

The Gondwana Grand Tour

By Robotech_Master and Jon Buck

Prologue: Shell Game

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Nextus

Gilmore Building Penthouse

“Gah!” Joe Steader jerked awake, breathing hard. After a moment, he said, tentatively, “...Julius?”

“Right here, buddy.” The jaguar next to the bed leaned over and gave him a raspy slurp on the cheek, then laid his immense head on Joe’s chest, luminous orange eyes peering up at him. “Bad dreams again, huh?”

“Hard to tell, when I wake up in the night, what’s real and what’s the dream...” Joe reached up to run a hand along Julius’s furry cheek. “The same one. Armistice Day...”

“Yeah, that’s on me again. Sorry ‘bout that. You’d gone and got over it, and then me showing up fuckin’ stirred up all the bad memories again,” Julius said.

“I *never* got over it,” Joe said. “I just got used to it. And I’ll take bad dreams *every night* for the rest of my life if it means having you back.”

“Aw, shit,” Julius said. “Don’t get all mushy on me now.”

Joe chuckled. “You’re about three days too late for that. What time is it, anyway?”

“About 0300,” Julius said.

“Still a few hours ‘til Donizetti opens, then. Looking forward to your new shell?”

Julius sneezed. “You really don’t have to do this, y’know. This ol’ thing’s plenty good enough. It’s in good shape, has hardlight, Fuses up just fine. As long as we’re together, you could stick me in a Laurie housecat shell and I wouldn’t complain.”

“Maybe I should get one of those, too,” Joe said, grinning. “But this is just my way of killing the fatted calf. After all, ‘my brother who was dead is alive again.’”

Julius sniffed. “Come into Nature Range with me and I’ll *show* ya how to kill a fatted calf.”

Joe chuckled. “Thanks, but that sounds like a little too much fun for me just yet. Give me a few more days and I’ll prowl with you, though.”

“Socah’s in the kitchen, by the way,” Julius said. “Damnedest thing, that woman. You toss her out, and she just comes right back in the moment you turn around. Like a cat that way. I think I like her.”

“I think she only sleeps a couple hours a night anyway,” Joe said. *And she’s been bored lately...* He’d given her the keys to the castle, so to speak. She could come and go as she pleased anywhere he had a home. Joe was uncertain where their relationship would go, but was *very* willing to find out.

“She’s been tellin’ me stories of the old days,” Julius said. “course, I already know ‘em through your memories, but it’s fun to find out what she thought.” He chuckled. “Sometimes it’s *reeeeally* fuckin’ different from what you *still* think.”

“Well, naturally,” Joe said. “I’m the only human you’ve ever Fused with, so you only have my viewpoint. If you Fused with, say, my brother Mikel—not that you could—you’d get another view of the same events.”

“Also, you were sorta an idiot back then,” Julius said.

Joe chuckled. “Guilty as charged. But in my defense, I was just a kid.”

“You’re *still* just a kid,” Julius said. “God, I still can’t believe what you *did* the last 35 years. You fuckin’ made this whole world over in the image of that crap you dug up. I honestly never expected you could do it. Maybe get a small twencen fandom going, but the whole fuckin’ *planet*?”

“Lovely, isn’t it?” Joe beamed.

“Fuckin’ *incorrigible*, you are,” Julius said, headbutting him affectionately.

“Now, are you going back to sleep or what? We can Fuse-sleep if you want.”

“I think, with Socah here, I’ll at least get up and say hello,” Joe said. “She’s heading back to Uplift tomorrow morning, after all. Then you can show me how to properly catnap in Nature Range. Deal?”

“Works for me, bro,” Julius said. “You’re gonna love it.”

“I have to admit, that was...different,” Joe said the next morning as he straddled Julius’s skimmer bike form while they cruised uptown.

“Good different, I hope,” Julius said. “Man, wait’ll you see what it’s like to *hunt*.”

“Uh, yeah,” Joe said. “You really hunt other RIDEs in there?”

“Consensually, yeah,” Julius said. “It’s part of stayin’ sane in a metal body kinda thing. They need to feel what it’s like to die to make them feel alive, or something like that.”

“Seems kind of one-sided,” Joe said. “Do you ever have humans in there with big rifles?”

“No, but sounds like it might be fun,” Julius said. “You volunteering?”

Joe chuckled. “Something tells me I’d get my throat ripped out within about five minutes. Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Aw, I’d go easy on ya,” Julius said. “Probably.”

“Yeah, *that’s* reassuring.” Joe grinned behind the hardlight helmet as they pulled through the gates onto the Nextus RIDEworks campus. Passing by the showroom and more public buildings, they pulled up in front of the nondescript structure that housed *Signor* Donizetti’s workshop. Joe climbed down from the bike, and Julius shifted into his Walker form to follow him inside.

The receptionist whose bored expression was just as much a constant as the waiting room’s muted décor glanced up at him, then nodded. “*Signor* Donizetti is with another client right now, Mr. Steader, but he should be available in just a few minutes. Please have a seat.”

