” She shrugged. “It doesn’t make me like the Sturmies any better, though.”

“Of course, we’ll have to send a message home to the family. If we can figure out what to say.” Kisa paused. “Of course, I’m going to have to rub their faces in it a little. Only *a little*. They thought you were dead and I was a fool for spending every last ruble I had to go find you.”

“Well, there’ll be plenty of time for that.” Jade smiled. “Right now, let’s have some dinner, then I’d like to see Flint’s truck. It looks pretty impressive from the outside.”

“I’m glad you think so. I’m pretty proud of her.” Flint waved to Serena. “Could we see some menus?”

“Sure thing, hon.” Serena brought the menus over. “Glad everything’s going well for you. I do love a happy ending.”

Kisa grinned. “Oh, this isn’t an ending. This is only just beginning.”

NEXT EPISODE: DISSOLVE TO

DISSOLVE TO

By Jon Buck and Robotech_Master

July 20, 156 AL

INT GOLDMAN & CATANNO DETECTIVE AGENCY – DAY

With Zane Brubeck’s public revelation of Integrates, the Show was on indefinite hiatus while certain sticky legal issues were worked out. Cape Nord’s City Fathers had barely begun to debate what should be done about the formerly secret Integrates living among them. It wasn’t so much the hundred or so residents as it was the nearly three *hundred* persistent Cover Personas they had created.

The Enclave was already being peppered with dozens of lawsuits for fraud, four (so far) of which were directed at the Goldman & Cattano Detective Agency. Whether criminal charges were also forthcoming was still undecided. The Enclave was technically established in “stolen cavern volume” even though they’d carved out the place themselves. Then there were all the falsified IDs, business records, who was responsible for what. Typical of Cape Nord the Man Card points and ranks were the most controversial of all.

Most of the Show’s cast crossplayed at one time or another, playing a role of the opposite sex in a hardlight glamor. Tallyhawk (formerly APD Detective Mitch Gardner) knew she would be called to account. Goldman held the status of True Nordsman—there were only thirty thousand of those in a polity of tens of millions. A True Nordsman was quite literally secure in his masculinity. Once attained, only in specific circumstances, individually judged, could it be revoked and the Man made a woman or exiled.

It only mattered to Tallyhawk because the revocation of Goldman’s Man Card would make the role more difficult if the Show was allowed to resume. Until then, though, it was just academic. All of the businesses owned by the Enclave’s Cover Personas were closed for the duration.

Hellir Enclave was too full these days, both with other Inties and the Open House the Producer Desilu had decreed. There was a new tour group every five minutes so people could gawk. The only place Tallyhawk could find peace was the Detective Agency office. She sat in Goldman’s creaking leather chair, tail feathers jammed against the back, gripping the edge of the desk with her taloned toes. For the first time in years there was nothing to do but wait. *Bored. Bored bored bored. Dear God, I’m bored!*

Briefly she considered calling up Jade, but discarded the idea instantly. Two weeks ago Jade’s sister from Neorus had shown up in Cape Nord, having heard that Mitch Goldman specialized in missing persons cases and was pretty cheap (since he wasn’t very good at it). The reveal had made the situation all the more complicated and difficult. Now Jade was taking a much-deserved break with her sister in Aloha, and the goshawk wasn’t about to stoop in when she wasn’t welcome.

Bored bored bored...Boared. It was one of those free-association thoughts that just naturally flowed, between the missing persons case and just the word “bored”. In 141 AL, nearly fifteen years ago, Mitch Gardner had been assigned just such a case. One of the Aloha Police Department’s own, a cop named Mitchell Gaffney, had disappeared with his RIDE while on a stakeout. Gardner had investigated. The trail had led all the way out to Bartertown, where he’d closed in...

Tallyhawk still felt an unpleasant twinge at the memories surrounding those hours. Mitch Gardner and Tally became the Integrate they were today because *he* got too close to the mark and the Snatcher...snatched. They were a gestalt, rather than two

people in one body many other Integrates were.

Now that Integrates were public, though, a host of other serious problems had cropped up. There were over 100,000 unsolved missing persons cases just on Gondwana in the thirty-plus years since the Nextus-Sturmhaven War ended and the Integrates were born, to say nothing of the tens of thousands more considered solved-presumed-dead.

Boar'd, Tallyhawk thought. She decided to give an old friend a call. They'd naturally kept in touch since the forced-Integration, but it had been a year or so since they'd last spoken. It was high time to renew the acquaintance, especially in light of recent circumstances.

The man who answered was a literal pig—a boar, really. “Heyo, Tally! What can I do ya for?”

“Mitchell! How're you holding up?”

“Oh, same old same old. Nothing's changed much in the Pridelands, believe it or not. Did you just call to chat, or what?”

She smirked. “Well, I got a hankering to go to Aloha and see some old friends at HQ. There's nothing doing here with the production freeze in effect, I'm bored as hell, and I feel like stretching my wings a little. How about you?”

It took a moment for Mitchell to catch on. “Oh, hey! Great idea! Would be great to see the guys again. Meet you at the Arch tomorrow? I got some stuff here I can't just drop.”

“Sure thing. See you then, Mitch.”

“Heh. See you then, Mitch.”

EXT. APD HEADQUARTERS – DAY

Like most of the residents of the Pridelands, Mitchell Gaffney was a feral. The man had been the butt of many jokes over the years before his disappearance. Porcines weren't the most popular of RIDEs, and the tags played on the centuries-old stereotype of police and pigs. Then he'd vanished along with his RIDE, and HQ sent Mitch Gardner to solve the case.

Far from being an overweight domesticated type, Mitchell was a hundred and fifty kilos of angry-looking wiry-haired porcine with huge tusks. He trotted alongside Tallyhawk, who wore a fitted, older version of the APD uniform with her old name and badge number on the front. “What's with the protestors?”

There were maybe a couple dozen of them, holding physical signs or surrounded by hardlight ones. The media paper signs flashed various slogans, others accused Integrates of being responsible for all sorts of conspiracies and should therefore all be incarcerated—*especially* AstraNikki Munn. Few of them appeared to bathe regularly.

“Believe it or not there are actually some *humans* who'd rather we'd kept to ourselves.”

“Even in Aloha?”

“Yeah. Funny, isn't it? Let's go inside.”

The sight of a red-eyed hawkwoman in an APD uniform entering the building with a huge boar was enough to part the crowd before them. Tallyhawk found the Duty Officer's desk occupied by a familiar sea lion-tagged face. She presented her badge, which transmitted her credentials. “Detective Mitch Gardner reporting in, Danae. I'm a

little late, but I found him.”

“Good to see ya again, Danae!” Mitchell grunted. “They still got those great doughnuts in the break room? You can’t get good doughnuts in the Pridelands.”

The officer looked at both of them, nonplussed. “Missing Persons Clearinghouse is in Office 212B, second floor. You can lift right up to the new balcony if you want.”

“Not even a ‘welcome back, Mitches’?” Tallyhawk deadpanned.

The woman rolled her eyes. “Until you’re cleared and your identities proven, you’re just a couple of rubes. You think you’re the first who’ve come into this office claiming to be missing cops in the past couple weeks? Now shoo, I have work to do.”

Instead of going to the elevator, the two Integrates went outside again, laughing. “Same old Danae,” Mitchell said. “By-the-book as ever. You’d think she’d be in a different job after fifteen years. At least she’s got Sergeant’s stripes.”

The balcony was more of a makeshift landing platform for Integrates. The two former cops lifted, Tallyhawk reflexively flapping her arms at the takeoff. *I need to learn to shapeshift so I can actually have wings*, she grumbled. It looked silly, and either making herself properly goshawk-shaped or adding a set of wings on her back like some avian Integrates had would look far more dignified.

Even before she landed on the balcony Integrates were pointing. The Show had made her a very recognizable face for years now. *The Goldman and Cattano Mysteries* was easily the longest running program. She and Jade swapped between the roles regularly—even playing bit parts sometimes while other Players put their own spin on the popular detective duo.

Someone shouted. “It’s Tallyhawk! Hey!” At the shout, the balcony was instantly too crowded to land on, and some of the waiting Inties took flight. There was a cougar in particular who started his pitch for his own Show before his feet left the building. “Hey, I have this idea for a program! It’s called Puma Man!”

“And he’s a superhero who ‘flies like a moron’, right?” Tallyhawk deadpanned. “Comedy show? Starring *you*?”

“How’d you guess?” the cougar said.

“I’ve heard that pitch before, friend. Work on it.”

“When is Mitch going to propose to JadeCat?” someone else asked, a young female otter.

“When is the Show coming back?” yet another asked in a rather more laconic tone. “*Three’s Company* reruns just don’t cut it.”

Over the years the Show had spread out into many different genres. Dramas, sitcoms, soap operas, investigation, noir, news, even documentaries about Integrate daily life near the end. Except for the last, they were based around the Cover Personas in and around Cape Nord, so they were more like reality shows. True genre programming was more typically done in the sim-spaces Integrates could create within their own heads. Though there had been some muttering about doing something Sci-Fantasy around Xolotlan—assuming the huge space dragon Integrates Lady Vox and Lord Nagafen were amenable. A few years back the crew of the *Clementine* had produced their own variant on *Star Trek* for a couple seasons, before the popularity faded and the audience moved on.

Right now, Tallyhawk didn’t know the answer to that question. “Right now we’re waiting for Cape Nord to decide if they’re going to levy criminal charges for impersonating Men, among other issues. So, you’ll just have to hold tight with the rest

of us. Until then, I'm here to do what the rest of you are probably doing. Get my life back. Now, do you mind?"

The crowd sheepishly moved aside, creating a path for them to land on the balcony and enter the building.

Behind this desk was a black panther. On first glance, her tail seemed far away. There was also something odd below her waistline. Mitchell put the clues together before the Detective did. "Hey, she's a 'taur type!"

The panther-taur was more starstruck than any of the rest so far. She practically went *squee* as Tallyhawk approached. "Um...I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I just have to have a fangirl moment here. I've always wanted to meet you, and I thought you'd end up here sooner or later. I'm Eudora and I'm going to help you get your old life back, Tallyhawk!"

Everyone acts like they're on camera around me. Well, not too long ago that would have been the truth. Any cameras around here would just be monitoring the room for the building. And a little test revealed the HQ's servers had the most recent version of Watchdog. "Mine, and Mitchell's here."

"Oh. Of course. Well, transmit your details and we'll get the ball rolling. It's going to take a few days in realtime to make sure everything matches up. So, kick back and enjoy Aloha again. Welcome home!"

"Thanks, Eudora. We will."

When they turned around this time the crowd had closed in and cut them off from the door. A hundred starstruck, autograph-hunting Integrates mobbed Tallyhawk, soaking up so much of her bandwidth with DIN connections it slowed her connection to the APD network to a crawl. But Mitchell had had enough of this. The boar sighed, then shouted in his best Fezzik impersonation. He certainly had the presence for it. "EVERYBODY MOVE!"

Everybody knew the scene from *The Princess Bride*. It was a film with very powerful memes. The crowd parted down the middle, through the door. Mitchell laughed as they sprang into the air over the city. "Always wanted to do that. Let's beat cheeks. You know, there's a club over on Keys Street I loved to visit. It's still there. How about a night on the town, sweet thing?"

"Did you just *proposition* me, Mitchell?" Tallyhawk didn't intend for it to come out like it did, a little *too* sharp.

"Uh, no. I just...well...no. Just, you know, like old times. Off duty, out on the town. Been awhile since I was in an actual *city*, you know. Fifteen years. Pridelands and all that. Five hundred square clicks of savannah. You know. Um."

Tallyhawk sighed. "I'm sorry, Mitchell. Just a little touchy right now, after...all *that*. If you'd told me back in the old days that *I* of all people would end up a movie star..." She shook her head. "Sure, let's hit a few clubs. But if what's happened so far today around here is any indication..."

"I see what you mean. What can we do about it?"

The easy solution would be to just rez up a human glamor, but Integrates were supposed to be out for good. So that was right out. But that didn't mean she couldn't use another type of glamour. She formed the image of a male blue jay Integrate, then rezzed it. "Well? What do you think?"

"Colorful. You know, Mitch, once the Show comes back, you don't have to just play humans anymore. You realize that, right?"

"That's out of my hands, Mitchell. I figure that in the meantime I'll make myself

useful here.”

The boar snorted. “Dunno what use they could have for *me*, old buddy. At least you *have* hands for things to be out of. But I guess we’ll see. If they won’t have me, I hear the Marshals are taking on feral Inties. Might have to mosey down there and take a look.”

July 23, 156 AL

INT. ALOHA POLICE DEPARTMENT HQ – MORNING

“They actually kept our stuff for fifteen years. I can’t believe it.” Mitchell used his lifter fields to remove several items from the box, taken from the HQ’s Cold Case Storage basement. They were just the kind of things that accumulated on a desk in a long career, including a personal firearm that he no longer had any use for.

There hadn’t been a ceremony, really. Soon after the Reveal the APD had added an MPI (Missing, Presumed Integrated) flag to their files. Getting their identities verified was a matter of providing genetic information, various memory engrams to check against fifteen years ago, and a few other forensic Stupid Intie Tricks. Aloha had known there were Integrates around at a subconscious level for years, really ever since Astranikki had returned to her family in 150. Buzz on IntieNet was someone local had cooked up the Watchdog program to detect them and run some underground servers for Integrates to trade information about themselves that even Fritz’s cronies had problems keeping shut down.

Normally Tallyhawk hated clothes—feathers and fabric didn’t mix well for her—but today wearing the new APD women’s uniform (modified for her avian physique) felt *very* satisfying. The items here, though, only represented what was in their desks on the day of their disappearance. Literally everything else had long been removed from their homes and either sold or given to living family.

“Aw, *hell*,” Mitchell said, echoing her thoughts. “I just realized...what the *hell* am I gonna tell my momma? ‘Hi, momma. I’m your boy Mitchell, and I’m a big pig now?’ Hell! What *would* my momma say?”

Tallyhawk sighed. “My brothers and their families live in Florencia. We came here to Zharus together about twenty years ago. I just remembered I’m actually about fifty years old. Time flies when you live in a cave.”

“Don’t look a day over forty-nine and a half,” Mitchell quipped. “But I gotta say, you’re a bit more of a looker than I am.”

“I’m not even a mammal anymore, Mitchell.”

“But you are pretty obviously human...oid. You’ve even got tits.”

“These aren’t...” It got very tiresome to explain that they weren’t really breasts. She didn’t even have nipples. They were just...there, a remnant of being a mammal, like she used to have an appendix. “Mitchell, if I let myself, I *lay eggs* for Chrissakes.

“And *why* does every crossrider get the ‘at least you’re pretty’ or ‘at least you’re handsome’ line, as if it helps?”

Mitchell snorted. “Haven’t you played, like, *three* of those characters on the Show over the years?”

“Well...it makes for good Drama. You know, the young man or woman who manages to find love and fulfillment despite not being their birth sex.”

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything.” The new voice came from the Captain of the Watch, Brann Hirai. Next to him was a silver android with cobalt blue accents. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder. “Gardner, Gaffney, at ease.”

“I’d salute, sir, but...” Mitchell stammered.

“It’s okay, Gaffney. I understand. Now, before I discuss what I came here for, I’d like to introduce my own partner, Roady. He’s an EIDE and holds rank equal to mine.”

“Heard about them,” Mitchell said. “Nice to finally meet one of you in person.”

“RI cousins, right?” Tallyhawk said.

“Of a sort,” Roady said. He extended his metallic hand and shook Tallyhawk’s. His voice had the sort of robotic overtones one would stereotypically expect. “Now that we’ve been introduced, though, Captain Hirai has something for you.”

“Indeed I do. I understand Integrates have perfect recall,” Hirai said. “I infer from this that your investigation and general policing skills have not decayed in the decade and a half since you were taken.”

“Essentially true, yes. But I’m not as up on modern departmental procedures as I should be,” Tallyhawk said. “I can learn those in fast-time.”

“That may not be strictly necessary.” Hirai smiled. “As it happens, your arrival here is doubly fortuitous. As I understand it, Tallyhawk, you hail from that Enclave in Cape Nord, isn’t that right? The one that...made the soap operas?”

“Yessir?”

“Then we have a couple of...requests for you. The main one is, we were wondering if we could dispatch you *back* to Cape Nord on official business for us. We’ve been having a hard time getting in touch with anyone in authority at the Cape Nord Law, to join our interdepartmental committee. Perhaps if someone local were to speak with them on our behalf, it might break the logjam. Especially someone who has had reason to be in contact with the police before—such as a private detective.”

“Heh. Well, Captain...the relationship of ‘Detective Mitch Goldman’ to the Law is a little uncertain at this point, but...at least I’m not a total stranger. Perhaps this will help resolve a few things in limbo right now.” *Especially his Man Card status and being a True Nordsman...*

“Good! But...that’s not the only message we’d like for you to carry, if you’re willing,” Roady said. “We had already been planning a sort of...well, diplomatic mission to a number of nearby Enclaves—and as former APD officers and one of you being a minor celebrity, I think you would make excellent ambassadors in that respect.”

Hirai nodded. “We’ve made up an itinerary of Enclaves that have gone public we’d like for you to stop by, on your way back to Cape Nord—including your own Hellir, in fact. Since they’re mostly between us and Cape Nord, it would let us kill two birds with one stone. We understand that many of the Integrates in them were formerly locals, and we would just like to offer a friendly greeting and an invitation to come home, or at least to visit.”