Joe nodded to him, and sat down in one of the waiting room’s comfortable chairs. He and Julius were the only people in the room at the moment. “That’s what I like about this place,” Joe confided to Julius. “He’s *always* ‘with another client’ when you get here. I’m pretty sure he’s almost never *really* busy, but being kept waiting is such a novel experience for his clientele he feels obligated to provide them all with it as part of the package. And I get the feeling that the more *obviously* ‘novel’ it is to you, the more of it he feels the need to give you, if you know what I mean.”

“Ah, the rarefied world of the super-ultra-fucking-mega rich,” Julius said. “I’m glad *I* don’t have to put up with all that crap.”

“You could call it my version of Nature Range, I suppose,” Joe said, grinning.

“*Tou-fucking-ché*,” Julius said, wrinkling his nose.

A few moments later, *Signor* Donizetti himself, a short, balding fellow in a suit, made his way into the waiting room. “Ah! *Signor* Steader, and *Signor* Julius! It is so good to see you again!” He opened his arms and gave Joe a friendly embrace. “Please, follow me. Your part shipments came in last night, and we have just finished assembling your new shells.”

“Shells? Plural?” Julius said, raising his ears. “I thought you were just going to pick one for this time.”

“I got started and I just couldn't stop,” Joe said. “Humor me in my old age.”

Julius rolled his eyes. “Seems like I was always fuckin’ humoring you in your *young* age, too. One a’ these days, *you’re* gonna humor *me* and I’ll be so fucking surprised I’ll have a fucking central coolant pump attack and that’ll be all she wrote.” He padded along behind Joe as Donizetti led the way to the workshop section.

“I have a little surprise for you, too, Joe,” Donizetti said over his shoulder. “When you said you wanted more than one shell, I got to thinking. There’s a little prototype project I’ve been working on with *Signorini* Seaford from the Freeriders Garage. I asked her for permission to share it with you, and she was happy to grant it in return for hearing how well it works out for you. Given that she has your coin, I thought that would not be a problem.”

“Quite right,” Joe said. “As I told you when I placed the order, I have her and Miss Stonegate and their RIDEs to thank for having Julius back at all.”

“With that in mind, *Signor* Julius, I would like to present the first shell, the *Julius Minimus*.” Donizetti pulled a black silk cloth off something very flat, sitting on a marble table.

“It’s a hoverboard,” Julius said. He looked at the underside, where a pair of small cylindrical lifters were attached. “Like that guy Griff rode in *Back to the Future Part 2*. You really got room to cram me into that?”

“Si,” Donizetti said. “With modern advances, we can build a core housing very small.”

“That’s...interesting,” Joe said. “I’m not sure my sense of balance is quite up to it, though.”

“It’s got the usual inertial dampers,” Donizetti said. “You will find it hard to fall off no matter how poor your balance. But that is not the important part. Watch.” He manipulated a control on the side of the table, and the hoverboard unfolded into a skeletal frame suggestive of the shape of a large cat, though considerably smaller than Julius’s present shell, closer to life-sized. A moment later, a hardlight representation of a smaller version of Julius flickered into place over it.

“Well, look at *that* fuckin’ handsome devil,” Julius purred.

“That’s intriguing,” Joe said. “Has it got a Fuser form, too?”

“*Si!* Feast your eyes.” He touched another control, and the hardlight flickered out. The skeletal cat unfolded like origami into a skeletal humanoid shape around a hardlight mannequin, and a hardlight Fuser skin flickered into place over it.

Joe raised an eyebrow. “That’s...really something. Almost like a Laurasian RIDE that can Fuse.”

Donizetti nodded. “Precisely. It has a few limitations, of course.” He ticked them off on his fingers as he spoke. “The environmental capability largely depends upon the hardlight skin, which means changing modes in a hostile environment is not a good idea. It only holds enough air for a few minutes regardless, though we are looking into

making rebreather paks for use in water sports. And of course it does not process bodily waste like a full shell, if you know what I mean.”

“So my human has to use a fuckin’ litterbox for a change,” Julius said.

Donizetti chuckled. “Quite. Where was I...ah yes. Even with triple-A-plus batteries, it still needs to charge daily, or twice daily under heavy use. And it doesn’t have room for large Fuser tanks of its own, so it depends mostly on the Fusers you got from your last Fuse with a full-sized shell. But it is not strictly *meant* to be used by itself. At least not yet.”

“It works *with* a larger shell, then?” Julius asked.

“Yes.” Donizetti nodded. “What you do is, you put the RI core in the housing for the Minimus. Then the human wears the Minimus *while Fusing* the other shells. It has the same type of connection within it that *Signorinis* Stonegate and Seaford put into that big Sturmhaven RIDE, Fenris, to let him link with another.”

“So you don’t gotta fuckin’ pop my core out of one and pop it into another whenever I want to change up, is that it?” Julius said.

“You can still *choose* to transfer your core directly to one or the other if you wish to use them without the Minimus, or you can pack the Minimus into them without it Fused to your human, but effectively, yes,” Donizetti said. “You could think of it as a core housing that can move by itself.”

“It’s basically like the EX-Gear from *Macross Frontier*, then,” Joe said. “Damned clever idea.”

“Would that I could take the credit for it, but *Signorini* Seaford brought the idea to me,” Donizetti said. “She and *Signorini* Stonegate are both extremely talented. They flatter me with their attention.”

“I certainly won’t argue there,” Joe said. “They brought ol’ Jules here back from the dead, after all.” He patted Julius’s head, and the jaguar purred.

Donizetti cleared his throat. “Regardless, we have been through several iterations of the Minimus, and have significantly improved it from the earliest prototypes. We still have some distance to go, but it should be ready for production by the end of next year,” he said.

“Can I get it skinned to look just like the board from *Back to the Future*?” Joe asked. “But with a jaguar head on it, of course.”

Donizetti chuckled. “It will be done by the time I am finished showing you the rest. Follow, please.” He touched a control and the shell collapsed back into its hoverboard form, then led the way through the door to another room.

“Here we have, as requested, your ‘Ahnuld’ skimmer cycle.” Donizetti whisked the tarp from a sleek skimmer cycle which had some similarities in form to the Chinook on which Julius had been based, but had much sleeker lines, and the animal features were incorporated smoothly into the design instead of seeming stuck-on the way the old shell had.

Julius just stared for a moment, speechless. Then he rubbed his head against Donizetti’s leg and purred like a thunderstorm.

Donizetti chuckled. “I do not usually design ‘Ahnulds’ myself these days, as I feel following in another’s footsteps is not truly creative,” he said. “But this time, the challenge inspired me. I was able to incorporate many of the same features as *Signorini* Katie’s shell, such as the reconfigurable hardlight aeroshells to mimic a flier. And, of course, it works with the Minimus.”

“Wuh...wuh...” Julius stammered and chuffed. “I don't...*mrowl*.”

“There is one special experimental feature, but it would be best demonstrated when your core is installed, *Signor* Julius. Your story proved extremely inspiring. I believe both of you will be *quite* pleased.”

:He does love his little surprises,: Joe sent.

Julius sent a snort emoticon. *:No shit, Sherlock.:*

“The last one is more an exercise of personal whimsy,” *Signor* Donizetti said, leading them over towards something concealed behind a hardlight wall. “Perhaps I have gone a trifle overboard, but I simply could not resist.” He wiggled his fingers and the hardlight field turned off, revealing a sleek, retro, convertible sports car sitting on a pedestal. It had a huge long hood that made up most of the length of the vehicle, and very little body at all behind the two-seater passenger space. The car’s paint job was tawny with black spots, suggestive of a jaguar’s pelt.

“It’s a 1965 Jaguar E-type,” Joe said, absolutely stunned.

“Oh, a *pun*,” Julius said. “Um, no offense. It’s a fuckin’ beautiful pun.”

“Your blunt praise fills me with humble joy, *Signor* Julius,” Donizetti deadpanned. “It is not a completely accurate reproduction, of course. It has a retractable hardtop. The wheels house lifters and rotate out and down, as is usual for reproductions these days. The paint is programmable for different colors. The Walker and Fuser modes are naturally somewhat larger than the bike version—enough so that it supports Fuse-in-Walker, and has a small separate compartment for cargo or a passenger if you should need to Fuse while carrying one. Fully compatible with the Minimus frame.”

Julius padded around it and sniffed at the tires. “Can’t say I ever expected to run something this big. Or this fuckin’ *pretentious*, no offense.” He considered. “But I’ll bet you can get some great speed out of those lifters. I’m fuckin’ sold.”

“I might have some ideas for other shells down the road,” Joe said.

“I would be delighted to hear them when you have them,” Donizetti said. “In fact, *Signorini* Seaford said I might share with you some information on our other prototype project...the *Maximus* shell.”

Joe raised his eyebrows, and his jaguar ears perked forward. “Oh, do tell?”

“I will forward it to your mailbox,” Donizetti said. “Essentially, it is at the other end of the spectrum from the Minimus: a larger shell that a normal-sized RIDE can Fuse into. *Signorini* Seaford’s *Uncia Maxima* is to be a suborbital, but the principle could work with any other large vehicle. A skimmer yacht, perhaps, or a motor home?”

Joe whistled. “That is an interesting idea. I’ll have to think about that some.”

:Man, you really don’t have to buy me all these fuckin’ toys,: Julius said. *:I’m pretty sure you’ve already blown more dough on me than you’d’a paid me if I’d been here all thirty-five years.:*

Joe grinned at him. *:Hey, you misunderstand. I’m buying these toys for me. You’re just along for the RIDE.:*

Julius favored him with a loud raspberry emoticon.

“If you’re ready to check out, we can make the core transfer right away,” Donizetti said. “We also have the armored core jacket you requested. It uses the very latest alloys; I guarantee you even better protection than the very latest Nextus military specifications.”