“But we can understand that they might be a trifle hesitant to deal with outsiders at this early stage,” Roady added. “Which is where you would come in.”

“Huh,” Mitchell said. “You know Tally, being a celeb might actually come in handy here.”

“There’s also the question of if these ex-locals want to be found, Captain. Some of us have simply moved on. We’re not the same people we were when we went missing,” Tallyhawk said. “I know I’m not.”

Roady nodded. “Nobody’s going to make them return to their old lives if they don’t want to, and I’m not asking you to tattle on them. We just want to let them know not to give up on us because they might have had to bend some laws in how they left, or how they lived after that. If they *want* to come back, we’ll do everything we can to work with them and clear up any problems.”

“Understood, sir,” both officers said.

“Good! Now, I realize you fly under your own power, but we want this to look more official. We’re fabbing an aerovan for your use big enough to hold Gaffney with room to spare. It’ll be a full flier capable of transonic speeds and specially hardened against the Dry.”

“We’ve also managed to lay our hands on some supplies that we understand aren’t the easiest to get out in the Dry, that we’ll be sending along as a peace offering,” Roady said. “Luxury goods like chocolate and coffee beans, fresh fruits and vegetables, high-grade sarium wafers, even a little booze.”

“You can drop a crate off at each stop. A sort of a fruit basket for the neighbors, so to speak. It’ll be loaded into the van before you leave.”

“We also have some case files we’ll send over, with some of the other missing officers we’d like to hear from if they can be found,” Roady added. “If you should know where any of them are, let them know we’d appreciate a call.”

“Got nothing else to do,” Mitchell said. “Tally?”

“Sounds good to me.” After downloading the case file Tallyhawk returned to realtime. “Files downloaded. Let’s have a look at these.”

“Same,” Mitchell said. “Hmm. Half of these are marked ‘Recursive’.”

From the description that meant incidents like Tallyhawk’s own search for Mitchell. These were cases when the investigator sent to search for the missing person also ended up missing. There were a couple cases of those three layers deep. “Huh. The Snatchers are real bastards, you know. Or at least they were, back in the day.” Come to think of it, Tallyhawk couldn’t remember any major Snatcher incidents in the last few years. It was as if they’d gradually lost interest. Maybe that explained why Zane Brubeck had been able to do what he’d done.

“So, just make contact with them, then?”

Hirai nodded. “Which is why we’re sending along the ‘fruit baskets.’ Just being neighborly. If *they* decide the time is right to reach out, we’ll be ready.”

“And as both Integrates and APD officers yourselves, you are uniquely suited to be our official olive-branch bearers,” Roady said.

“Captain, I’m willing. Some of these names are familiar, and I can see what might make these cases hard to solve. A few might actually be deceased, but we’ll verify that if we can.”

“That’s all we can ask for, Detective Gardner. Thank you. Your van should be fabbed and loaded in a couple more hours.”

:Looks like we’re heading for some obscure Enclaves,: Michell sent. :Maybe even a hermitage or two.:

:It’s not those I’m worried about. It’s the ones still following Fritz. We’d better give a very wide berth to the Coffeehouse as it is.:

“Thanks again, officers,” Roady said. “Welcome back.”

July 25, 156 AL

INT. APD AEROVAN – OVER SOUTHWESTERN DRY OCEAN – DAY

“So, I’m gonna learn shapeshifting,” Mitchell said. “I’m not facing my momma looking like a pig.”

“C’mon, Mitchell. You’re not a pig. You’re actually a big, hairy boar. Anyway, Cape Nord would *love* you, male chauvinist pigs that *they* are,” Tallyhawk deadpanned. The aerovan flew a few thousand meters over the desolate Southern Dry Ocean. Beneath them was Harmon Gulch, the region where the Marshals had gotten their start. The land was scarred from decades of qubitite mining.

“Har de har har. No, really. I don’t want my family to see me like this. I’m gonna learn how to change into something more respectable. Dunno what yet. As long as I can get back on two legs.”

“How about a secretary bird? Two legs, wonderful plumage.”

“If you start quoting *Monty Python* at me I’ll give you *such* a pinch with my trotters!”

The duo shared an uneasy laugh. They were depending on Tallyhawk’s own celebrity as their shield against the more zealous followers of Fritz. They stretched their Integrate sensors to the limit, scanning to make sure they weren’t being followed by some of the hangers-on Fritz still had—ex-Snatchers and other sycophants, now calling themselves the not-at-all-arrogantly-named “Ascendant”.

There was a knock on the rear doors...a quick rapping in the classic shave-and-a-haircut pattern. They were currently going well over Mach 1, so it could only be one thing. Tallyhawk turned to the door, the palms of her hands crackling with pulse energy, before tapping into the external cameras. A familiar raccoon was holding on tight in the slipstream, his own lifters surging at max, somehow having slipped between the van’s twin impellers on either side of the doors.

“Oh goddamn it, Clayton!” she grumbled. The aerovan started to decelerate, slowing enough to open the doors safely. “Why the hell didn’t you transmit anything?”

“Bosscat wanted someone to follow you two, so here I am,” Clayton replied. “Can you let me in? Why doesn’t this thing have a proper aeroshell around it?”

“It’s built for speed, that’s why. It’s a proper flier, not a skimmer.” The van slowed to only a couple hundred clicks per hour before shutting down the impellers and forming an aeroshell behind the doors, then opening them so the raccoon Integrate could enter. “So, the Bosscat sent you, huh?”

“Not me *specifically*. I sort of had to ditch the lady they sent first. Convinced her to let me do the deed. Uh...” He eyed the angry boar and the perpetually-angry-looking goshawk. “C’mon, Tally. We’ve known each other fifteen years! I *never* wanted to work for Fritz! Remember the party we had when Paulie got him to shut us down? Huh?”

“And now Paulie’s *dead* at Fritz’s hand and the Snatchers are back, no matter what you want to call yourselves now,” Tallyhawk said.

“Okay, okay. Sheesh. He didn’t send me and I didn’t ditch anyone to watch you instead. I just saw this new gig of yours on the IntieNet and I kind of want in on it.”

“Kind of,” Mitchell said. “Come clean, pal.”

Clayton hunched over sheepishly. “I really don’t have anywhere else to go right now. Cape Nord’s turned unfriendly, I’m afraid Fritz’s cronies will haul me in front of him and my hide’ll end up as several hats. I hear he’s really unstable these days. Nuttier

than any number of fruitcakes.”

“He’s lost control over us. He just doesn’t know it yet,” Tallyhawk said.

“Bastard’s going to go down fighting, Gardner. It’s not to be pretty,” Mitchell added. “He’s gonna take a lot of other Inties—and humans, and RIDEs—with him.”

“You sure you want to be with us, Clay? We should technically put you under arrest for a few dozen counts of kidnapping.”

The raccoon snorted. “Then *arrest me!* Protective custody! I’ll own up! I’ll give you root! Besides, you might need another celebIntie face on this. One that isn’t a cop. Good PR.”

“He also knows all the Snatchers’ tricks, Gardner,” Mitchell said.

“That he does. Good point.” Tallyhawk shut down her pulse guns. “Okay, Clayton. I’ll have to clear this with HQ, but I think we can work something out. It might also mitigate whatever charges are leveled against you when this blows over.”

“I’m gonna end up in the Freezer anyway. If I can reduce my sentence a few months, I’ll do anything. Here, take root...damn!” Clayton’s DIN on his arm emitted a sad little *piff* as it burned out. “Here, I’ll grab another one...”

“Cool your jets, Clay. Just have a seat and calm down.”

Clayton plugged in a new DIN. “Okay, okay. I hear you. So, where are we headed?”

“Eventually, back to Cape Nord,” Tallyhawk said. “Unfriendly or not, we have a job to do there. I don’t think anyone will bother you as long as you’re with us.”

Clayton shrugged. “I’ll take that chance. It’s not like I don’t deserve anything that happens. But you said ‘eventually’? Where first?”

“Aloha PD wants us to do some PR for them. Drop off some all-is-forgiveness-please-come-home greeting cards and fruit baskets.” Mitchell shrugged. “We didn’t have anything better to do, so...”

“First stop is the Convoy Enclave,” Tallyhawk said. “One of the names on the MPI-R list is there, too. I recall getting some fan mail from him. Didn’t know he’d been a cop himself, though.”

“Ain’t that a kick in the pants?” Mitchell said. “Not like I shared my past much, either. What’s this Mobile Enclave thing anyway?”

“That place?” Clayton said. “They’re a bunch of *Mad Max* meme-infected weirdos. I saw them passing through Samson’s Erg while I was catching up with you.”

“See, Clay? You’re useful already.” Tallyhawk patted him on the shoulder. “Grab a brew and have a seat.”

July 26, 156 AL

EXT. SAMSON’S ERG - NIGHT

“I just wonder how they’re going to react to me,” Clayton said. “I do know a couple of ‘em. And not socially.”

Tallyhawk folded her arms. “You’re in our custody, Clay. Anyone who wants to get to you has to go through us.”

“Don’t sweat it. They won’t shoot. Just open your ports. Not root, but everything else. Let’s go.”

The trio moved asides, ports open and hands up (at least two of them) while

several of the Enclave's residents searched their aerovan and also searched them. Tallyhawk felt a tingle through her systems as they swept her for viral trojans. Only when they were satisfied that there was nothing amiss did they power down their own weapons and drop their suspicious demeanor.

Their leader was a deinonychus named David. "Well, I never expected to see any celebs here. We put on a Show of our own, you know. Still do. You're welcome to stay with us for the night. Even Clayton."

"We appreciate your hospitality," Mitchell said. "Lead on, MacDuff."

The Erg covered an area equal to the size of the Sahara on Earth. Nobody had yet attempted to mine it. The massive dunes were treacherous, shifting with the wind in the dense atmosphere. The Enclave where their missing APD cop was located was a mobile one. A half dozen giant vehicles, some of which had been built from the wreckage of one of the two NeumonFormers eaten by the Dry Ocean over 150 years before. They bore no small resemblance to semi-trucks, scaled up into mobile buildings.

It was clear from the moment they entered the night camp that their quarry wasn't there. David said he wouldn't divulge any information about her until the three of them had watched their version of the Show. After Hellir had released theirs to the public IntieNet, other Enclaves had taken the concept and run with it, usually with significant mutations based on their circumstances.

One of the Enclave's smaller trucks turned into a circular stage, the audience taking seats around it. The roles were chosen by lot, so everybody got a chance to play each character. Different nights were for different Shows. Tonight's happened to be comedy, since everyone felt like they needed a laugh.

On stage was a recreation from the classic bad (some might say, worst) piece of fantasy fiction, the "Eye of Argon". The Players were to enact the scenes in the story as they were read by the audience members. The first to crack up in either portion of the Show was replaced by someone else. Tallyhawk managed to play both the roles of Grignr (the main character) and the woman he rescued (described by the author as being both slender and having "outcropping, bulging breasts"). By the fifth passage involving "stygian pools of ebony" both Clayton and Mitchell had had to leave the stage for almost debilitating laughter. Tallyhawk barely made it through the Show with her sanity intact, herself.

Over drinks, David revealed what the Tallyhawk had suspected. "So sorry there. He and a bunch of like-minded took one of the smaller aux rigs and high-tailed it for Rodinia to see how things blow over."

Mitchell snorted. "Well *that* figures."

"Hey, I thought you guys had a *Mad Max* thing going," Clayton said.

"We had a meme-doctor from Camelot come by about seven months ago. Really cleared up most of the infections," David informed. "Course, most of us are still just content to keep moving around the Dry like always."

"We're on a road trip from Aloha back to Cape Nord, by way of the scenic route," Tallyhawk said, tipping a bottle back. With her beak, it was actually easier to drink this way than from a normal cup. "You're just our first stop so far, but I can already see the appeal." It felt good to have some Intie brew in her to relax.

"Roads?" Mitchell scoffed. "Where we're going, we don't *need* roads."

"Good luck with that, and I mean it." David picked a beer bottle off the table and popped the top. "You should be okay if you stay near the Ring and don't hare off into the

deep Dry, but still...we've got an Integrate civil war getting started, you know. That Brubeck guy doesn't know the the anthill he stirred up is full of swarming Army Ants."

The boar snorted. "What's done is done. What does Fritz think he can do about it now? I don't see him telling everyone to bug out for Rodinia. They'd follow us there, too. We're out, and we're not going to go back into hiding."

"The winds of change are blowing," David said. "You can either ride the storm, or get flattened. I plan to ride it, and so do the rest of us here."

Clayton nodded. "I noticed the greeting wasn't exactly the friendliest. Not like *I'd* expect a warm welcome, heel that I am, but I'd have thought a face like Tally here would rate one."

David shrugged. "You can't be too careful, times like these." He took a swig from his own bottle. "Frankly, I think y'all jumped the gun on this. Nice to know the mundanes want to be friends and all, but Bosscat's making a grab at his old powerbase. I think you should hunker down and wait it out. See how thing with Brubeck resolves before you go poking your beak into mundane diplomacy."

"You gotta start somewhere," Mitchell said. "If *nobody* starts, it doesn't get started."

"Yeah, Mitch," Tallyhawk agreed. She eyed the dinosaur Integrate. "Besides, Mr. Smith, didn't you just say we had to ride the storm?"

"There's tacking against the wind, and then there's sailing straight into 'the teeth of a blooming gale' and getting your mast ripped off and your ship capsized." David shrugged. "One of those lets you stay afloat until the wind changes. Hell, the Convoy's thinking about going to ground in the Trench for the duration. This storm's just getting started and it's going to be a really bad blow."

"Frankly, I think he's right," Clayton added. "I doubt Brubeck and company have any idea the pile of poop they've stepped in. I mean, look at the company's stock price since they lost their big platform."

"Because a company's stock price is the surest indicator of whether they're doing the right thing," Tallyhawk said dryly.

"No, see. What I'm saying is that Fritz is going to *ruin* the guy and anyone around him. Wanna bet on how much of that drop is Intie hacking the markets?"

"The thing your APD bosses are *right* about is that things are changing. The cat Integrate is out of the bag, and no stuffing it back in," David said. "But no one's real clear on what that change *means* yet. Just because people know about us now doesn't mean Fritz is going to drop the reins. Not without a fight, anyway." He shrugged. "Were I you, I'd hole up somewhere for a while, until it's clearer which way the wind's blowing."

Tallyhawk snorted. "For someone who lives in the middle of the desert, you sure do use a lot of nautical metaphors."

"Well, this is the Dry *Ocean*," the saurian said. "And we know from wind out here. Anyway, you're free to stay overnight if you want. We've been glad to have you for our little Show." He drained the last of the beer from his bottle, then put it on the table. "Talk it over 'mongst yourselves, let me know what you decide. 'Scuse me." He got up and headed over to chat with some other Integrates at the next table.

Mitchell watched him go for a moment, then glanced at Tallyhawk. "He kind of does have a point, you know. The Bosscat's always had a few loose screws, and sometimes you can't really tell what will set him off."

“There can’t be any harm in stopping by to say hello.”

“Sure, no harm. Unless Fritz happens to notice you and decide you’re easier to get to stop than Mr. Rich and Crazy. Zane Brubeck.” Mitchell rolled his eyes. “I’m not saying I’m not with you, just...ya know, it’s a little nervous-making.”

“Let’s just see how our next few stops go, and we’ll decide then.” Tallyhawk shrugged. “It’s not as if we’re trying to bring down Fritz single-handed or something. We’re just dropping off fruit baskets. Where’s the harm in that?”

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INT. APD VAN – APPROACHING CAPE NORD SOUTH ENTRANCE – MORNING

Sunrise the next day found the van much further north and west, making its way up out of the same subduction trench where the Mobile Enclave had been considering going to ground. They’d hit several more Enclaves along the way, not staying very long at any of them. They’d finished up with a stop at the Towers, the closest major Enclave to Cape Nord (apart from the one actually *inside* Cape Nord).

The mood of their stops had ranged from cautious to worried to downright *somber* at the Towers, which was still in mourning over the loss of one of its council members, Paulie the gryphon, murdered by Fritz shortly before Brubeck made his announcement. Not wanting to take any chances, Clayton had left the van before that stop and waited well outside the Enclave’s borders for Tallyhawk to come back and pick him up afterward. They’d left the last save one of their crates there and the van, now significantly lighter, was on its way home to Hellir.

“Glad you’re on your way back, Tally. The City Fathers are getting on our tails the last day or so,” Desilu said over comm. She was Hellir Enclave’s leader, a position called the Producer. “They’re talking about putting us under house arrest. They don’t want anybody leaving until they sort out the legal status of all our Cover Personas.”

“And how’s *that* working out?” Clayton said.

“About like you’d expect. We’ve been so bored here I’ve been letting a few low-profile Cps resume their storylines. The Reveal of the Integrates! Can’t pass this up, though it’s rather meta.”

“That’s...kind of asking for trouble if anybody notices,” Tallyhawk pointed out.

“We *know*. But...what else can we do? The City Fathers won’t even *talk* to us directly. We’re untouchables, and not in the good, Kevin Costner, Robert Stack way.”

“They’ll *have* to talk to *us*,” Tallyhawk said grimly. “If for no other reason than that we’re law enforcement officers accredited by a *human* polity they recognize, so if they don’t there will be diplomatic repercussions.”

Desilu frowned. “Well, I don’t suppose you can make the situation any worse.”