“Good,” Joe said. “The sooner he’s in it, the better I’ll feel.”

Julius nuzzled Joe’s leg. “Aw, buddy, ya don’ gotta worry ‘bout me like that. I do

appreciate it, though.”

“Also, if you wish, we can adapt Julius’s current shell to use the Minima while you are here,” Donizetti said. “As proud as I am of my creations, I must admit they do tend to draw the eye. It is possible there are times you might wish to travel incognito.”

Joe nodded. “Good thinking.”

Signor Donizetti led the way back to the other room, where the Minimus shell’s hoverboard form had already been redecorated to look just like the “Pit Bull” hoverboard from the movie, but with a jaguar logo instead of the dog’s. He converted it back to Walker form, and opened the compartment in the cat’s head where the core would go. One of his assistants wheeled in a cart with surgical gloves, various tools, and a gleaming metallic armored RI core jacket on it.

Donizetti pulled on the gloves. “Open up whenever you’re ready, *Signor* Julius.”

:*You’re gonna be okay with this, right pal?*: Julius sent.

:*Sure. Sure I am.*: Joe said. That didn’t keep a lump from coming to his throat as Julius’s hardlight winked out, then the plate on top of his skull opened and his optics dimmed. In his head, he relived again that awful moment up on the stage when the hole had been more ragged...

“Ah, *bellissimo*,” *Signor* Donizetti said as he carefully lifted out the jacketed core. “Such a fine job they always do...” With one of the tools from the cart, he deftly opened the jacket and gently lifted the core out, holding it up to the light for a quick inspection. To Joe, it looked just as it had all those times he had opened the little box and taken it out to speak softly to it, except for the crack—which he couldn’t have seen at this distance anyway. Then Donizetti gently placed it into the new armored jacket, which he locked up tight and inserted into the waiting slot in the Minimus shell. “There we are,” Donizetti said, closing the core compartment.

A moment later the cat’s optics flickered to life, followed by his hardlight pelt. Julius blinked a couple of times. “I feel like I fuckin’ shrank in the wash,” he said, lifting a paw experimentally. “This is new.”

“Hey, buddy,” Joe said, blinking a bit of moisture away. “So, does this shell come with a leash? Maybe a litterbox and a pooper scooper?”

Donizetti chuckled. “Ah, very droll, *Signor* Steader. Now, if you would try the hoverboard mode?”

“Right. Let’s see...” The hardlight skin winked out, and the skeletal cat collapsed into the hoverboard form, floating a few centimeters off the ground.

Joe chuckled. “You are one flat cat.”

“Hop on, let’s see how this works.”

“All right...” A bit uncertainly, Joe stepped up onto the board. It felt as steady beneath his feet as a concrete step. Once he had his feet in the right positions, he felt an inertial damper field power up, locking them into place. “I see what you mean about balancing,” Joe said. “It would be hard to fall off like this.”

Donizetti nodded. “You could even fly upside down. Though I do not recommend trying it for very long. The blood will rush to your head.”

“So how ‘bout it? Shall we go for Fuse-up?” Joe said.

“Coming up,” Julius said. “Gimme sec. This bod’s new to me, so I’m running a few sims first to get the hang of it. Okay, here we go.” The hoverboard split apart under Joe’s feet and folded up along his body, enclosing arms, legs, and head in a thin metal framework. Then a moment later the hardlight flickered into being, and Joe felt the

familiar sense of being furry all over—except smaller than he was used to.

“I see what you mean about feeling like you shrank in the wash,” Joe said, raising his arms and looking at them, rotating his wrists back and forth and flexing the fingers. *Signor* Donizetti nodded toward a full-length mirror on one of the walls, and Joe walked over to have a look.

“Sheesh. We look just like a fuckin’ Intie, don’t we?” Julius mused.

“Except for no visible hardlight projectors, yeah,” Joe agreed, watching the muzzle move directly with his lips as he spoke. “That might be confusing for a while.”

“Hey, check this out,” Julius said. The hardlight pelt flickered, and suddenly it looked like Joe was wearing baggy pants and a hoodie sweatshirt. Then it flickered again into a double-breasted pinstripe suit with fedora. The suit was only slightly larger than it should have been, and it was only obvious if you looked closely.

“Hey, that’s pretty slick,” Joe said. “A concealed-carry RIDE. Well, that’s one way to take your bodyguard with you wherever you go.”

“I could get used to this,” Julius purred. He moved one of Joe’s arms to touch the brim of the hat. “And I still got the same full-body motor override as in the big size. I could fuckin’ bodyjack you and live life as an ordinary human and *no one would ever know*, muahaha.”

Joe grinned. “Hey, if you ever wanna take over, just say the word. I could use the vacation.”

“Speakin’ a’ concealed carry, you got anything in the way a’ sidearms for this zoot suit?” Julius asked.