“Don’t worry—I’ll try to be tactful.” Tallyhawk took a moment to glare at Clayton, who was unsuccessfully attempting to stifle laughter, then signed off.

“There’s hardly a Gentleman or a Nerd in the City Fathers these days,” Clayton said. “They’re all boorish Dudebros. You call that Manly? I don’t.”

Tallyhawk shrugged. “They’re under a lot of pressure. It can’t be easy having the responsibility of deciding what’s Manly. Though I imagine it’s easier now that the Steaders have finished releasing new media finds that kept redefining it.”

“There were only so many *Die Hard* films,” Clayton added.

“It was the Cohen Brothers films that actually had the most effect in terms of *redefining* Manliness,” Tallyhawk said. “The Dude’ and White Russians, and Steve Buscemi...but don’t get me started.”

“So where do we go first?” Mitchell asked. “The cops? Or straight to the top?”

“We might as well run by the precinct, just for old time’s sake.” Tallyhawk smiled wryly. “It’ll be interesting to see if anyone knows who I was, when I’m in my ‘mufti’ like this. I almost hope they do. I wonder how they feel about ‘Private Detective Mitch Goldman’ now?”

Clayton cleared his throat. “We *are* supposed to be trying to *calm things down*, remember?”

Tallyhawk chuckled. “Oh, I know. Don’t worry, I’ll try to pour oil on the troubled waters *without* lighting it on fire.”

The van pulled into the Visitor Parking section of the parking lot for the Cape Nord Police Department’s Main Precinct. The station was an impressive piece of architecture, all marble pillars and statues, combined with vast expanses of glass. It looked not unlike a reimagining of the headquarters of the Justice League from DC comics. “Huh. That’s fairly impressive,” Mitchell said.

“After you’ve been here a while, you don’t even notice it.” Tallyhawk parked the van and shut down the ignition. “All ashore what’s going ashore. Let’s go see about shaking some coppers out of their complacency.”

They walked up the sidewalk toward the main entrance, walking casually as if they belonged there—never mind that they were an anthropomorphic bird and raccoon, with a rather large boar trotting along behind them on all fours.

“Well...no protesters here, anyway,” Mitchell noted.

“They don’t go in for that kind of display here in Cape Nord,” Tallyhawk said. “It’s too much like...well, whining, I guess. Which isn’t exactly masculine, is it?”

Mitchell nodded. “I suppose that’s a valid point.”

Ignoring the looks they were drawing, they marched right up to and through the entrance. Mitchell was a tight fit, but he managed to make it. Clayton chuckled. “Good thing it’s not a revolving door.”

“A police station with a revolving door would be bad symbolism.” Tallyhawk led the way up to the front desk, where a slightly portly cop in uniform was staring determinedly down at the comm in front of him. A tepid cup of coffee and a half-eaten doughnut on a plate sat at his right elbow. *:Given the role he’s in, they’d dock him Man Points if he let on like anything fazed him,:* Tallyhawk sent privately to the others. *:Kind of funny, really. See how he’s sweating? The Reindeer Games aren’t really so different from The Show when you get down to the mechanics of it. Which is pretty much where we got the idea, come to think of it.:*

Tallyhawk marched right up to the desk. “Morning, McGinty. The Chief around? Or is he sleeping off another one of his hangovers, *ahem*, migraines?”

The cop actually fell out of his chair. Tallyhawk smirked inwardly. *:Ouch. At least fifty Man Points for that.:*

:Ahem. ‘Calming things down?’: Clayton shot back.

:Okay, okay, sorry. I just...after all those months staying in the role, giving the guy guff every time I saw him, I can’t help reverting to it a little when I actually come face to face with him again. He’s just so much fun to tease.:

Getting back to his feet, McGinty tried for some aplomb. “Wh—who the hell are

you, marching in and asking something like that? And—how the hell you know my name?”

:Two ‘the hells’ in one line. He’s overcompensating badly. Could cost him more points, if the judges aren’t sympathetic.: Aloud, Tallyhawk said. “I’m one of the locals. Been in here before. But this time I’m actually playing errand girl for the top cops down at Aloha. They have some things need talking over with the top cops here, but nobody’s been answering their mail. I’m going for my credentials.” Tallyhawk slowly reached into a pocket and pulled out her Aloha PD badge case, which she tossed onto the desk.

McGinty looked at it, and only fumbled it a little as he picked it up and dropped it onto the near-field reader pad. “Well, uh, Detective...Tallyhawk? The Chief is a very busy man. I’ll see if he’s available.”

“If he’s still under the weather, we can come back in a few hours.” Tallyhawk shook her head. “Manly or not, how he manages to drink that rotgut bathtub gin at Charlie’s night after night without developing two or three bleeding ulcers is beyond me. Especially what with his *wife* to deal with...”

McGinty goggled at her. Then he looked back at his screen. “Wait a minute...’Detective Mitch Gardner’ ...Aloha...” He looked up, glaring, face tinting toward beet red. “*YOU!*”

:Oh, crap. Think I overplayed it.: Tallyhawk sent an ‘eyeroll’ emoticon. *:Always thought I might have been a little too clever for my own good, filing so few serial numbers off for that role...:* “Well, partly me. Sometimes it was someone else.” Tallyhawk grinned. “So, yes, guess my secret’s out. If it’s any consolation, ‘Mitch Goldman’ is who I was before *this* happened. More or less.”

“You—you—I thought you were my *friend*. All those nights down at Charlie’s...all those billiards games and throwing darts...and all this time you were playing me! Making a *laughingstock* of me!”

Tallyhawk raised her hands. “Hey now, take it easy. If you don’t calm down you’re going to blow more Man Points.”

“Righteous indignation *is* Manly, you...you...*crossdresser*.”

“Fair enough.” Tallyhawk nodded. “Look, I owe you an apology, big time. I’m *very* sorry I had to deceive you like that. But you have to understand, I was operating under a lot more strict constraints than *you* are under the Reindeer Games. If you screw up too badly, you *could* spend some time as a woman. If *I* screwed up too badly, including letting someone like you find out about the role I was playing, my skin would have been decorating someone’s wall. Literally. So I did what I had to, and I’d do it again. Doesn’t mean I was happy about it.”

McGinty blinked. “...huh.” He glowered and tossed the badge case back to Tallyhawk. “I’m still mad. But...have a seat. I’ll see if the Chief’s available.”

Tallyhawk and Clayton moved to a row of molded plastic chairs along one wall, and Mitchell sat on his haunches on the floor next to them. They waited for a few minutes while McGinty regained his composure, tapped on the comm screen, and spoke in an undertone. After a while, he looked up and nodded at them, jerking his head toward the elevator.

Tallyhawk smiled. “Thanks, McGinty. We know the way.” She led the way over to the elevator and pressed the button.

Mitchell glanced around. “Kind of surprised they’re not making more of a fuss about us. I see all the weird looks we’re getting.”

“Don’t be fooled. It’s not Manly to make a big fuss. All the same, I expect there’s a fully-armed SWAT team waiting just out of sight, in case we try anything.” The elevator dinged and opened. The car was empty, so the three of them stepped in, and Tallyhawk punched for the top floor.

“I don’t guess I have to say, let me do the talking?” Tallyhawk asked.

Clayton snorted. “Why not? You did a *terrific* job downstairs.”

Tallyhawk rolled her eyes. “I know, I know. Old habits, sorry. But I am the one who’s had plenty of face-to-faces with the guy over the years, so at least *I* know *him*.”

Mitchell scratched behind an ear with a hind foot. “I get the feeling *he’s* going to know *you*, too, now that McGinty’s had a chance to spill. You think that’ll be helpful?”

“At least we’ll both know where we stand.” Tallyhawk shrugged. “Not like he needs to *like* me to acknowledge receipt of my message.”

Mitchell snorted. “You know, I’m not really seeing many female cops around here.”

“The meter maids’ division is on the second floor. I think half of them are named Rita.” Tallyhawk rolled her eyes again. “The only *real* lady cops you get around here are the occasional token ones who are super-competent but must obviously Need A Real Man To Show Them How To Love. And given that most women who’re *really* competent wouldn’t want to have to put up with that kind of malarkey, most of them end up emigrating to polities that *aren’t* a gender-role crazytown.” She chuckled. “Cape Nord and Sturmhaven together are sort of Zharus’s grease trap for sexist throwbacks. They *collect* ‘em, so they’re kept out of everybody else’s hair. I think that’s why they’ve been able to exist for so long without undergoing revolutions—everyone who can’t stand the heat gets out of the kitchen, so we end up with too many cooks.”

The Chief’s office had a wooden door with frosted glass window, much like the Goldman & Catanno office. The name on it was Chief Willard Selleck, JD, TN (pending), Main Precinct. It was all very noir, which worked quite well for manly gumshoe Mitch Goldman and his sexy partner investigatrix Jade Catanno when they had to visit for one reason or another. Showing up at said door as her true self felt decidedly odd to Tallyhawk. She put her betaloned hand on the glass.

“Goldman! Or whoever the *hell* you actually are! Get your feathery ass in here!” Selleck shouted, emphasized by a few audible thumps on his desk that rattled the junk on it.

Tallyhawk pushed the door open. The older man behind the desk glowered at her over the piles of paper that decorated it. Tallyhawk still wasn’t sure whether the paper was just an attempt to mimic the busy boss’s desk seen in all the old movies, or he actually *worked* in paper by preference. She’d been nearly certain of both possibilities more than once.

He stormed up to her and thrust a burning cigar towards her nares. “We need to clear the air here, Goldman or whoever you are.”

“Before all this I was APD Detective Mitch Gardner,” Tallyhawk said calmly. “And despite what I look like, I am still him. Mostly.”

“Ha! You look all woman to me! And see? That’s the bullshit! For years you lied to me, you lied to this department, and you lied to this polity! See, I *knew* there was something funny about you, Goldman! I *knew* it! See, I’ve been briefed about this ‘Show’ thing! Not only have you lied to us about who you are, but you’ve had cameras in this room for who knows how long!”

:If he keeps going on like this he's going to run out of exclamation points,:
Clayton sent. *:Should we just give him the whole song and dance you gave McGinty?:*

"I should arrest you for fraud and impersonating a True Nordsman! And that's just to start!" He glared at her, shifting the cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, then went back around his desk to have a seat. "Well, don't just stand there, woman! Speak up!"

"First of all, I wasn't *impersonating* a True Nordsman. That honor was granted to me—or, to Goldman, anyway—fair and square, *while* I was playing him. I didn't ask for it. I didn't even know he was nominated. It was as much a surprise to me as to anyone." She shrugged. "It wasn't all acting. It was in large part reality TV. That wasn't scripted. I *was* a damned good Detective in Aloha."

"Any woman who showed the valor Goldman did would have been Manned on the spot."

"And that's what I *was*. Still can be, if I project him. But we Integrates can't be 'crossed' the way plain old humans can. Believe me, after this first happened to me, I'd have done anything if I *could* have been changed back. The Goldman role started out as my way of dealing with that.

"As for the cameras...well, okay, guilty as charged. Though they're not ones we planted, but the ones you-all already use for security, and our own digital memories. Anyway, we were basically being kept in what amounted to our own little jail, unable to mix with ordinary folks except in that kind of disguise. And not everyone could get out all the time, but they could all watch the Show, so it started out as a way to keep us from going off our collective nut from boredom. For what it's worth, we didn't share the stuff outside of our own private TV network, and we never did anything mean-spirited to ordinary folks. You, in particular, we played up as a respected gruff-but-wise father-figure type. Like in the old cop shows the Steaders put out."

"Hmph." More chewing on his cigar, but Selleck was thinking things over. Tallyhawk had known him for years. She knew it would take some time before he could absorb something like Integrates and fit it back into his worldview. "Real Men" weren't supposed to talk about their feelings much, though Tallyhawk could tell he wanted to. "Hmph," he grunted, more uncertainly. "You shoulda been a saleswoman, Gardner. You almost convinced me with that pitch."

"I'll be happy to talk it over with you at length sometime, but that's actually not why I came today. We're here on behalf of Aloha PD. They're working with a number of other Gondwanan law-enforcement agencies, like the Marshals, pooling resources to try to clear up all the Integrate-related missing persons cases that are on the books. They'd like to ask Cape Nord to join the party."

"All that hot weather down south makes you soft," Selleck said. "I'm sure we can handle it on our own."

"That's actually why they want your help—for the parts of it that start out in other places but end up here. I'm sure you'd rather handle the local end of cross-polity investigations than have a bunch of outsiders tramping around."

Mitchell decided to speak up. He sounded mildly irritated. "Hey! What's that about Alohas being soft?"

The cigar hung on Selleck's lower lip for a moment as he allowed his gruff exterior to slip a little at the sight of a giant talking pig. "That reminds me. You haven't introduced your friends here. Officer...Gaffney? Who's the raccoon?"

“Mitchell Gaffney, yeah. It’s my fault Mitch there ended up like she did,” Mitchell said. “And this guy is Clayton.”

“I can speak for myself, thank you,” Clayton said. “I’m another local. I’ve actually been in this office a couple times—in different roles.”

“Hmph. Ought to arrest the lot of you, but all that crap is being worked out well above my pay grade. And it’d only mean *more* bad publicity when the press got ahold of it. Damn snoops are having a field day already.” He took another puff on the cigar. “All right, fine, leave me the contact information for whatever mucky-muck they want me to talk to, and then beat it.”

“Transmitted,” Tallyhawk said. “See you around, Chief. Thanks for your time.”

“Hmrph!” He turned in his chair to face the wall behind him.

:I know why Desilu and the Editors love this guy,: Clayton sent as the trio turned to leave. *:Maybe we should send him some episodes of Goldman and Catanno?:*

:Let’s not push our luck,: Tallyhawk replied. *:You were already borderline mentioning your bit parts. Both of those were female, you know.:*

:Hey, I crossplay. It’s what I do. My Manhood is just fine with it. I can’t imagine Mr. True Nordsman (Pending) Selleck playing Meter Maid Doria Gray, could you?:

Tallyhawk snorted. *:Thanks for that image. C’mon...we might as well run by the Man Cave and see what we can find out about the situation with Hellir while we’re here.:*

EXT. MAN CAVE – AFTERNOON

If the police station had been impressive, the entrance to the Man Cave was not, at least on the outside. It was a fairly nondescript blocky building with no signage and smoked glass on the doors. The only thing out of the ordinary were the armed guards stationed to either side of the entrance. “Huh,” Mitchell said. “Is it just me, or does it look like a strip club? Or maybe an adult bookstore?”

“I would have said that the City Fathers are a fairly modest bunch who don’t want to draw more attention to themselves than to the act of governing,” Tallyhawk said. “But you know, you’re right. It *does* kind of look like a strip club.”

“You’ve lived here too long,” Mitchell said. He snorted. “Reminds me of that little place on Mobius Street back home. You know the one.”

The interior of the building was entirely an entrance foyer, with a receptionist behind a security desk and a couple guards at hand. A security door in the opposite wall was sealed, the controls undoubtedly at the security desk. Tallyhawk approached the desk and offered her badge case. “Detective Tallyhawk, with Aloha PD and Hellir Enclave. We’d like to speak to one of the Men in Charge.”

The receptionist was a blond bombshell chewing gum, and turning the pages of a worn Iphigenia Rose paperback. She put it down as they approached. “Oh, you would, huh? Well, I’d like a pony, but my hubby won’t let me get one.”

Clayton smirked. “Wouldn’t we all?”

“Are you supposed to be Davy Rocket or something?” the woman continued in a voice that warbled in pitch.

Clayton rolled his eyes. “Lady, take it from an actor. Your ‘Brooklyn Bubblehead’ accent really isn’t working on me.”

The woman almost swallowed her gum. She went *sotto voce* and lost the accent.

“But the Men here like it, right? A woman can’t sound too smart around here. And seriously, is that a Davy Rocket fursuit? I loved that show! Don’t you guys at that Enclave place play all these characters or something? That’s what I heard.”

“No, this is what I really look like, ma’am,” Clayton said. “My avian friend here is for real, and so’s Big Pig back here. All for real.”

:But there was that Davy Rocket mall gig you did a couple years ago,: Tallyhawk pointed out. She cleared her throat. “Anyway, Miss, we urgently need to speak with one of the City Fathers.”

“Good luck with that.” She pressed a button on the desk, and with a buzz, the door unlocked. “I mean, you can *try*...but who knows if any of ‘em will want to speak with you?”

“We’ll just have to chance it.” Tallyhawk nodded to her. “Thanks, Miss.”

The receptionist nodded, and went back to her book.

Beyond the door was a long stairway leading down several stories. Mitchell moved carefully behind the others on his four legs before deciding just to use his lifters. “Stairs? Really? What if you’re in a chair or something?”

“There’s a back way in that’s got an elevator. But it’s a couple clicks out of the way and ends you up in the middle of the office level, so only people who really need it use it.” Tallyhawk shrugged. “This is all in keeping with the ‘Man Cave’ theme. They’re called that because, historically, they were in the basement of the house. Basement means stairs.”

“If they have a comfy sofa and a big screen vid at the end of this, I’m gonna—” Mitchell began.

“Don’t make any promises you can’t keep,” Clayton advised, as they went through the door at the other end of the stairway. They emerged into an atrium that actually *did* have comfy sofas, several big-screen comm displays, a number of vintage arcade game reproductions, and a foosball table at one end. Another corner held a massive dark wood liquor cabinet filled with bottles of fine wine vintages from one end of human space to the other, as well as hard liquors. There were small fabbers disguised as beverage fridges by the sofas, and several Men were lounging, sipping from beer cans and watching a football game replay on the screen. The other end of the room had another security station, this one staffed by Men. A couple of them noticed the trio and moved in their direction.

“One of the big, constantly-running flamewars on the ‘net forums is whether all this means the City Fathers *don’t* or *do* take themselves too seriously,” Tallyhawk said. “The jury’s still out on that.”

One of the approaching guards had bear tags and a build to match, though the RIDE himself wasn’t in the room. RIDEs were still fairly uncommon in Cape Nord. Tallyhawk held up a hand, then offered him her badge case. “Detective Tallyhawk, Aloha PD, and long-time resident of Hellir. My associates, Clayton, also from Hellir, and APD Officer Mitchell Gaffney. We’d like to speak to a City Father.”

The guard grunted, holding the badge against his wrist comm and checking the display. He handed the badge back, then grunted, “Follow me.” He led the way to a door at the opposite end of the room from the “Man Cave” lounge, and down a long hallway lined with doors. He opened a door to a small conference room and nodded them through. “Be a few minutes.” He closed it behind them.

The room had a round table with six comfortable upholstered chairs, and another

one of the beverage-fridge mini-fabs in the corner. The walls were lined with prints of movie posters for classic John Wayne films. There was ample room in another corner for Mitchell to sit down, as the other two took seats at the table.

“So, now what?” Mitchell asked.

“I guess we’ll see. How this goes depends on who we talk to,” Tallyhawk said. “There are several political factions among the Fathers. Well, if you can call them anything as formal as ‘factions.’ They’re more like...guy types, I guess. You’ve got the ‘Gentlemen,’ whose idea of Manliness is strictly old-school, tied up with being polite and respectful to the Fairer Sex. They were really big in power around the turn of the century, but they’ve gradually declined. Largely due to the Steaders bringing out all this long-forgotten stuff that challenged accepted notions of Manliness, spawning other types and diluting their power. Like the Cohen Brothers films, but again, don’t get me started.”

“You’ve got the Nerds. As in ‘Revenge of,’” Clayton said. “Still took them decades to get recognized as a valid form of ‘Manliness,’ and there aren’t very many of them. At least openly.”

“And then there’s the Dudes, though they tend to go in more for forming bowling leagues than taking part in polity government,” Tallyhawk continued. “Really, there are a good half-dozen of those smaller types, many of them inspired by some movie or other. The Cowboys. The Dirty Harries. The Surfers. Et cetera, et cetera. They don’t tend to form voting blocs of their own—either they vote their own way, or they follow one of the major ones.”

“And then there’s the Dudebros.” Clayton rolled his eyes. “I blame Joe Steader for this one. They’re not the Dude in any way.”

“More of an Anti-Dude,” Tallyhawk added. “Sort of an offshoot of eighties pop culture—’duuuuuude!’—crossed with forum troll.”

“They’re a toxic blight on all that is Manly,” a new voice said. The speaker was a grey-haired Man in a gray flannel suit, wearing a fedora, carrying a highball glass of some cocktail. He glanced at each of the three inhabitants of the room in turn, using the slope of his nose as a guide-line for his eyes. “But their standards are low, so they tend to multiply in dark corners. Like cockroaches.”

“Aw, you’re just mad because we get more chicks,” said another voice behind him. “Move your ass, Scoresby. I want to get a look at our guests. Never seen any Inties up-close and personal-like.” This was a shorter man in jeans and a sweatshirt, with mussed-up light brown hair and a matching mustache that strongly resembled a caterpillar clinging to his upper lip. “I’m Fred Higgins, and the stuffed shirt there is Rupert Scoresby. Who might you-all be?” His eyes zeroed in on Tallyhawk’s chest. “You’re some kind of bird, huh? You still got tits under that uniform?”

“Down, boy,” Scoresby said dryly. He pulled back a chair across from the Integrates and took a seat. “You asked for an audience; very well, we’re here. Pray introduce yourselves, and elucidate the manner of your request.”

“He means say who you are and what you want,” Higgins translated helpfully. Scoresby glared at him.

Tallyhawk decided to take a different tack with these guys, and dropped into a narrative tone she’d often used for *Goldman & Catanno* cold openers. “I am—or at least I was—Detective Mitch Gardner of the Aloha PD. Some years ago I was assigned a case. One of our own had gone missing while on a stakeout.”

“That’d be me, Mitchell Gaffney. Just a beat cop,” the boar added.

“Integration doesn’t happen here as much,” Tallyhawk said. “But poor Mitchell there, well...there’s run of the mill Inties like me and Clayton here. Then there’s ferals like the Big Pig. Now, I didn’t know it at the time, but there were clues. They led me out to Bartertown.”

“No shit?” Higgins said. From the rapt look on his and Scoresby’s faces, she knew she had them both caught up in the story.

“Do go on, madam,” Scoresby said.

“Bartertown. That blight in the High Desert,” she continued. “The trail led me there. Then I got too close. See, until Zane Brubeck blew the lid off, Integrates had a faction dedicated to keeping themselves secret, no matter the cost to the victims. A poor hawk RIDE named Tally was their other victim. They mashed us together like so much wet clay, leaving the bird-woman you see before you now. Neither of us wanted it, but here we are. Or more accurately, here I am. Tallyhawk.”

Higgins went over to the corner fabber, replicated a bag of popcorn, brought it back to a seat next to Scoresby, and sat down, munching noisily. Scoresby glared at him.

Clayton took up the story. On the screen behind him, a scene started to play out, as shown from the raccoon’s own perspective. No doubt Desilu, Ubu, and the Editors at Hellir were hard at work in fast-time.

“I wasn’t the one who did it to them. I was new to the Snatchers at the time. That’s what they called Integrates who took away newbies from their old lives,” he said, voice full of regret. “Politics, right? Me and a small group, well, we wanted to pull as far away from those politics as we could. We decided to take a chance. We came here.”

:What are you guys doing?: Mitchell asked in fast-time.

:What’s it look like? Putting on a Show!: Clayton said. *:Hellir thing. It’s a small but important audience, what else can we do?:*

“Are you going somewhere with this?” Scoresby asked.

“We want you to understand us, and why we did what we did,” Tallyhawk said. She pointed at the screen behind her with her thumb. “Hellir Enclave. That’s what we called it. I won’t pretend everything we’ve done is above board. But from the very first day we bored a new cavern into the rock under the abandoned buildings on McKenna Street, we had a mandate from what passes for a leader. How’d Fritz put it, Clay?”

“Let me see if I can do this right. Just don’t let any word get out that I’m doing this,” Clayton said. The air around him blurred, then there stood a lynx in a black beret. He turned around to face the screen and the gathered residents of Hellir at the time.

“What is he doing there? Some kind of hardlight costume?” Scoresby said.

“Looks like a Beatnik putty tat,” Higgins said between swallows of popcorn and beer.

“You cats listen up,” “Fritz” said to the dozen or so Integrates on-screen, which included Tallyhawk and Clayton. “I gotta admit, it’s a pretty clever spot you picked to hide in. It’d be some tough toenails to yank you outta there without nobody getting wise—more trouble than it’s worth, so I guess you’re jake for now. Don’t make waves among the meat, dig? You make me regret this, and I’ll make you regret you was ever born. *Twice.*”

“So who the hell is he supposed to be?” Higgen said.

“The Bosscat himself. Fritz,” Tallyhawk said. “The cat who’s been calling the shots in Integrate society for the last twenty-odd years. You heard about what happened

at the press conference where Brubeck made the announcement? Fritz's lackeys. If it'd been ten years ago, when he was still at the top of his game..." She shivered. "Brrr."

Clayton dropped the hardlight. "And if he finds out I did that, well...I'm already due to end up a dozen hats anyway, so what's one more?"

"Meat', are we?" Scoresby scoffed.

Higgins munched popcorn thoughtfully. "So there you all were, stuck in a hole in the ground. Or a hole under a hole in the ground. Sounds hella boring."

"Give the man a cigar," Clayton said. He gestured at a cigar case over on a side table and floated it out to the City Father's seat.

"Huh. Neat trick," Higgins said, taking a cigar and inspecting it. "But really, I prefer a good blunt." That didn't keep him from tucking it away in a pocket, however.

"One imagines that boredom drove you to...innovate?" Scoresby said.

"Boredom, and we needed stuff just to live," Clayton said. "And I won't pretend all of our seed money was from completely legitimate sources. The Bosscat also had that commandment 'thou shalt not make waves'. So, we used our...innate talents to make disguises and give them a paper trail to make them legit."

Tallyhawk concentrated, then projected Mitch Goldman.

"We all got to talking among ourselves, sharing the 'clever' bits we did when we had to interact with people, and before long we were making 'gag reels' to show at parties," Clayton said. "And some of us shared 'em with friends in other Enclaves, and they asked for more, and some of the creative role-playing types had the idea of writing up plots for people to play out. From there, it just sort of snowballed into a soap opera-slash-reality show kinda thing."

"Our records show that your Enclave technically owns the two blocks on McKenna Street above it," Scoresby said. "The Hooters, the Gym, the Detective Agency, a convenience fabbery, a motel, a bar and grill, an apartment complex..."

"All 'owned' by the people you made up and inserted into our Citizen Registry," Higgins said. "That's fraud, right there." He pointed accusingly at Tallyhawk. "And that chick is the worst of you bunch. We should revoke your True Nordsman-ness. Thing. Deal."

"Technically, it's not *mine*. It's 'Mitch Goldman's.' And he's not always me."

"Yeah, sometimes *I'm* him," Clayton said. "And sometimes other people. We don't really think of the roles as being 'us.' They're parts we play. Like James Bond was Sean Connery, but also George Lazenby, Roger Moore, et cetera."

Scoresby snorted. "There *was* no James Bond except Connery."

"Naw, man. Idris Elba was the best," Higgins said. "He was the first one to play the character *right*."

"I hate you."

Clayton shrugged. "All right, maybe James Bond was a bad example. Still, it's the way our culture worked."

"Hollywood survived on reboots all the way to the Oil Crash," Tallyhawk said, dropping the disguise. "Point being, many actors played the same characters. Goldman started out as a way for me to deal with my sudden femininity. I know you both have done enough un-Manning judgements to know how jarring that is to the victim."

"Hell, look at *me*," Mitchell said. "You know that big African Plain they have south of Aloha? Talk about boredom! The only shows we had down *there* were when some meerkat Integrate came up to me and started singing 'Hakuna Matata.' And that

got old after the first three times. Mitch, Clay, you don't know how *good* you had it here!"

"I feel like I'm in the 'Very Important Lesson' part of a *Davy Rocket* episode," Higgins said, looking pointedly at Clayton.

"This has all been very clever storytelling," Scoresby said. "You've clearly had time to hone your skills. Are you expecting some kind of leniency?"

"We simply want the Council of Men to understand how we got to today," Tallyhawk said. "Desilu and Ubu—our Enclave leaders—have been asking to speak with you for weeks now. We have much to offer Cape Nord, and the prospect of no longer having to hide behind these Cover Personas is...how to put this?"

"A fucking *relief*, pardon my French," Clayton said. "Until recently it was a matter of survival. All these years, you never knew we were here because it *had* to be that way. We had no other choice."

"Aren't you being sued for fraud? You and a half dozen others?" Scoresby asked pointedly.

Tallyhawk shrugged. "The lawyers are discussing it. It seems to me that if we can reach an overall accord between Hellir and Cape Nord, those cases will easily be settled."

Higgins cleared his throat. "Where's the money for your lawyers coming from? As I understand it, you people don't exactly interact with our economy except to siphon money out of our banks."

"The roles we created are small business owners and workaday people," Clayton said. "And since we don't have the same expenses as ordinary people, any profit went into the Enclave's group fund to pay for our daily needs. Hellir's earned every buck in that fund honestly." He turned a palm over. "Of course, I can't say the same for every individual, but we never took any contribution to the fund that we couldn't document."

"Indeed," Scoresby said. "Only it doesn't seem to me that the proceeds from running a city block or so of town could be all that high, overall. Especially given where you are situated. Consider the tourist dollars that drive Cape Nord's economy. Those have been in decline ever since the War, and we have to bring in ever more money from the fishing fleets and deep mining, but they still bring us a pretty penny. Your Enclave isn't located anywhere near the Tourist Gallery, and it certainly doesn't have any ocean docks. How can your tax revenue stack up against that sort of income?"

"Maybe you can afford to pay your lawyers." Higgins wadded up the popcorn bag and three-point-tossed it into a recycler next to the fabber. "But what can you do for the rest of us? Show me the *money*, honey. You want a seat at *this* poker table, you gotta ante up, stud."

"As uncouth as my compatriot might be, he does hit upon the essential truth of the matter," Scoresby pontificated. "The easiest route to resolving your difficulties is to obtain representation among the City Fathers—and we do not grant that simply on the basis of being a snappy dresser."

"Though there are exceptions!" Higgins interjected. "I mean, just look at me!"

"Quite," Scoresby said dryly. "You Integrates have demonstrated your superhuman powers. Very well, I grant that. Even also granting the purity of your motives, you have henceforth used these powers only to hide amongst and befuddle your fellow Man. Can you turn these powers toward earning an *honest* living? One that will enable you to do more than merely subsist? Prove that, and your other difficulties

will resolve themselves like a toppling chain of dominos.” Scoresby pushed his chair back. “Until such time as you can accomplish this, we have nothing more to say.”

“And that goes double for me!” Higgins added, also getting up.

“Good day, lady and gentlemen.”

“And don’t let the screen door hit you in the bum on the way out!”

And just like that, they left.

INT. HELLIR ENCLAVE – MIDDAY

“I say we bug out and fill this entire place with foamcrete.”

“It’s not *that* bad, Desi.” Tallyhawk frowned at the white mouse Integrate over the conference table.

“From the memories you relayed, it sounds like it is.” Desilu cocked her head and chewed on a pencil, considering. “It was good of Mitchell to take a seat at such a different angle from the two of you. Gives a better perspective for intercutting the conversation...”

Clayton cleared his throat. “Focus, Desi, *focus*.”

“Oh, your field of focus was just fine...oh. Right, sorry.” She smiled nervously. “I guess it’s obvious what *my* meme infection is, huh?”

Mitchell shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, madam; we’ve all been there.”

“But getting back to what you were saying, it sounds like it *is* that bad,” Desilu said. “Lawsuits for fraud, investigations into the circumstances of our licensing—I just heard a rumor that they’re looking into potentially deporting some of the Hooters girls—the real human ones—for working at a fraudulent business. Every day, it multiplies. Maybe we’d be better off cutting our losses and going to Camelot, or Chakona, or one of the other places willing to accept immigration.”

“But you heard what they said.” Tallyhawk cocked her head. “That all this would go away if we just had enough money.”

Desilu rolled her eyes. “*Everything* would go away if we had enough money. But we can’t just pull it out of the banks. Even if they weren’t wise to us, it wouldn’t be right. But what can we do? We don’t have a lucrative trade like Camelot and their ship-building, or Shangri-La and their breweries and distilleries. Just a couple blocks of businesses. *Bankrupt* blocks of businesses, the way things are going now. Damn that Zane Brubeck, anyway. Going public like that *now*. If we’d had more time to get ready...”

Clayton raised an eyebrow. “*Were* we getting ready? What steps were we taking? What was the timeframe on our plan for figuring out how to introduce ourselves *gradually*?”

Desilu bit the pencil in two, glowered at the stub that was left, and threw it angrily across the room. She reached for another from her breast pocket. “Damn! You know there was no such plan. But if we’d known we were going to *need* one, then we could have—”

“Why didn’t we think we were going to need one? Did we think we could just go on like this *forever*?” Clayton snarled. “Hell, *I* knew something like this was going to happen sooner or later, and I’m as guilty as anyone of not doing a damned thing to get ready.”

“I don’t know what else Zane could have done, really,” Mitchell said thoughtfully.

“It pretty much had to be big, public, and sudden, or the Bosscat could have shut it down. Honestly, I’m surprised he let it happen anyway with no more than a few incompetent RIDEs showing up to try to stop it.”

“But just throwing us all into the mix like this...” Clayton sighed. “All the rest of Cape Nord sees is all the underhanded stuff we’ve done to keep our cover intact. Not a whole lot of understanding between them and us, and they don’t want to listen to explanations.”

“Well, the pair we spoke to were pretty understanding, once we filled them in,” Tallyhawk mused, staring into the distance. “Even the Dudebro, in his uncouth way, which kind of surprised me.” She mimicked the man’s accent. “Show me the *money*, honey.”

“What good is that?” Desilu said. “It doesn’t help with our money troubles.”

“No...no, maybe it does,” Tallyhawk said, slowly smiling. “Come on, don’t you remember all the old movies? What did the plucky young hero say to all his friends when the bank threatened to foreclose on the orphanage and get them all sent away to a trade school?”

Desilu blinked. “Let’s put on a show! I *ought* to know that, it’s the whole idea we built the Enclave on. But how does that—?”

“Well, in this case we don’t have to *put on* a show. We’ve been doing that for years. We’ve got petabytes of episodes, and even more petas of raw material.” Tallyhawk was grinning now. “What we need to do now is *put out* a show. Market it—but not just to our fellow Integrates this time. The secret’s out now, so let’s make it available to *everyone*. For a reasonable fee, of course. Everyone’s so Intie-curious now, it would sell if we just read the comm directory.”