“A full selection, for all three shells,” *Signor* Donizetti said. “We can go over them later. For now, let’s go ahead and fuse up with your other shells so we can take care of any necessary adjustments before you leave.”

“Fair enough,” Julius said. The suit flickered back into his pelt, and they followed *Signor* Donizetti back into the other room as more of his assistants came in to take the old shell away for the retrofitting he’d promised.

“So, what, we just climb on the bike and power it up?” Julius said.

“*Si*,” Donizetti said. “The link works by near-field communications. As long as you’re within a meter or so of the bike, you link up. You can extend the range with *Signorini* Stonegate’s ‘DINcomm’ gizmo, though you will have to speak to her to obtain those, and they do not work especially reliably as yet.”

“Gotcha.” They climbed onto the seat. “Well, this is comfy,” Julius said. “Can’t say as I’ve ever sat on myself before.”

Joe reached out and thumbed the power switch on the dash, and the panel gauges came to life, echoing in the Minimus suit’s head-up display projection. “Atomic batteries to power...turbines to speed...”

“I see what you mean about the link,” Julius said as the bike lifted free of the pedestal. “I can split my attention or shift it back and forth.”

“Right. The shell will handle like an ordinary skimmer bike without you in it,” Donizetti said. “It can even operate that way, and Fuse passively without you, much like the AIDE it descends from, but the usual performance penalties apply. And you can also operate its self-drive remotely—in case you should want to bring the bike along while you inhabit the car, or vice versa.”

“Fusing up!” Julius said. The bike wrapped itself around them, more smoothly than either of Julius’s earlier shells ever had. It was almost liquid-metal smooth in the

transition, with thousands of little parts rearranging their configuration to turn them into a three-meter humanoid jaguar. They stepped down from the pedestal, moving around experimentally.

“Oh my fuckin’ God,” Julius breathed. “Holy *shit!* I’ve...never felt *anything* like this before. It’s like I’m fuckin’ Pinocchio and just got turned into a real live boy.”

“And *that* is the Donizetti difference,” Signor Donizetti said—a little smugly, perhaps, but if so Joe had to admit he was entitled. “Now for that surprise I promised you. Julius, this shell has a *fourth* mode, which we are calling ‘Shell Mode’ for now. Engage the mode-change at quarter-speed this first time.”

“I see the subroutine, hold on...” Julius said distractedly. And then Joe felt himself being pushed forward. He instinctively took a step down, then he was standing un-Fused from both the full-sized and Minimus shells. He turned around in time to see Julius’s Fuser form finish contracting into itself, becoming a shorter and stockier version of its usual humanoid shape before the hardlight came back on. He was still about thirty centimeters taller than Joe, but a good half meter or more shorter than his usual three-meter height.

Joe whistled. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Now what the fuck is this?” Julius said wonderingly. He lifted his arms and flexed the fingers, just as anyone Fusing for the first time naturally would. “I got thumbs...but no one inside. How is this even fuckin’ possible?”

“Technically, it has always been possible, in a manner of speaking,” Donizetti said. “There is nothing innate to articulated arms, opposable thumbs, and walking upright that put them beyond the abilities of your quantum core. Indeed, look at all the raccoon and primate RIDEs who are almost human-dextrous in Walker form, or the EIDEs from Laurasia who operate naturally with no human inside.”

“So they could have built RIDEs to have their own thumbs all along?” Joe said.

“At least in theory,” Donizetti said. “You would have to ask *Dottores* Patil and Clemens why they did not. It could be they just did not think of it, due to the existence of Fuse, or perhaps it was intended as a safeguard against some imagined robot revolt.” He shrugged. “The designers of the EIDEs, they came from a different background and with more experiences, so they made their creations more complete from the start. We are only now catching up.”

Julius attempted a step forward, then wobbled and nearly fell over. “...the fuck?”

“Be careful there, *Signor* Julius,” Donizetti warned. “I have found that many light and medium RIDEs are used to relying on their human’s inner ear in Fuse rather than their own gyroscopes, because it is simply most convenient. The largest RIDEs are not so affected, since their humans do not so much ‘wear’ as ‘pilot’ them.”

“Right. Got it,” Julius said. “Running a few sims to get used to this...all right.” He took another step—still fairly awkwardly, but with more assurance.

“Put one foot in front of the other,” Joe sang, “And soon you’ll be walking across the floor...”

“Don’t make me wanna fuckin’ smack you while I’m getting used to working this thing,” Julius said. “I don’t think I know my own strength yet.” He took a few more halting steps, getting smoother as he moved along.

“Give it an hour or two of practice, and you should move as smoothly as any human,” Donizetti said. “Manual dexterity might take a trifle longer—again, most RIDEs not built with dextrous paws from the outset use the human’s motor reflexes as a

shortcut and must build new neural networks to use the hands properly.”

Joe grinned. “Excellent! You know what this means? You can *finally* do your share of chores around the house!”