Desilu’s jaw dropped, and the pencil fell to the table in front of her. “I never thought about—but no...no, it couldn’t work. All the unsuspecting humans who were featured in the show. We’d have to get releases from all of them.”

“Then compile a list of names in fast-time and have all those people who’re out of work from the Show being frozen work on getting them to sign off,” Clayton said. “Offer them a fee, or residuals, or something, depending on how much they’re in it. If they say no, then just edit ‘em out. Or drop in some virtual actor who doesn’t look anything like ‘em.”

“Hmm, that’s an idea. And it has been a while since the Steaders released anything. There would be a market for new entertainment. But that would just show us playing at being human, it wouldn’t show them...the...real...us...” Desilu frowned, then looked up. “We could do like they did back in the Twentieth. Release it as a ‘special edition’ with ‘behind-the-scenes’ documentaries. Show how it was made—the daily lives of Integrates. *Show* them what our lives were like. Which...would also get all the Integrates who grabbed it already from IntieNet to go out and get it *again!* With *money* this time.” She glanced into the distance, and the DIN on her right ear twinkled. “Yes... yes, I think we could do it. It would take months in fast-time to cut it all together, but we *have* the raw materials. If there’s anything we’re missing, we could get it from the Integrate actors.”

“What about Fritz?” Clayton asked. “He was in some of the episodes right after we went live on IntieNet, remember?”

Tallyhawk turned to him. “Which means even *more* people will want to see those. Especially with the documentary footage of him getting into character. So we can charge

extra for that set.”

“Uh...” Clayton said.

Tallyhawk grinned. “What’s he going to do, sue us? He’s going to be too busy tangling with that Brubeck and his cronies to come after us for sharing home movies. Besides, he ought to be happy about it, overall—we bent over backward to give him a good role, and you know how he loves an audience. This’ll give put him in front of all of Zharus.”

Desilu picked the pencil back up and toyed with it again. “I think...I think it could work. I’ll get the other Editors working on compiling a list of the talent we need to clear, and edit lists for how to deal with them if they decline. Then we can put as many of the cast as we can round up on contacting them and making the offers.”

“Otherwise, we can do a pretty simple find-and-replace of faces and even entire people with randomly generated extras,” Clayton said.

Desilu nodded. “And if they come around once the show is popular, we can simply undo it and push the revisions out. Though they won’t get as much money as the people who said yes first thing.”

“Sounds like this would be the best possible time for something like that, too,” Mitchell said. “I mean, from what I’ve seen around. After all these years of being invisible bogeymen, now that we’re out everyone wants to know all there is to know about us, and there just isn’t much out there.”

“Oh, but there *will be*.” Desilu chuckled. “There absolutely will. But we need to get on this right away. Strike while the iron is hot. I’m going to need all hands for this.” She glanced at Mitchell. “Or hooves, trotters, whatever. If you wouldn’t mind helping out?”

Mitchell beamed. “If you have something an ex-cop feral can help with, I’m your boar.”

“We’ll *find* something.” She stared off into the distance, DIN twinkling again. “I’ll have everyone put their plots on hold again for the duration—I’ll need their help on this, too. They’ll grumble a little, but once they find out what it’s for they’ll jump at the chance.” She grinned. “Hey, everyone...*let’s put on a show!*”

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EXT. CHARLIE’S SPORTS BAR – NIGHT

Chief Willard Selleck pulled his unmarked skimmer into his usual spot out front of his favorite drinking establishment. Just down the block from the cop shop, Charlie’s was a sort of unofficial police bar. The booze and beer was raw, but it was also cheap—and even a Law Chief’s salary didn’t stretch far enough to poison himself with the good stuff *all* the time. Or...very much of the time at all, really.

And if he ever needed a good dose of alcohol in his system, it was a day like today. The news had been all over all the channels. That cockamamie bobcat had shown up in Uplift, killed several people, and carved up Zane Brubeck and some other Integrate bodyguard like a pair of turkeys, before getting run off by still another Integrate who was *supposedly* the missing Quinoa Steader. Yeah, sure, whatever. And *he* was Charlton Heston. Not that he really cared one way or the other right now. It had been a day of everyone running around like a chicken with their damn fool head cut off, and way too

many fires for a man to piss on at once. *Booze...booze booze booze...*

Selleck was just stepping away from the car when a voice behind him said, “Chief Selleck?”

He whirled, and his gauss magnum was in his hand before he was even consciously aware of drawing it. But there was no one there. “Who the—”

“It’s me. Tallyhawk,” the voice said again. It seemed to be coming from somewhere else, he couldn’t tell exactly where. “Mitch Goldman, P.I. If you’ll holster that hog leg, I’ll show myself. Forgive the melodrama, but after yesterday, everyone’s a little jumpy around us, and I just didn’t want to end up with bullet holes *before* we had a chance to talk.”

“You people ain’t exactly trustworthy, especially now,” Selleck growled. “Eh, screw it.” He shoved the gun back under his armpit. “All right, fine. You wanna talk, hawkwoman? Spit it out.”

Tallyhawk faded into visibility a couple of meters away from him. She had a bottle tucked under her arm. “Actually, I want to buy you a drink. And then talk.” She leaned over, put the bottle on the ground between them, and backed away.

Selleck was curious in spite of himself, because he thought he recognized the label on the bottle. He took a couple steps forward and squatted to take a look. “The Balvenie’ 17-year-old single malt scotch. Imported from Earth. Tryin’ to bribe me now?” The seal on the bottle appeared intact. From the patina of dust on it, it looked to have sat on a shelf for a while.

“No bribe. Just a...peace offering.” The damn bird *smirked* at him. At least, he thought it was a smirk, if he was reading the expressions right on her...beak. “We’ve shared booze, Chief. You listen better with a drink or two in you, and I wouldn’t want to feel guilty for contributing to your ulcers with that lighter fluid they serve in there.” She chuckled. “Oh, and for what it’s worth, I didn’t steal that. It’s from the stockroom of the Blind Boar Tavern, a bar we run on McKenna Street. Paid for it myself, with money I really earned.”

Selleck could have easily fixed those ulcers with some over-the-counter nanny-pills, but True Nordsmen learned to endure pain. At least, ones that still had “Pending” next to the title did. When it finally came through, *then* he’d see. Besides, they made a handy excuse when he needed to get out of something That Damn Woman wanted him to do. Why he’d ever married her in the first place...

But he was wool-gathering again. “All right, so what do you want?”

“Just a chance to talk. Fill you in on what we know from the Integrate scene that might not have been on the news. And...ask a favor, maybe.”

“Hmph. Figures you’d want something.” But it actually made him feel a little better to know that the world still worked the way it always had. Whatever these... techno-animal-things were, they at least still *thought* like people. “So talk, then.”

“Here?” She waved a hand around at the parking lot. It was deserted at the moment, but any time now someone could come out of the bar, or pull in to park, and see him right there talking to one of Cape Nord’s resident superhumans with a bottle of booze on the ground between them.

He had to admit, he saw the problem. Probably wouldn’t do his rep any good to be seen meeting furtively. “Where, then?”

She shrugged. “You choose. Even in there’s fine, if you don’t think booze that good would ruin the atmosphere.”

He snorted. “The booze wouldn’t, but maybe being seen with you would.” He stood and picked up the bottle. “This bar of yours, it’s open to the public? Like the rest of your street?”

“Yes. Not that we get many customers, what with the roadblocks that just sprung up, but we’ve got nothing to hide anymore.”

“All right, what the hell. You got me curious, and you even bought the booze. Might’s well drink it where it came from, and I ain’t talking about Scotland. I’ll meet you at that bar of yours in half an hour.” He’d just comm someone at the station and let ‘em know where he was going, just in case.

“Fair enough. I’ll see you there.” Tallyhawk bowed, then vanished again.

“Yeah, and I’ll see you, too.” Selleck shook his head and got back in his car, putting the booze in the shotgun seat. At least getting by the roadblocks wouldn’t be a problem for the likes of *him*.

INT. BLIND BOAR TAVERN – NIGHT

Getting to the place wasn’t a problem. It was the first time he’d actually been there, in fact. A Law Chief wasn’t in the habit of going to private detectives’ offices, and since they’d come out to the public there hadn’t really been a good opportunity to rubberneck the neighborhood. It hadn’t exactly been a crime scene—at least, not the kind of crime that took detectives to solve.

It looked funny to see a street so empty of people, but then, most of the businesses were closed and the police were currently keeping anyone who didn’t live in the neighborhood from coming in. Well, at least they knew where he was. A couple had offered to come along, but he told them he wanted an hour to meet with an informant alone.

The bar was open, and the bird was the only one in the room. She was sitting at a table in the open, with a pair of empty shot glasses on it. Looked a little nervous, then relieved when she saw him. *They got people body language, too. So maybe they’re just funny-looking people, huh?*

He stopped halfway into the room, glanced around, nodded thoughtfully. It was all polished wood and well-kept furnishings, well-used dartboard on the wall, expensive pool tables at one end. A few notches up the ladder from Charlie’s, but the same general type of establishment. “Swanky kinda place. But I guess it goes with the fancy scotch.” He set the bottle down on the table, twisted the seal broken, pulled the cork, and took a sniff. Then he poured a healthy dose into each glass. “All right, so talk.”

She nodded, raising the glass to him and taking a sip. “First off, *we* didn’t have anything to do with the attacks on Uplift or Nextus.”

He sniffed. “So you say.” He sipped the scotch. It was good. Too damn good to gulp, much as he would’ve liked to. So he sipped again. “That bobcat-whatever *was* one of your kind though.”

“Lynx, actually...but yes he was. He’s the one who thinks he’s the boss of us. Who *was* the boss of us up until a little bit ago, and wants to prove it to Zane Brubeck and anyone else who might be watching. What he did yesterday is probably more a message to other Integrates that he’s still the Bosscat than meant to scare you humans.”

Selleck waved a hand. “Bobcat, lynx, what the hell ever. Stumpy tail, bad attitude, same difference.” He supposed he shouldn’t swear in front of a lady...but on the other

hand, this woman wasn't exactly a *lady* anyhow. "So what's it all mean to you? What're you gonna do, huh? You gonna, what, volunteer to *protect* us from him if he comes knocking here?"

"Cape Nord is our home, Chief. If any of Fritz's followers try and cause trouble here, you can be *certain* we'll fight back. We'd like to coordinate defenses with you, if possible. Not that we *expect* him to show up here—his fight's with Zane and Uplift, and he won't go looking for more trouble until he's settled that. But that's not actually why I wanted to speak with you tonight. In fact, enough talk, I think I'll just show you. Roll 'em, Desi!"

One of the walls had a large blank patch on it, and it now became apparent why as a projector hanging from the ceiling clicked on. A title card came up: *The Goldman & Catanno Mysteries*.

Selleck *did* take a gulp of scotch at that. "The hell is this? You got me down here to show me your f—your damn home videos?"

Tallyhawk paused on the title. "One of the conditions of being able to stay here Fritz pushed on us was that we had to be monitored 30/6, to make sure we weren't crossing the line and letting you know about us. Like I told you the other day, we turned that into a diversion. This is one of the results."

That didn't make him feel a whole lot better. "So you're showing me your home videos...of *me*."

She shook her head. "Oh, don't worry, I'm not going to make you sit through the whole thing. This is just a 'highlight reel' to give you the gist. For the rest..." She placed a memory module on the table next to the bottle of scotch. "Every episode and behind-the-scenes featurette we've gone done is on here. The rough cuts, anyway; we're still finishing up some of them. You can watch it or not on your own time." She started the footage again. "Remember that big jewel heist two years ago? The one you called the 'Family Jewels' case? This is what we made out of it...or at least, one of the scenes involving you, anyway."

The scene playing out on-screen was a conference in Selleck's office. After an overzealous Law detective had arrested Goldman on suspicion of complicity in a jewel theft, his assistant Jade Catanno had come down and bailed him out, and they'd barged into Selleck's office and talked to him together. Selleck had been skeptical at the time—he'd thought something about it hadn't added up. Now he thought he knew why—they'd been faking stuff up for their damned show—but he couldn't be sure now if that was what he really *had* thought then, or just what he *thought* he'd thought then. In any event, he'd accepted Goldman's innocence provisionally, they'd worked together, and had ended up catching the real crook. He'd confessed to everything, and now he was doing five to ten with possible time off for good behavior.

As he watched, Selleck realized something was off about the scene from how he remembered it. It felt like they'd cut some inconsequential chatter to tighten it up, but also, it looked like...they made it look like...*wait just a damned minute here*.

For once, Selleck was speechless. "But how the..." He couldn't even find the right curse word, and wasn't sure whether it was because he was trying to find one that was tame enough to use in front of The Fairer Sex, or trying to find one that was extreme enough to encompass what he'd just seen. "I *wasn't acting*, but you made it look like I was!"

Tallyhawk shrugged. "Part of that's creative editing. Desi's *very* good at that.

We've got very good soundtrack composers, too. But part of it is...well, you kind of *were* 'acting.' Just as you're 'acting' right now. Pretty much every Man in Cape Nord is 'acting,' every moment he's out in public—because if he doesn't present as his most Manly any time someone might be watching him, he can get docked points, and that can eventually have physical consequences.”

“But that's just...” Selleck trailed off again, as he slowly put it together.

“Just the Reindeer Games?” Tallyhawk prompted gently. “Yes, it is. Because Cape Nord was founded as an offshoot of Sturmhaven, which was itself founded as a fancy live-action role-playing retreat. And you're all *still* playing roles, it's just that you've built your daily lives around them so you don't see them anymore.”

Selleck was silent for a long moment, then he carefully refilled his shot glass and gulped it down again, heedless of the flavor. She was right. He saw that now. He *did* present as a gruff-but-wise father figure, because that was how you earned points in the Man Card class he'd chosen. He knew full well deep down it was all an act, but he'd simply gotten into the habit...and there he was.

The bird-lady's beak twisted in a wry smile as she went on. “And those roles these days are largely based on modern interpretations of old TV shows and movies dug up by the Steaders—shows that the history books tell us were recognized as artificial even back when they were first made. The original Rulebook from when Cape Nord was first founded was mostly based on old half-remembered platitudes like 'big boys don't cry,' and was a 16-page pamphlet. Have you looked at it lately? It's ten volumes! It's worse than the 5th edition of *Dungeons and Dragons!*”

Well, that's why we have Nerds to keep the Rules straight, he thought. Now that he thought about it, he wasn't even really sure *why* everyone continued to play the Games, and to force those around them to play them. The original people who'd set them up were long since dead, so couldn't everyone just agree together to stop forcing everyone else to conform to the artificial standards, instead of *adding to them* every time a new TV show was discovered?

Except they won't, Selleck suddenly realized. It was like an epiphany. *It's just too damned much fun to have that much power over your fellow Man. Turn him into a woman if he slips up too much. Letting your fellow Man have the same kind of power over you would be cheap at the price, wouldn't it? After all, you don't plan to slip up yourself.*

“The Show wouldn't have worked nearly as well in any other polity, except maybe Sturmhaven. Really, I guess it was the way everyone here acts a part without even realizing it that sort of gave us the idea to ham it up ourselves. Then one thing led to another, and that led to The Show as you see it. But even then, we stay within the limits of the Reindeer Game ourselves when people who aren't in on the secret are around. For instance, nobody but us could hear our internal monologues from that scene while they were happening.”

Selleck poured himself some more scotch. He felt he needed it *now* more than ever. “So what...what do you want, then?”

“Well...I said we wanted to ask a favor. And the favor is...well, we're planning to release our Show, complete and uncut, to Integrates, humans, and RIDEs alike. But to do that, we need to get permission from everyone who appeared in it. That includes you.” Tallyhawk put a tablet and stylus on the table. “If you sign that release allowing us to use your likeness, we'll compensate you a tenth of a percent of overall revenue for the

sales of any episodes in which you appear. Or if you prefer, ten thousand *mu* cash up front instead.” She smiled. “I’d take the percentage, if I were you.”

Selleck looked from the screen, currently frozen on a shot showing him behind his desk with Goldman and Catanno in front of it, down to the tablet. “And if I don’t sign it?”

“Then we swap out your likeness with some computer-generated character.” Tallyhawk shrugged. “He’ll still say the same things, but will look and sound entirely different, and be named something different, and nobody will ever know it was supposed to be you. I’d really rather not—I think you were really good in the role, and you deserve recognition for it, and compensation for being filmed unaware like that. But we will change it up if we have to.”

Selleck picked up the form and forced himself to read through it. The language was pretty clear for legalese, and as far as he could tell it offered exactly what they said it did. “And people will see...me. In that TV series of yours.”

Tallyhawk nodded. “If you want to take some time before signing it to watch more episodes, make sure we didn’t make you look bad...”

Selleck barked a harsh laugh. “Made me look *bad*? Hell, you made me look better than *I* thought I did, which takes some doing. Do I want people to see me like that? What Man wouldn’t? I’ll take the percentage, thanks.” He picked up the stylus and signed. Then he drained the shot of scotch.

“I...need to go home and...think, I think.” He got slowly to his feet.

Tallyhawk nodded, then waved a hand to the table. “Don’t forget your bottle. And the memory chip.”

“Right.” Selleck picked up both, pocketed the chip, and tucked the bottle under an arm, and started to go.

Behind him, he heard the woman stand up and say, “Chief Selleck...”

He grunted and half-turned. “Hmm?”

“I’m sorry about...well, shattering your illusion, I guess.”

He waved it away with his free hand. “Forget it. I’ve always said I’d rather know the truth, even if it hurt. Be a damn fool hypocrite if I backed down on that now.” He shook his head. “I’ll do what I can to get the roadblocks...lessened. But they came down from over my head, so...”

“I understand, Chief. Have a good night.”

He shook his head, set his shoulders, and walked out into the night. Just another Man with a lot on his mind.

INT. HELLIR ENCLAVE – GREEN ROOM – NIGHT

Desilu frowned. “Damn it, Tally, I think you just broke one of our best character actors. Now that he’s seen the Man behind the curtain, will he still be able to play the role in quite the same way? Or will he turn all self-conscious?”

Tallyhawk shrugged. “It couldn’t be helped. He was too stubborn and opinionated to just sign the release because we asked him to. This at least gets him on our side a little, or at least not so much *against* us as he was.” She paused. “Besides, I happen to know his True Nordsman status goes final next week. So you could spin any changes in his personality as coming from being accredited secure in his masculinity so he doesn’t have to put on the act anymore, come to that.”

“I suppose there is that...” Desilu shook her head. “At least he doesn’t know about the *women* and their little mystery cult.”

Tallyhawk smiled wryly. “That really *would* break him.” She shook her head. “Anyway, we’ve filled him in on how we stand *vis-a-vis* Fritz, got his form signed, and that’s all done and dusted.”

Desilu nodded. “I guess I do have to admit, we always knew getting him to sign was going to take some doing, but it was *worth* doing, as much power as he can swing. If we did ‘ruin’ him for future episodes, well, we can work around that. All in all, you did a great job.”

Tallyhawk thought back to the episodes they’d just excerpted for Selleck’s benefit. The way the “Family Jewels” case had gone, Hellir’s network snoops had noticed someone bypassing an alarm on the jewelry store the next neighborhood over, and managed to maneuver Goldman onto the scene just in time, having him stop in for dinner at the restaurant across the street and then his keen detective intuition notice something was wrong. So he barely missed catching the guy, but was coincidentally on the scene looking for clues when the police arrived, in the best hard-boiled detective novel tradition.

Of course, the Hellir snoops knew exactly who the burglar was, as they’d simply bypassed his bypass of the cameras and hence seen (and recorded) the whole thing—but in the name of verisimilitude, nobody else got to see it. Tallyhawk had carefully left all that stuff out of the screening for Selleck, but she supposed it would come out in the behind-the-scenes segments. Hopefully he wouldn’t get around to watching those for a while.

Knowing exactly who the perp was, it was simple enough for them to find sufficient clues to point him out. They didn’t even need to fabricate any, as the burglar was just that sloppy. Goldman was able to “find” the clues and lead the cops to the right guy, they arrested him, and everyone was happy. Meanwhile, Hellir’s writers wove their own entirely fictitious storyline around the real-life robbery, throwing a mysterious crime syndicate, Jade Catanno’s evil twin sister separated at birth, and an ancient relic believed to have alien origins into the mix—but none of *that* ever got anywhere near the real-life cops. All that was explained, of course, in the making-of segments that would accompany the episode’s official release. It had been one of their more popular storylines. It might cause a little fuss amongst the mundanes when it came out, but they’d added enough disclaimers to it that their posteriors would hopefully be covered.

“Not something I want to have to do again soon, though.” Tallyhawk shook her head. “It’s just a good thing most of the clearances are a lot simpler.”

Desilu chuckled. “Yeah. ‘Oh, you wanna put me on TV? And you made me look good? And you’ll pay me for it? Where do I sign?’”

“So, who’s next on the list? I think I’ve still got time to check off a couple more names today.”

“As it happens, I do have a couple more candidates for you to talk to.” She beamed the contact information over.

“Right. I’ll get right on it.”

“Good!” Desilu grinned. “With any luck, we’ll be ready to air in only a week or so.”

“We’d better be.” Tallyhawk frowned. “The way things are going, we need to start telling people more about us, and soon.”

“I had some ideas about that, actually,” Desilu said. “I’m thinking we could do kind of a talk show on launch day. Call it ‘Hello, Hellir’...”

September 11, 156 AL

INT. GOLDMAN DETECTIVE AGENCY – DAY

The office looked the same way as it always had. A desk whose chief occupants were a pair of crossed legs slanting down to the chair behind it and a half-empty bottle of bourbon. Simulated sunlight coming through the blinds, the slats making a pattern of stripes on the opposite wall. A low bluesy saxophone wailing somewhere in the distance.

Then a pair of feline legs in fishnet stockings and high heels clacked into the foreground, and a woman politely cleared her throat. The pair of legs on the desk slowly swung down, and Mitch Goldman’s torso and head rose into view as he straightened up, fedora pulled down over his face. “Whadayawant, JadeCat?” he grumbled as he pushed the brim of the hat back.

The camera perspective stayed locked as Jade walked forward to the desk, coming into view from the knees up as she approached it. “What I *want* is a new case for us to work on. *You’ve* been slacking off, mister.”

“What do you expect, toots?” Mitch shook his head. “No one’s coming around this block anymore. We’re pure poison, ever since those...Intie-whatsits came out.”

“That just means we have to try a little harder.” Jade turned and walked to the window, separating the slats with her fingers and peering out. “Look at it another way, we maybe just doubled our clientele, is all. After all, who’s an Integrate going to come to when they need to do things on the quiet in the human world?”

“They already *do* do things on the quiet in the human world on their own. That’s what the papers said.”

“Aw, what do they know? There are still some things you need a good old-fashioned human for.”

Goldman sat up straighter. “You just don’t get it, kid. They can disguise themselves so they look just like us. Hell, anyone could be an Intie. Maybe even you or me.”

And then they both turned to face the camera and dropped their disguises—and there they were, Jade and Tallyhawk. Except that the standing-up “Jade” was actually Tallyhawk, while “Mitch” was the real Jade. “Surprise!” they said in unison.

“Forgive us for breaking character, but it’s for a good cause.” Tallyhawk grinned. “For the first time ever, we’re releasing every episode of *The Show* on the wide-open market. Humans, RIDEs, Integrates...find out what all the fuss here in Cape Nord is about.”

“And just to make it worth your while if you’re already a fan, *this* copy comes with hours and hours of behind-the-scenes documentaries and featurettes. Making-of, cast and crew interviews, the works.” Jade grinned. “So you can see how we entertain ourselves, *and* how we live, at the same time.”

“Just one thing, though.” Tallyhawk raised a hand. “If you’re one of our long-time Integrate fans—in keeping with the new spirit of openness, in the name of greater understanding and all that jazz, we ask you buy it with money you actually *earn*. Find a job, or go out and dig up some Q...whatever. Just get it legit, not with sticky fingers.

Make our lives easier, okay?"

Jade pushed back the chair and got up, and Tallyhawk moved over to the chair and sat down. "You remember where we were?"

"I do." Jade moved over to the window and separated the same slats with her fingers.

"Then...action!" Then Tallyhawk was Mitch Goldman, and Jade was...still Jade. "Hell, anyone could be an Intie. Maybe even you or me."

Jade giggled. "*That* would be something, wouldn't it? I'd think if *we* were Inties, we'd have known already."

Mitch shrugged. "I'm just saying, anything's possible." He uncapped the bottle of bourbon and poured it into a handy shot glass. "I dunno, maybe you're right. Maybe we should try to scare up some more business."

"I think we'd better try. This rent's not going to pay itself, you know."

"...and, CUT!" The Integrates dropped their hardlight disguises again as the "camera" stopped rolling.

Jade sighed. "Think the City Fathers will buy it?"

"If they don't at first, they will once their accountants go through our books and see our tax revenues," Desilu said cheerfully, rising to her feet. She had been squatting at the other end of the office, providing the camera angle with a handheld unit. "We're being completely open every step of the way."

Someone knocked at the door. "Excuse me—I heard Jade was up here?" Jade's younger sister Kisa stepped into the room, followed a moment later by an elk RIDE.

"Kisa! Glad you could make it!" Jade ran over to give her sister a hug. "Welcome to behind the scenes!"

"Oof." Kisa hugged her sister back. "Sorry we're late. Flint and I got held up on the way in. Traffic jam. He dropped us off while he parks the truck."

"There's no place to park a rig that size within five blocks," Tallyhawk said.

"Well, the elevator's just a block away, actually, but the entrance is a couple of clicks to go. Cape Nord: a maze of twisty passages, all alike." Kisa grinned. "Hello... Tallyhawk, was it? Jade's told me all about you. I guess we might have met when I was here last time, but this is my first chance to meet you for real."

"I remember you, Kisa—and Jade's told me about Dolores." Tallyhawk nodded to the elk. "Pleased to meet you both." She chuckled. "Flint really did set the cat among the pigeons when he and you just turned up on our doorstep."

Kisa blushed a little. "She mentioned. It was just one of those things, I guess. I'd apologize, but..."

"No need for that." Desilu chuckled. "Sudden adrenaline spikes are good for the writers. Does their little hearts and circulation pumps good. I'm Desilu, the chief inmate in the asylum."

"You're a mouse? I...hope that didn't sound racist, but, I'm continually amazed at just how many animal types there are among RIDEs, so I guess that translates to Integrates, too."

"We're a diverse bunch, that's for sure," Tallyhawk said. "I'm not even technically a mammal, either. For all I have these...attributes."

"Breasts, honey. You can say the word," Jade said.

"Which is kind of funny, as I'm pretty sure no part of your RIDE woulda been a real bird," Dolores said. "Weird how that works. If it happens to Kisa and me, I'll

become a real...half-an-elk? It's like some kind of weird sideways Pinnocchio thing."

"Your guess is as good as ours, Dolores," Desilu said. "Anyway, the Editors are working on getting our series pitch ready to send to the City Fathers."

"What if they turn it down?" Kisa asked. "I mean, Jade told me about what you all are planning to do..."

"To be honest, we don't actually think they'll bother to look at it," Desilu said. "It's not like they've bothered opening any of our mail before."

"Now, Desi, you don't *know* that," Tallyhawk said. "Just that they haven't ever bothered to reply."

"And why would they break a perfect record?" Desilu chuckled. "But on the outside chance they *should* see it, and object, we'll do what we've always done when the unexpected happens. Right, crew?"

"We ad-lib!" Jade said, grinning. "It's always worked before."

"We've all been working like crazy to get it ready, the last couple of weeks. We've got all the editing done, with the exception of a few last people we still need to clear before we know if we can go with them as shot or have to swap in more Fake Shemps. Once we get those last few yea-or-nays, we're good to go."

"Desi's been doing a bang-up job keeping track of everything," Tallyhawk said. "Crises always do bring out the best in her."

Desilu rolled her eyes. "Oh, spare my blushes. But anyway, once the last few are cleared up, we'll be ready to roll. And right about time, too. Goodness. I wish we had longer to add a little more polish, but we couldn't have asked for a better time to release this. All the things that have happened in the last two weeks...Brubeck taking back his platform, that crazy Steader girl skydiving from outer space..."

"Nexus's richest citizen attacked in his own home, Uplift's city government plaza torn up, Zane Brubeck put in the hospital..." Jade nodded. "I'm glad I was already here helping you out before most of that happened. It feels a lot *safer* within Enclave walls these days. Brrr."

"At least Brubeck's out of the hospital now and doing better." Tallyhawk clicked her beak. "And people are going nuts to learn more about us."

"It's not exactly helping your popularity with the rest of Cape Nord, though, is it?" Kisa shook her head. "You wouldn't believe how hard it was for us to make it through here today—they've basically blocked off every road in. If Jade hadn't told us about that secret back way..."

"Talons crossed that once The Show gets out, it'll change a few hearts and minds," Tallyhawk said firmly. "Anyway, they're not *all* against us. Some of them want to 'recruit' us as a defense militia just in case Fritz should decide to attack here."

Jade rolled her eyes. "Joy and rapture. After how he tore up Uplift, though, I can't say I blame them. He killed a lot of people."

"And we're in a cave," Desilu said. "If he gets pissed off enough he could just bring the whole thing down on everyone with a few blasts of that cannon of his. Olympos redux."

"Not for a few more weeks he can't, as badly as that crazy Steader girl carved him up." Tallyhawk shook her head. "After all that, I'd almost be worried about him taking a pet at The Show after all, except something tells me he's going to be focused on the people who hit him with the sticks and stones once he gets better."

"We'll just have to bite the bullet and keep our eyes and ears peeled for any of his

‘Ascendant’ who show their faces,” Jade said.

“Well, we’re basically all done except those last few release forms,” Desilu said. “They’ve been some of the toughest to get ahold of.”

Tallyhawk chuckled. “If you need the services of a good private detective, I think I know where you might find one.”

Desilu looked distant for a moment, DIN twinkling. “Actually...I think we’ve got a line on the rest of them now. Care to help?”

“Why not?” Jade said. “Let’s get it over with so we can finally get this Show on the road.”

September 12, 156 AL

INT. HELLIR TELEVISION STUDIO, CONTROL ROOM – AFTERNOON

“Well, that’s that. Last ‘I’ dotted, last ‘t’ crossed, uploads complete.” Desilu considered the comm screen, then cracked her knuckles over a control board with physical sliders, dials, and buttons. The past week the Enclave had dug a number of new rooms and set them up as an old-fashioned TV studio, complete with newsdesk, control room, and a big “ON AIR” sign, as yet unlit.

The control room was set up with all the trimmings of a real twentieth-century television production studio—because apart from being a working control room, it would also be a set for TV studio scenes should any plot require one. In fact, with Zharus being the crazy nostalgic place it was, it would work equally well for both the modern Show *and* one-off period dramas, in case anyone wanted to make some.

At the moment, Desilu and her chief assistant editors, the weasel Mark Seven and the black labrador Ubu, occupied the three main seats at the controls. Tallyhawk, Clayton, and Jade were leaning against the back wall, and Mitchell was watching through the open door, it being a little too narrow for a feral of his size to maneuver. Everyone was wearing bulky twencen headsets because the setting demanded it—even Mitchell. He looked remarkably silly with a headset on, but that was part of the point.

But right now they were using the control room for its *other* purpose—controlling the broadcast feeds to the outside world. Not that they really *needed* a physical room for that—they could have done it from virtual just as easily—but given the nature of The Show, it felt apropos that it be controlled from a set.

Desilu nodded to the screen, which showed the tail end of a long list of episodes, all with full progress bars with “100% CRC OK” at the end. “The episodes are ready to sell, and the commercials are ready to blanket the net. The press releases are queued up to hit every major and minor news agency and NextusLeaks. All I have to do is tap this button and the sales are on.”

Clayton raised an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t NextusLeaks have gotten their copy last night?”

Desilu smirked. “We’re not in Nextus, now are we?” She glanced over her shoulder to Tallyhawk. “This whole thing was your idea. Would you care to do the honors?”

The studio was set up like a morning TV newsmagazine program, like *The Today Show* or *Sunday Morning*. There was a leather couch for guests and a couple of comfy chairs for the hosts. It was a traditional three-camera interview setup, with an arc of

cameras facing the stage—one camera each for the host and the guests, and the one in the middle to hold a medium two-shot. The cameras were fully functional, with the one concession to modernity being that they could shoot in ultra-high-definition VR-quality 3D. The stage backdrop was intentionally sparse and more than a little faded in spots, as if this really was a small, local TV station that didn't have a lot of budget for this sort of thing. No one was actually on the set just yet, because the "talent" was there in the control room with them for the momentous occasion of the release.

Tallyhawk chuckled. "You know, if you thought we were swamped with fans and wanna-bes when we went live on IntieNet..."

Jade chuckled. "How bad could it be? They're just *humans*. And RIDEs. They don't *get* meme-infected."

"They don't get meme-infected the *fast* way," Clayton corrected. "They just *work up to it*, then they're capable of being every bit as crazy as we are. For that matter, any RIDE who wants to fast-time it could probably binge every episode in under half an hour real-time. That's how the Steaders got everyone hooked on the twentieth century to begin with—with RIDEs' help."

Desilu shivered. "Brrr. You're scaring *me*, and I've actually *done* that." She nodded to the button. "Well?"

"Well, here goes everything," Tallyhawk said. It was a big red button that came alight when she pushed it with a satisfying click. "Now, we wait." She glanced at the clock on the wall—like the rest of the set, a practical prop. "We planned to go live at the top of the hour—and that's just fifteen minutes away. Might as well take our places."

Desilu nodded. "Right. I'm calling in the camera crew." A door in the other side of the set opened and three more Integrates filed in to pick up their headsets and station themselves at the cameras. DevCorby, Aeolia Keys, and Hanley Rose took up their positions and flashed quick thumbs-up to the plate glass window of the control room.

"So, where do you want me?" Flint Ironstag asked.

"You're our humaniform-type representative, so take a seat on the couch. Mitchell will sit in the space between the couch and the hosts," Desilu said. She reached up to the headset. "Okay, Camera 1 give me a good tight close-up of the hosts. Camera 3, the guests. 2, get all of them in frame and hold it there." She glanced at the monitors showing the feeds from the cameras. "Okay, good. Lock it off and hold it there. We can do a little quick rehearsal while we wait..."

"We're already starting to get some comm calls," Ubu reported. "The switchboard crew are on 'em. Telling 'em to tune in to our feed in a few minutes. So far nobody important..."