“Be fuckin’ still, my beating central coolant pump,” Julius said, rolling his eyes. “But seriously...this is the fuckin’ *shit*, man. You realize, you’re gonna put AlphaWolf right the fuck outta business? Well, if he was still *in* the business, which I hear he’s not anymore. Not like I even heard *of* him ‘til a couple days ago.”

“*Si*. This is exactly the point,” Donizetti said with a self-satisfied smile. “Indeed, many older shells can be retrofitted with a sort of Shell Mode. It is easiest with the largest RIDEs—*Signorini* Stonegate did it for Fenris already, and your larger shell has that capability also. You simply remove the limiter. For smaller ones, you must make it so they can shift parts around to fill the inner cavity and make themselves shorter. This is not always possible, nor does it always bring the most satisfactory results—you do not always get full range of motion, and the proportions of the body might make the RIDE look strange and dwarfish that way. But it will be a stopgap for those who cannot afford new shells.”

“When are you going to start rolling those shells out?” Joe asked.

“We hope to start making them, and making available the conversion process, sometime late next year, around the same time we introduce the Minimus,” *Signor* Donizetti said. “As Nextus Nano did with sarium batteries so many years ago, we will license it cheaply to all shell manufacturers for the first few years, then release it to the public domain once the research costs have been covered. This is *my* contribution to the RIDE rights cause. It has been a long time coming.”

“You, sir, are a fucking Gentleman and a Scholar,” Julius said. His hardlight winked out and he reconfigured himself down into his Walker form, a much sleeker version of the metallic jaguar he had been before. His skin came back on, and he padded over to rub against Joe’s leg. “It even feels better in Walker form. Gotta tell ya, you’re fuckin’ spoilin’ me for anything else here.”

Donizetti chuckled. “It is always good to hear from a satisfied customer. Now come, let’s try the larger frame.”

“You bet.” The jaguar’s hardlight smoothly phased out from nose to tail, then a hatch opened on its back and a smaller jaguar hopped out.

“Whoa,” Joe said. “That’s just like someone spilled water on a metal mogwai.”

“Don’t charge me after midnight, then,” Julius quipped.

“Don’t tempt me to get you a shell based on an AMC Gremlin,” Joe said. “I might just do it.”

Julius snorted. They followed *Signor* Donizetti over to the sports car RIDE, then Julius hopped up onto the hood. He positioned himself over the middle of it, and his paws sank into four panels directly beneath them. Then the hood split open under him and he sank out of sight. It sealed seamlessly shut over him again. Then the car’s headlights lit up and its motor—or the noisemaker imitating an internal combustion motor—revved.

Joe grinned. “Sweet!” He walked around to the driver side, opened the door, and climbed in. The dash and steering wheel looked completely authentic to the period—then it winked out, revealing a more modern flat panel display and control yoke.

“Hardlight dashboard? You think of everything.”

“A craft of this size, considering the hardtop and impeller, is technically a *flier*

under current regulations,” Donizetti said. “It will also work like any other skimmer in this configuration without *Signor Julius* plugged in.”

“*Awright!*” Julius purred from all around Joe. A light in the middle of the dashboard flickered in time with his voice.

“I’d make a joke about you being a KITTy now, except one of my idiot cousins already had one made—a melanistic jaggie, Trans-Am skimmer mode,” Joe said. “Quinny tells me he Integrated with his next owner after Harold sold him, renamed himself Cylon, and was assigned to keep her under house arrest when I stuck her in the Aloha counterweight masion. He’s now doing ten to twenty realtime in a fast-time VR prison for second-degree murder during Fritz’s uprising.”

“I heard of this one. He was *not* one of ours,” Donizetti said. “We never did business with that cousin of yours. The way he would get a new one every few months, it was clear he had no respect for RIDEs before we even opened our shop. But not all of our competitors felt that way.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” Joe shook his head. “That boy messed up more RIDEs...”

“Ugh,” Julius said. “Ophelia’s brother, wasn’t he? That branch of the family fuckin’ never had a lick of sense. Whatever happened to him, anyway?”

“Disappeared a few years back.” Joe shrugged. “The prevailing theory is either his latest RIDE ‘jacked him or else they Integrated. Or both. He hasn’t come forward since the Enclaves went public, and nobody’s ever really bothered to look too hard for him. Or her.”

“Okay, think I’m familiar with this thing’s systems. Let’s do this.” The hood of the car surged up toward the windshield as the roof collapsed and panels slid up along the sides. Everything went dark. Then a moment later, Joe was standing on all four feet on the pedestal where the car had been. *Wait, all four feet?* He blinked, looking around, then looking back at his car-sized furry jaguar body.

“Well, I’ll be a son of a queen,” Julius said. “It really works. This is just like those really big deuce-truck RIDEs they had in the Home Guard Battle-lions.”

“This feels really weird,” Joe said. “It’s like my legs don’t bend right.” He lifted a forepaw and examined it.

“It’s just like in Nature Range,” Julius said. “Okay, *alley-oop!*” He stood on his hind paws, his body shifting to make the hind legs into humanoid legs. Then he stood a good five meters tall, his ears nearly brushing the ceiling. “Mmm...some of the same sort of balance issues from Shell Mode on the little one. I can see I’ll have to get used to this.” He took a few tentative steps forward. “But hey...the view is *great* from up here. I feel like jagzilla or something.”

“What happens if I’ve got someone in the shotgun seat when we do this?” Joe asked. “I mean, I could see being on a cruise out in the Dry or something without any good place to put ‘em.”

“There is a passenger compartment in the body in both Walker and Fuser forms,” Signor Donizetti said. “It is not necessarily the most *comfortable*, as it approximates the size and shape of the one where your own body resides...and unlike you, their perception is not overridden by the Fuse. But it is better than getting dumped on the ground.”

Joe withdrew his senses from the Fuse for a moment, and discovered he was curled up in a fetal position, his arms around his knees, within a small round space that

didn't offer much room for movement. "I see," he said. "Is it all right being Fused like this for long periods? I could get a pretty good crick in my neck without even knowing it."

"The nanos' medical function straightens that sort of thing out when you de-Fuse," Julius said. "Like they do when you're Fused with my smaller bod, for that matter. Though they don't do that for the passenger, so yeah."

"Probably wouldn't be a problem for Socah, though, with that mechanical body of hers," Joe mused. "Huh."

"De-Fusing now," Julius said, and his body collapsed back down into skimmer car form, metal panels sliding down and away and the hardtop rolling back so Joe was sitting in a convertible—wearing Julius's Minimus shell.

"Sweet!" Joe said, grinning, as he opened the door and climbed out.

"Now about those weapons paks?" Julius said.

"Come with me to the next room, and I shall show you what we have," Donizetti said. "You can walk out with personal sidearms, but the larger paks will need to be delivered."

"Works for me," Julius said. "What do you think, Joe?"

"These are your bodies, and you are my bodyguard," Joe said. "You know what you need better than I would. Knock yourself out."

Julius grinned. "Aw *yeah*. This is gonna be *fun*."

Joe and Julius chose to ride the skimmer bike home and have the car and Julius's old body delivered by truck later that day. Since it was the size of his old one, the skimmer version was going to be Julius's default "indoor" body, those times when he wasn't sticking with the Minimus shell anyway.

They didn't go *directly* home, of course. Instead they headed out of the city, into the wilderness where they could push the new bike flat out to see how fast it went. A few minutes later, they were streaking over the Dry in a hardlight aeroshell shaped like a Colonial Viper starfighter. A sonic boom rumbled through the air behind them as they broke the sound barrier.

"Holy *shit* this is fast!" Julius whooped. "At this speed, if we could keep it up all the way, we could be in fuckin' *Aloha* in something like 8 or 10 hours."

"I think even your super-duper AAA++ batteries would run dry before we got about halfway there, but if we stopped to gas up at a friendly Enclave or two, yeah," Joe said. "Or we could shave a few hours off that if we took the car, which would run even faster. I think we could even get add-on booster paks and go suborbital like a Redstone."

"Hey, don't fuckin' spoil me *too* much here. I gotta have something to put on my Christmas wish list."

Joe chuckled. "C'mon, pal, let's head back to Nextus." The Viper banked over into a broad, sweeping curve and headed back toward the city, shedding speed as it went.

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The next few days in the reopened Gilmore Building penthouse were almost like old times. Julius was still inclined to shake his head and mutter when he looked out the window and saw an Olympic pool where the gun turret they'd taken such care to protect had been, but he accepted that the turret was no longer needed in peacetime. After the

“new” wore off, they found they were largely content to leave the Minimus shell installed in Julius’s cycle body most of the time, and they only took the larger car out a few times. Mostly, Joe and Julius hung out on the sofa—the same sofa as thirty-five years before, just a little creakier—and watched movies on their media wall. Julius got to see *Kill Bill* for the first time, and pronounced it “fuckin’ awesome.”

But after a while, the *deja vu* started getting to Joe. Weird as it was, the happiness of having Julius back still didn’t cancel out the *bad* memories from losing him in the first place. And those brought Joe back to thinking about all those *other* things they’d never had the chance to do. “You know, bro, there’s a ton of things we never did together because of the damned war.”

Julius looked up from the kitchen table, where he was busy with dexterity exercises with his new hands. Simulations gave him the basics, but nothing beat real practice in real time. At the moment, he had a loop of string and was on his fourth try making a cat’s cradle with it. The servos in his hands made little whirring sounds as he tried again. “Like what?”

“Well, we sat at home watching movies because we had to. Energy conservation, that sort of thing, and there wasn’t really anywhere safe to go, what with the war on. Then there’s, well, that I was on the wrong side very recently,” Joe said.

“With Fritz, you mean?” Julius said. “Didn’t you end up in jail for tax evasion, too?”