"Right. Well, unless it's Zane Brubeck, Joe Steader, or, God help us, the Bosscat himself, we're all unavoidably detained."

"Wouldn't be the Bosscat, at least," Clayton said. "Wouldn't expect a peep out of him for another month or so."

"Thank Heaven for small favors." Desilu rolled her eyes. "Okay, let's all drop into fast-time for a quick rehearsal. We won't be rehearsing any of the questions and answers—we want spontaneity—but I want to make sure everyone's clear on staging and direction. Here's how this is going to go. When we're ready to start, I'll say..."

"Quiet on the set! We're live in five...four...three..." The last two counts were

silent, in case some itchy trigger finger flipped the mics live early. They really were doing this just like a twentieth-century studio, right down to the clip-on lavalier microphones on collars or nearest equivalents (including one attached to Mitchell's shoulder with medical tape) even though they weren't strictly necessary. But Zharus had been long-enough immersed in twencen pop culture that it could appreciate a good reenactment.

The ON AIR sign in the control room came alight.

Then, in the control booth, Desilu began to direct. "Ready camera 2...take 2!" Mark Seven punched one of the glowing buttons on the board in front of him and the picture on the main monitor showed the talent and the guests. On the left, Flint sat on the sofa, still a little self-conscious even after the rehearsal. Mitchell sat on his haunches on the floor, looking rather calmer than Flint. Across from them in two reasonably-comfortable chairs were Tallyhawk and Jade, also in their undisguised Integrate forms.

:Remember, look into camera 1 for the introduction, then don't look directly at the cameras after that,: Desilu sent. "Ready camera 1...take 1," she said aloud in the booth. The light on the front of camera 2 went out, and it switched to 1. *:Okay, go.:* One area where they weren't bothering for verisimilitude was in the crew-to-talent comms, since Intie broadcasts were so much simpler.

Tallyhawk nodded in greeting to the camera. "Hello, everyone. Welcome to our inaugural episode of *Hello, Hellir*. I'm Tallyhawk, and my co-host is Jade. We realize you all have a lot of questions after the last couple of weeks, and we hope we can answer some of them for you tonight."

"Ready camera 3...take 3."

"With us right now are our first guests, Flint Ironstag and Mitchell—"

:Oh no...I just thought of something,: Mitchell sent in fast-time. *:What if my momma is watching?:*

:Then she ought to be very proud that her son is on TV,: Tallyhawk replied in kind. *:C'mon, you only just thought of that just now?:*

Mitchell sent an icon of faint embarrassment. *:I kinda got caught up in the excitement.:*

:Well, it's too late to do anything about that now.:

"—Gaffney. We're going to talk a little bit about our Integrate lives, and about The Show which you'll have noticed is newly available for purchase in your favorite media store. Flint, Mitchell, welcome to *our* show."

"Well, I'm a little surprised you'd want a truck driver like me on your very first show, but here I am," Flint said. He just looked like a man with RIDE tags, the ears, tail, and antler nubs of a whitetail deer.

"Or a porcine feral-form ex-cop, either," Mitchell added.

Jade smiled. "Give yourselves some credit, guys. You're here because you, in addition to your hosts, help us represent the average Intie, from human-form to feral. *And* the average joe humans and RIDEs, too. Point is, we can't all be Zane Brubeck."

"And neither can our new audience. I expect there are a lot of truck drivers and cops out there watching us tonight. And hair stylists, and bartenders, and even Hooters girls." Tallyhawk grinned.

Flint nodded. "Well, you've got us there."

"By now, just about everyone knows the basics about Integration—how it happens, what it does, and so on," Tallyhawk continued. "But we'd like to start off by

talking about what it means in a little more detail.”

“Once people know more about *what* we are, then we can move on to *who*,” Jade added. “So, Mitchell...I think you’ve been Integrated longer. Why don’t we start with you?”

“Er...all right,” Mitchell said, still a little nervous. “Well, I used to be a cop with the Aloha PD. One day, I was out on a stakeout, and...”

The interview went on for a good half hour, covering the basics of Mitchell’s and Flint’s Integrated-life stories. They touched on the good parts and bad parts, the Enclaves and their relations to them, and the Bosscat and everyone’s relations to him. Tallyhawk and Jade kept the questions moving, prompted by the Script which was this time doing duty as an interview teleprompter.

“That’s all we have time for right now,” Jade said.

“But stick around—*Hello, Hellir* will resume in a half hour, when we’ll tell you more about what The Show is, how it came to be, and so on,” Tallyhawk picked up. “But first, we thought we’d do a little ‘show don’t tell.’ So don’t touch that dial—next up is a highlight reel our editors put together, to give you a sort of preview of what’s waiting for you if you order up. See you soon.”

“Three, two, one, and...we’re out! Great job, everyone!” The monitors changed over to a station identification card, and a moment later the introductory reel began. Over the next half hour, it would sketch out some of the subplots around the more popular characters, interspersed with behind-the-scenes footage showing it getting made.

“Well, that was definitely no Hakuna Matata song and dance,” Mitchell said. “I need one of those Shangri-Laagers.”

Flint scratched around his antler nubs. “I’ve always wanted to be on the Show, but like that? Ugh.”

“I know it was a strain, but we all appreciate it,” Jade said as they all took off their mics and left them on the seats. “You handled yourself like a trouper. Besides, I’m sure we can come up with a good guest role for you on the *real* Show. You strike me as the Jack Burton type. You’ve seen *Big Trouble in Little China*, right?”

Mitchell snorted. “Now that’s typecasting if I’ve ever heard it.”

The next segment was going to be with Jade’s sister, Kisa, and her RIDE, Dolores. Kisa’s own background, coming nearly forty light years in search of her vanished sibling, was to provide a perspective on how much damage Integrates keeping themselves from the rest of humanity had done. Then, in their APD uniforms, Tallyhawk and Mitchell would go over “missing persons” statistics and appeal to anyone who hadn’t come out yet to friends and family to do so.

“So, what’s the news from the switchboard?” Tallyhawk said.

“Well, initial sales figures are in,” Ubu said.

“And?” Desilu asked.

“Well...in years to come, whenever anyone talks about hotcakes, they’ll have to describe *them* as selling like *The Show*.” Ubu grinned. “Sales were off the charts. They even picked up a little as the interview went on. But they’re *really* starting to climb now that people are getting to see what it’s actually like.”

“Any calls from...I dunno, celebrities?” Clayton asked.

“Nothing from any of the City Fathers, if that’s what you’re wondering. I imagine

they either still don't know what's going on, or else they're still in shock."

"The way things are going, we'll *have* that money, honey, before the day is out," Clayton said. "By the end of the week, for sure. Hell, by the end of the month, maybe we could just *buy* Cape Nord, and put in a down payment on Aloha for our summer home."

Jade laughed. "I don't think it'll go quite *that* big. Though as long as we're daydreaming, I'd personally like to buy *Sturmhaven* and make a few little changes there, oh yes I would." She hummed, "I've got a little list...I've got a little list..."

Desilu chuckled. "No more Gilbert and Sullivan summer stock for *you*."

"Oh...I think you'd better take this." Ubu nodded to the main screen, which blinked away from the highlight reel to a test pattern for a moment.

Then it changed again, to a freckle-faced redhead who was right up in the lens. "How's this?" she asked, moving back. As she withdrew, her hair was revealed to be tied in a braid, dangling forward over one shoulder. She moved back out of the way, revealing someone else sitting in an easy chair behind her.

It was a tiger Integrate—a very *familiar* tiger Integrate from the news coverage of recent days. His left leg was propped up level, and his left arm was resting on some pillows. Both limbs had compression dressings around part of them, with tubing carrying silvery fluid into them from a tank on an IV stand. A pistol-grip cane was leaning against the right side of the chair. "Hey," Zane Brubeck said. "Pardon my not standing. Hell—if I weren't an invalid right now, I'd be on the next sub up there this very moment. But hey, that's life, and without it..." He paused, then chuckled. "Strange, but that joke doesn't seem so funny anymore."

The woman put her hands on her hips. "You're *not* an invalid, Zane."

"All right, Aggie, *half* an invalid. The left half."

"Of all the bigwigs we thought would call, we're glad you're the first, Mr. Brubeck," Tallyhawk said. She relaxed, not realizing she had tensed up. It could very well have been one of Fritz's cronies.

"Well, I'm glad to get the chance. I'd already heard good things about your show from some of the others who've been helping me, but hadn't had the chance to hunt it down. Then you made it so I don't have to. Needless to say, I've already bought the lot." He grinned. "It's so rare to get the chance to see something *new* these days. I'm looking forward to binging on it while I rest and recuperate."

The woman snorted. "The dirty cheater, he'll be able to watch all of it before the rest of us have even gotten through a dozen episodes."

"But what fun would that be? A TV show's better when your friends can watch it with you. Something tells me I'll be watching lots of it in real-time. If I *have* the time, with everything else that needs doing." Zane grinned. "Oh, by the way, this is Agatha Brubeck, my sister. Formerly a lowly drone slaving away in mid-level management in Nextus Administration. Now she's my keeper, I mean personal assistant."

"I think 'keeper' is better. *Someone* ought to." She rolled her eyes expressively.

Jade chuckled. "I've been there. Right, Tally? Seems to be a tiger thing."

"We're certainly glad you called," Desilu put in. "But if I might ask, why?"

Zane reached to scratch under one of the bandages and Agatha slapped his hand away. "Hey!" Zane complained.

"You heard the doctor, you'll get it infected!"

"But it itches!"

Agatha cleared her throat and nodded toward the screen.

“Oh, right...that. Heh.” Zane chuckled. “I’d like to appear on your talk show sometime, if you can fit me in. Not right now—I don’t need to be on TV right now any more than I have been, and people ought to hear more about us from someone not-me for a change. As many not-mes as possible. But in a few days, maybe.”

“We hope you enjoy it,” Desilu said. “We’ve been working for virtual months on this project the past couple weeks. We’ve even been able to include some Shows from other Enclaves. Camelot’s sketch comedy, a version of *Star Trek* made by the crew of the *Clementine*, and a *Stupid Intie Tricks* show made from various odds and ends.”

“And Shangri-La presented us with what seems to be an ascetic Asian philosophy...and instructional videos on mixology...crossed with *Cheers*...thing,” Clayton said. “Weirdest thing you ever saw. Everyone hanging out in the bar in those saffron Buddhist robes...” He put his fist in his palm and bowed. “A blessed morning to you, Norm-san. How does this new celestial turning find you?”

“We don’t have a lot of genre series...at least not yet,” Desilu said. “And if I do say so myself, a lot of the ones other people are producing aren’t that good, though they’ve gotten better. It’s those darned meme infections—they seem to make it harder to be original, so you end up making fanfic instead. We were just lucky enough to catch an *acting and producing bug* instead, I guess.”

“It sounds interesting.” Zane grinned. “Anyway, Dad used to say that the worst shows were often the most fun, especially if you had a bunch of friends to ‘really just relax’ with. I’m sure we’ll enjoy even the worst stuff.” He covered his mouth as he coughed a couple of times, then cleared his throat. “Sorry...I better not stay on much longer. I tire easily.”

“Maybe you’d better get some rest,” Tallyhawk said. “We’ll still be here later.” *We hope.*

Zane waved a hand. “I’m good for a few more minutes. Listen...I’m anticipating being up and about in a couple days, and I’m having a recommissioning ceremony on the big platform. I’d like you to come, or some of you...Aggie’ll give you the details. We’re sending a corporate jet up to Cape Nord anyway, so if you don’t mind riding along with a bunch of Men...”

“Oh, I think we can handle them,” Tallyhawk said. *:Regardless of what they decide, we might be able to start over somewhere else,:* she added privately to the room.

:Uplift, maybe?: Clayton opined. :Aloha would probably be good. Warm, for one thing. Given how popular we are, if Cape Nord doesn’t want us here, well...screw ‘em.:

:Hell, maybe we should go to Califia. It’s only natural. H’wood.:

Jade cocked her head. “But why do you want us along, Mr. Brubeck? We’re nobody important—least of all *here*. We just put on a silly little show.”

“That’s actually the biggest reason I want you.” Zane coughed again, but held up a hand to stop Agatha from approaching. “The recommissioning’s just the public face... I’m inviting enough Inties and stuffed-shirts from all over that I’m thinking maybe we could get some dialogue happening behind the scenes...talk face to face, instead of IntieNet. It’s about damned time we were all talking to each other together instead of each hiding in our own little holes. And as a Brubeck, I know damned well that ‘silly shows’ can be one of the most powerful—” He broke into a coughing fit, and wasn’t able to finish the sentence. Agatha silently offered him a glass of water, which he took and

drained.

:Sorry about that,: Zane's voice came over the comm with the sideband compression of a DIN transmission, as his lips didn't move. *:Probably best I finish this ventrilo...qui...ly...is that even a word? Eh, I'm about done anyway. I'm sending you my comm codes, and Aggie will be in touch with the sub schedule.:* He leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes. *:Check ya later.:*

"Thank you, Mr. Brubeck, Miss Brubeck," Tallyhawk said. "Get well soon."

"Thank you," Agatha said. "I'll comm you later. Right now..." She nodded toward Zane, and cut the comm.

Everyone in the room took a collective sigh of relief. Desilu in particular. "Even if the City Fathers chuck us out, I think we can deal with that. But I'd still fill the place with foamcrete out of spite."

"Hell, just being on the same plane with the City Fathers—the one that we need *Zane Brubeck's invitation* to get aboard—should count for a lot with them," Clayton said. "The Reindeer Games have some weird rules about heredity, but even if Zane never actually applied for one, at least some of the high score his pappy had on his should carry over to him."

"Not to mention going toe to toe with Fritz and not backing down, even when he cut bits off of him," Mark Seven put in thoughtfully. "So a Real Man's Man specifically asked to see *us*."

"We'd better get things prepped for the next host segment," Desilu said. "Work to do, everyone. Let's hop to it."

As Tallyhawk led the way to the door, Ubu looked up again. "Uh...hey...wait. There's another call you maybe ought to take. She...says her name is Mrs. Evelyn Gaffney, from Punta Sur. Wants to talk to her son."

Mitchell groaned. "Oh, no...*momma*."

"Don't worry. I'll be with you for moral support." Tallyhawk reached down to pat her friend on the shoulder. "We'll take it in Studio B. Give us a minute to get there. If we're not back by showtime, just swap a later segment in for us and we'll get it later." She glanced down at Mitchell. "C'mon, Big Pig. It'll be okay."

"I...I hope so..." The two of them left together.

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EXT. BRUCE WILLIS MEMORIAL AERODROME - EARLY MORNING

The selfsame skimmer van Tallyhawk had driven up from Cape Nord pulled off the aerodrome access route. It turned onto a side path marked "PRIVATE ACCESS" and in smaller print "Authorized personnel only." Desilu peered concernedly at it from the shotgun seat as they passed. "Are you sure this is the place?"

"These are the instructions Agatha Brubeck passed along," Tallyhawk said, peering ahead. "She said the invitation was the only authorization we'd need."

The road wound into a smaller cave separated from the main road, and then upward at a steep angle—though nothing a skimmer couldn't handle. At the end of the rise, it leveled out, and came up to a security booth with red and white striped gates barring the way.

The Man on guard looked up from his console, and his eyes narrowed to see a

human-sized bird in the driver seat. “This is a private entrance. What do *you* want?” he demanded.

“We have an invitation.” Tallyhawk’s DIN twinkled as she beamed it across.

The guard glanced at his comm screen, and glanced back. “That doesn’t mean—” Then he looked back at the comm screen again, and stared. He leaned forward, tapped a key, and mumbled something into the comm. A moment later, he put a hand to the earpiece in his ear. “...uh, yes. No, I just wanted to check. It’s just that they’re...oh. They are? Really? ...no sir. I mean yes sir. I’ll pass them right through.” Without turning his head to look back at the van, he tapped the control to raise the gates.

“Thank you!” Tallyhawk said cheerfully, and drove on through.

“I hope that’s the *last* obstacle we encounter,” Desilu murmured. “Goodness knows it was crazy enough just getting out of McKenna Street today. I’m used to cloaking to avoid other citizens, but doing it to avoid *fans* is something else altogether.”

Tallyhawk nodded. “I hear that.” In the couple of days since they had gone live with The Show downloads and their several hours of Integrate interviews and behind-the-scenes documentaries, life on McKenna Street had taken an interesting turn. The very next day, the street had seen a handful of strangers and strange RIDEs wandering around gawking in a way not usually seen outside of Cape Nord’s Tourist Gallery—the part of town where the most interesting natural cave formations and terraforming relics had been preserved.

It was a little puzzling so many had shown up, given the Cape Nord roadblocks, but apparently those roadblocks had been mostly meant to prevent an “invasion” of Integrates finding their way *out*. Confronted with a crowd of humans wanting *in*, a situation not covered by their orders, they’d shrugged and let them through.

Some of these strangers had wandered into the gym, or Hooters, and attempted to strike up in-character conversations. Some of them had been fairly decent roleplayers, but the majority had been considerably more enthusiastic than competent. But Tallyhawk, Jade, and a few other of Hellir’s more recognizable faces had managed to guide most of them into an “OOC area” and go over some ground rules for interaction.

The trick was finding something that people who weren’t great actors could do and still feel like they were taking part. But happily, most were satisfied just to be in and around the same space as the players in the Show, maybe get themselves on camera for a minute or two, and didn’t want to do anything to spoil the good times for any of the others, especially the people who were in the Show themselves. As it happened, many of the better roleplayers among the guests were happy to take those less-experienced in hand.

This was good, because the day after *that*, the number of strangers on the street had basically doubled, with more coming in every hour. Someone in Hellir had the bright idea to throw a “Street Fair” with booths from local businesses and organizations, giving the crowds of tourists something interesting to do outside so they didn’t overwhelm area businesses.

It helped that effectively every member of the regular cast had at least one character who could believably be expected to be out on the street helping—which gave them good reasons to talk to people. The IC/OOC rules were somewhat relaxed for the duration—there was enough going on that editors wouldn’t have any problem working around out-of-character conversations and slips when it came time to make an episode

out of it all.

The great thing about it was that the tourists were only too happy to spend money—and not just on tourist stuff either. (Which was good, since they basically didn't have any—but every fabber in Hellir suddenly went to work churning it out.) Most were content buying stuff from booths at the fair, or even just having lunch or dinner at Hooters. DevCorby had the notion to have the gym start offering one-day guest memberships to let the tourists work out in the same facilities they'd seen on the air so often, and that was another new source of revenue. It might have been maddeningly busy, but at least they were making mad money out of it.

"But we can't run a street fair forever," Desilu had complained to Tallyhawk at the end of the day.

"With any luck, we shouldn't have to," Tallyhawk had replied. "Remember how it went with IntieNet. We were a six-day wonder, then it tapered off to more manageable levels. So give it a week or so. Meanwhile, we can brainstorm other ideas to keep 'em busy—including ones that will work for the long haul. If everything goes well with the Council, who knows—maybe we could co-opt another cavern and set up an amusement park. If it worked for Walt Disney..."

Right in the middle of this, of course, was the invitation to Zane Brubeck's little *soiree* on the mining platform. It was a little hectic taking a number of their most skilled staff away for a day right at the height of the influx, but by then, they'd managed to recruit and train a good number of competent visitors—especially some visiting Integrates who were able to soak up a lot of training in fast-time. And they were keeping tabs on things as best they could by remote, while crossing their fingers that nothing would go wrong that they wouldn't be there to handle.

"We about there *yet*?" Jade called up from the van's middle seat. She, Kisa, and Ubu were seated together there, while Dolores was lying further back, legs tucked underneath to fit in the van's cargo area.

"Just about. It looks like the cave widens out just ahead...there." The van pulled out into a larger domed cavern whose top was open to the sky. In the middle was one of the biggest suborbital shuttles Tallyhawk had ever seen. "Wow, would you look at that?"

"My goodness," Desilu murmured. "How did they even fit it through the entry port? And why send something that big for *us*?"

"It's not *just us*," Jade reminded her. "The Nordie delegation's going in it, too."

"Even so, there can't be more than half a dozen of them either." Desilu shook her head. "We'll rattle around like peas in a pod."

"Well, it stands to reason, doesn't it?" Dolores called from the back. "You know's well's I do how easy it is to impress Cape Nord men with the size of your...plane." She smirked at the chorus of groans that greeted this pronouncement. "Come on...giant phallic symbol like that, you were all *thinking* it."

"They've certainly impressed this Neorus woman," Kisa said. "I don't think they even *have* suborbitals that big back home."

"We're a booming frontier world with lots of far-flung settlements," Dolores reminded her. "So the ability to shift a lot of stuff place to place fast is important."

Jade nodded. "On Neorus, everything's close together—it's not as terraformed as this world, so we all have to be able to help each other quickly in an emergency. So no need to move that much stuff that far."

Tallyhawk pulled the skimmer van into a spot marked for it by the cavern wall.

“Well, this is it. Make sure you’ve got all your stuff.” She shut the van down and locked everything while Jade and Ubu used their lifter fields to help Dolores out of the back.

“Okay, is everybody ready?” Desilu asked. “Great! Let’s get on board.” As one, they tramped toward the plane.

INT. BRUBECK MINING CO CORPORATE MCDONNELL-NEXTUS C-217
STARMASTER – EARLY MORNING

As they boarded, they heard a familiar voice from up ahead. “...tells me they’re just waiting on some other guests, then we shall be away.”

“Scoresby,” Tallyhawk murmured. “This should be entertaining.” She led the way forward, to the compartment where their voices were coming from. A section of the Starmaster’s upper deck had been configured as a lounge area, with a walnut bar along one side, a row of comfortable seats next to the windows along the other, and the rest of the space filled with round tables for four.

Scoresby and Higgins were sitting in two of the window seats. A number of other Men and even a token arm-candy woman or two were scattered between the bar and some of the tables. Scoresby looked up as the Integrates entered. “You?” Scoresby demanded. “*You’re* the other guests?”

“Yes, us,” Tallyhawk said crisply. She eyed the Men as a hungry goshawk would an actual mouse. “Deal.”

“Can’t you people fly under your own power?” Scoresby huffed.

“Duuuuude!” Higgins said happily, toasting them with a can of Bud Lite. He actually grinned at them. “Welcome aboard! Don’t mind ol’ Low-Scoresby there. He’s got a bee in his bonnet ‘cuz he owns a big chunk of the Tourist Gallery and business there has been *off* the last couple days. I’m sure I dunno why.”

Scoresby glared at him. “It’s not that I’m not happy to see them. It’s just a little... unexpected.” He glanced from one to the other of them.

“*We’ve* actually been trying to get in touch with *you* for the last few days,” Desilu said. “But for some reason no one’s been returning our calls.”

Scoresby straightened his lapels. “We have had other things on our minds. What with that dreadful attack on Uplift...”

“Is that why you’ve barricaded our streets?” Jade asked. “Trust me, if we’d had it in mind to attack you, we certainly wouldn’t have waited *this* long.”

“Do you have a problem speaking to people who look like us?” Desilu wondered. “Maybe this will make it easier.” Desilu shimmered and changed from a womanly young mouse to a mousy young woman. “How’s that?”

“Dude!” Higgins said, taking a long pull at his beer. “You busy tomorrow night?”

Tallyhawk cleared her throat. “All right, everyone, let’s just calm down. Yes, Mr. Scoresby, Zane Brubeck extended us a personal invitation to visit for the recommissioning ceremony. It seemed like an excellent chance to get to know people from other polities *and* other Enclaves. I believe that’s also why *you’re* going.”

“Well...yes,” Scoresby admitted, picking up a three-olive martini glass and sipping.

“It seems to me that as long as we’re going to be sharing the same space for the next little while, we might resume the talk we had the other day.” She waved Desilu into a nearby seat, and took one of her own. “Desi and I have got this—why don’t the rest of

you have a drink and mingle?”

Jade nodded. “Sounds good. C’mon, guys.” She led the others in the direction of the bar.

Kisa waved to the bartender, a fox-eared young man in a white jacket with a Brubeck Mining lapel pin. “Hey, got any Neorussian Blue?”

Scoresby eyed Tallyhawk and Desilu nervously. Higgins grinned at his discomfiture. “Can I offer you gals anything? Fuzzy navel, sex on the beach, grasshopper...?”

“We’re fine, thank you.” Desilu resumed her normal appearance.

“Now, I seem to recall last time we spoke, you were saying something about showing you the money,” Tallyhawk said. “As it happens, we’ve worked up some figures we’d like you to look over. Desi?”

The mouse’s DIN twinkled. Scoresby took out his comm and checked the incoming messages. He paged through the email. “What, exactly, is this?”

Higgins pulled out his own comm, which was in a silver case with the “Budweiser” logo on it, and tapped the screen a few times. “Looks like their revenue figures for the last few days, and projections for the next few months. Both on sales of that vidshow of theirs, and small business income from tourism. Nice.” He looked up. “Gotta admit, you’re *showing* us. So now *tell* us. What can we do you for?”

Desilu smiled. “Well, for starters, we’d like you to take down the roadblocks you’ve thrown up. They’re bad for business.”

“Beyond that...we’d like to request we start formal talks about getting us some Council representation. Not right here and now, but *sometime* soon.” Tallyhawk smirked. “We’d really rather work *with* the system and not cause a whole lot of needless fuss—like, say, calling for a public referendum, as we *could* do if we got enough signatures.”

“Otherwise...” Desilu said, also giving the Men a look like a hawk regarding a mouse. “Well, otherwise we were looking at a nice studio location in H’wood. I’m sure they’d be happy to have us *and* our revenues.”

“Now, now, there should be no need for that sort of extreme move at the present juncture. I’m sure we can come to some reasonable accommodation.”

“He’s impressed,” Higgins translated helpfully. “Which he isn’t easily. So, go you.” He put down his beer long enough to flash them a quick thumbs-up.

Scoresby frowned. “You do understand, if you should *get* representation, there will be certain conditions. Any representative must be a Man—an *actual* person of masculine nature when *not* in disguise.”

:*Of all the obstinate, pig-headed...*: Tallyhawk sent privately to Desilu.

She replied with a shrug emoticon. :*This is Cape Nord. What did we expect?*: “That shouldn’t be a problem,” Desilu said aloud. “Our own council has people from both sexes; we’ll just send you some of the male ones.”

“All right. Other thing is, you gotta agree to turn over anyone who’s committed serious crimes,” Higgins said. “Not’cher ‘fraud’ and all that, and we can probably look the other way for small stuff, but major felony crimes at least. Like kidnapping and forced Integration.”

“We won’t shield the people who did that,” Tallyhawk said. “You bring us your arrest warrants and we’ll serve them.”

Desilu sent a frown emoticon. :*You realize they’re talking about Clayton, right?*:

:I know. I told him at the outset something like that would probably be required. Recommended he scoot before it came to that. But you know him and that martyr complex he has.: Tallyhawk sighed inwardly. *:He's all set to fall on his sword. Just wanted to wait until it would actually do us some good is all.:*

:Well, we can deal with that later.:

“Well, then,” Scoresby said. “I suppose...it’s hard to find anything to object to when you put it so plainly. These figures *are* rather impressive.”

The sound of laughter from across the room briefly drew Tallyhawk’s attention. Jade, Kisa, and Dolores were at a table with two of the token women the Cape Nord party was bringing along. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves, talking over drinks while Kisa made animated gestures. Tallyhawk cranked the volume long enough to hear that Kisa was describing a recent visit to Sturmhaven. It sounded interesting, and she made a mental note to recall it and play it back from memory, later.

“Speaking of crimes, I watched all of that that *Hello, Hellir* thing and the first bits of that ‘Show’ of yours,” Higgins said. “Ran some of my own checks, called some pals to ask on stuff and they said it was all kosher. Back in the day, your lives *were* pretty shitty. That in mind, I think we can swing some kind of amnesty for base survival stuff. If you can make with some restitution for any cash and stuff you ganked, at a fair interest rate, it’d be even better.”

Desilu nodded. “We’ll be happy to. We kept careful track of every centi-*mu* we didn’t earn legally, and when it gets to that point, our accountants can sit down with yours and go over everything.”

“Kewlness. What you think, Score?”

Scoresby shrugged. “It’s all highly irregular, but...what about this blasted Integrate business isn’t? I suppose that if we’re going to visit with and even *honor* a foreign Integrate, the least we can do is try to normalize relations with the ones who are our own citizens.”

“Good deal.” Tallyhawk smiled. “And speaking of ‘honor,’ as a token of our goodwill, we’ll put in a good word for you with Brubeck when we see him. He may need someone to take him aside and quietly explain why a Man Card is such a big deal, and why he should graciously accept rather than try to laugh off the one you plan to stick him with. Gold, is it? Platinum? Or something else?”

Scoresby colored. “That’s not your...oh, all right. Platinum.” He sighed. “The public nature of his bravado, combined with his late father’s own ranking, has made it imperative that we, as Gondwana’s one true arbiter of Manliness, issue some public recognition.”

“Or else the constituents will revolt,” Higgins supplied. “And they’re pretty revolting already.”

“We’ll let Brubeck know the score,” Desilu promised. “Being from Nextus, he might not understand how much it means.”

:Not to mention, the most prominent Intie having his own Man Card will make it easier for our characters to keep theirs.: Tallyhawk sent.

:We might have our work cut out for us. Brubeck seems entirely too sensible to care about something like that.:

:Ah, but that’s why they need us.:

“Hey, cool beans. Can’t promise anything, but we’ll count that as a solid if you can swing it.”

“Hmph. Don’t think this will entitle you to any special treatment.”

“Give it a rest, Score. The whole thing *calls* for special treatment. We just have to work out *how* special, and I for one would a lot rather be palsy-walsy if they wanna be too. Less messy that way, brah. Especially when you think on all the *unfriendlies* out there.”

“Until Zane came along and blew things wide open, those unfriendlies were keeping *us* under their thumbs, too,” Tallyhawk said. “We have more reason to hate them than you do. A lot more.”

“I suppose...” Scoresby sighed, and for a moment looked ten years older. “These are just such trying times. People you believed you knew turning out to be...something else. An immense threat, heretofore entirely unknown, appearing out of nowhere. One longs for a return to normalcy.”

“I don’t think things will ever return to the *old* normal, and those of us who had to live in the walls like...well, you know...are glad of that,” Desilu said. “But maybe we can find a new one we can all live with.”

Higgins raised his beer. “I’ll chug to that.” He drained the rest of the can, then crushed the empty against his forehead in the time-honored fashion before dropping it in the recycler.

:I think if someone mashed Cape Nord and Sturmhaven together you might end up with something almost Nextus-like.: Ubu opined. The black labrador retriever smiled. *:I’ll put myself forward as the interim Man Cave rep. I’m not only a Man, I’m Man’s Best Friend.:*

:Works for me, Ubu.: Desilu said. *:Tally?:*

:It’ll work until we can have a proper election. Otherwise, sure.:

“Great!” Tallyhawk said aloud. “We’ll get out of your faces for the rest of the flight —” She started to get up, but Scoresby raised a hand.

“Please, madam, there’s no need for that.” He swallowed, took a moment to compose himself, and shook his head. “If we are to live together, so be it. We should all do our best to...acclimate to each other. We won’t be able to hide from each other forever.”

“What my brah there is saying is, weirdness aside, you’re pretty okay guys and gals, and we think it’d be kewl if you hung out with us. Don’t let us shoo you off. If we’re gonna share the polity, we can darned sure start by sharing a plane.”

The Hellir Integrates looked at one another and nodded. “If you’d like, we’ve marked some episodes of the Show you’ll probably find particularly interesting. And we have just enough time to watch before we reach Brubeck’s platform,” Desilu said. “It features Mitch Goldman and Jade Catanno.”

“Hey, an in-flight movie? Kewl!” Higgins enthused. “I thought I saw a theater a little further front. We can fab some popcorn and everything.”

“I believe they have *real* popcorn on this plane,” Scoresby said.

“Bonus! Even better! So, what’re we waiting for?”

Scoresby stood, and gallantly offered Tallyhawk his arm. Tallyhawk almost declined, but her Integrate-fast perception showed her exactly how long Scoresby hesitated before making the gesture...and, hence, exactly how much it cost him. *He really is trying*, she realized. *He doesn’t want to, but he knows he has to.* And almost despite herself, she simply couldn’t let that effort go to waste.

“Why, thankyou, kind sir,” she said, in the response that Cape Nord etiquette

called for—not simpering, but with measured politeness. “I would be delighted to accompany you to the theater.” Let him see that she was willing to match his effort.

He nodded in acknowledgement—not just to the words, but to the gesture behind them. “Then let us go.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Tallyhawk caught Higgins making his own best effort at gallantry. It didn’t come as naturally to him as to Scoresby, but he pretty obviously wasn’t going to let the other Cape Norder show him up. And Desilu followed Tallyhawk’s example.

“Hey, everyone! We’re going to watch some vids up front!” Higgins called to the rest. “Grab some booze and join us!”

:Diplomacy, Cape Nord style,: Desilu sent dryly.

:Don’t knock it,: Tallyhawk replied as she moved toward the front on Scoresby’s arm. *:Remember, the whole point of all of this is supposed to be that we’re part of Cape Nord, too.:*

:I suppose that’s true. But sometimes I almost wish we did have an excuse to pack up and move. The only reason we’re even here in the first place is that it looked like the safest place to flee to where we wouldn’t have to deal with Fritz. But then he went and surprised us by deciding he was okay with us being here after all—but was, in fact, still our lord and master.:

:True enough,: Ubu sent, moving into line behind them along with the others from their two parties. Kisa and Jade were still chatting with the other Cape Nord women, who seemed interested in what they had to say. *:But then we went and made this crazy place our home, warts and all. It just wouldn’t be the same anywhere else.:*

:Hey, speaking of warts, whatever happened to Mitchell?: Jade asked. *:I didn’t see him again after Hello, Hellir was over. I know you got that call from his mother, but everything got so crazy after that I didn’t think to ask about it until now.:*

Tallyhawk sent a “wry laugh” emoticon. *:Believe it or not, he’s gone home. His mother was so glad he was still alive at all that she didn’t care what shape he was. She insisted that he come to visit and tell her all about it in person.:*

Jade chuckled. *:At least one of us gets a happy ending.:*

:Hopefully it’ll be a happy ending for everyone. But we’ll just have to see.:
Tallyhawk said. *:We’ll just have to see.:*

NEXT EPISODE:

Integration Part 18 “Many Meetings” (Director’s Cut)

(When and if we get that far...)