“Oh yeah, that. More of Fritz’s doing.” The events that had started everything felt really tangled to Joe now. There were things that didn’t make much sense and he wondered if they ever would. To paraphrase comedian Jonathan Winters, he hadn’t just been Crazy Joe, he’d been *Crazy Crazy* Crazy Joe. “It was just one of those things. Quinnie had just Integrated, and Fritz needed a way to distract the press while he snuck her away. He got me back out again in a couple of days. Really, it was more of an insult than anything else. *Me*, one of Nextus’s preeminent Gamesters, sent up for *tax-dodging*? It’s as if they busted Arsène Lupin or Slippery Jim diGriz for shoplifting. My rep still hasn’t quite recovered.” He shook his head. “Then there was that stunt Fritz and I pulled, when Quinoa had just seen through him...before I woke up and realized Fritz really had gone off his tiny little nut.”

“I’m kinda shocked that you spent thirty years palling around with Fritz to begin with,” Julius said. “Psychotic bastard he was.”

“Well, I have *you* to blame for that,” Joe said. “You told me not to give up on my dream of cracking all that media, and then you told Fritz, ‘*You...help him with that.*’ And he damned well did. Psychotic he might have been, but he had his own twisted sense of honor, and he *was* our friend, for a while there at least. You think he was going to ignore your dying wish? And, well, I couldn’t exactly turn down the help.”

“Okay, okay. I give. My fucking fault.” Julius’s ears folded back as he got his fingers tangled in the string. “Fuck this for a lark. I don’t know who the cat was who came up with this thing...”

Joe smirked. “Time for me to cut the Julian knot again?”

Julius demonstrated that his mastery over his hands was improving by showing Joe just one finger.

“Classy. Anyway, I was thinking we really ought to go visiting,” Joe continued. “Get out of Nextus and see all the places we always wanted to see after the war. And some of the people, too,” Joe said. “Ol’ Clint’s not around anymore, sadly, but his kids

Zane and Agatha are. And there's a couple of people you wouldn't know—Kenyon and Nigella Walton. Met 'em a few years after the war. *Nouveau riche* folks from a big Q strike. Clint kept dragging me out to play golf with Kenyon and Marshal Mosley to try to break me out of moping over you. And he kept insisting we let them win."

Julius snapped the threads and dusted his hands free of them. "Liked 'em that much, did he?"

"I think he was just setting them up for a sucker bet somewhere down the road," Joe said. "Then he had that flier accident before he could take them up on it. I sort of dropped out of society after that.

"Then Quinoa and Quorra Integrated and he spirited them away, and Fritz's 'suggestions' suddenly started carrying more weight. After all, *he* was the one taking care of my bro's little girl now. So he said 'frog' and I jumped, the little son of a bitch."

"After all the shit he did, I'm surprised *he's* not rotting in a VR prison...or in pieces in a lab or something," Julius said.

"He's still got his last pilot accidentally locked up in his head, or so Dr. Patil told me. The guy always did his level best to keep Fritz from being a complete psychopath, but had no direct control. That's the only reason why Fritz was given perpetual public service," Joe said. "Integrates have some rather sticky legal issues." Joe shook his head. "If they ever figure out how to split them up, that'll probably be it for him."

"So I guess this means we won't be inviting the dickweed over for a bad movie night anytime soon," Julius said.

"Forgiveness is a virtue, but not yet," Joe said. "Maybe Dr. Patil can forgive him, but not me. Not yet."

Julius stood up, still a little wobbly, then shifted back to Walker mode. "Ugh. Never thought having my own hands would be so hard after using your brain in Fuse. I mean, I can go anthro in Nature Range. Out in the Real's a different kettle of fish."

"You're doing just fine, Jules. Just fine," Joe reassured, patting him on the shoulder. "I'm going to comm the Waltons and see if they're free. I haven't seen their new home since the dragon Intie burned the last one down."

"I read about that, Joe. Only on Zharus," Julius said.

"Oh good, they're in," Joe said a moment later. "Let's head on over, buddy."

"Works for me." He paused for a moment. "Uh, you think we should keep this Shell Mode thing to ourselves? It's not ready for primetime."

"Probably a good idea," Joe said.

Joe mounted up, and they cruised uptown, toward the hilly suburb on the outskirts where a lot of Nextus's *hoi polloi* had their digs. As always, Julius's eyes were part of the instrument panel screen. "This reminds me," Julius said. "Whatever happened to the mansion you said you'd donated for hospital space?"

"Eh. Let the government keep it. It's an orphanage or something now," Joe said. "Just didn't feel like coming back to Nextus after...well, you know. I'd mothballed the penthouse until just a few days ago."

"It still smells like 'em."

Joe waved a hand. "Nah, that's just my cologne. Eau de Humanity."

"Pfft. City's grown, though. Immigration stats, up six million? Dafuq is happening on Earth that they're sending all their weirdos our way?" Julius said.

"It's the Darth Vader effect. Earth's government's tightening its fingers, people

are slipping through its grasp. I'm not surprised." He shook his head. "It's bad. And their loss. Weirdness results in creativity," Joe said.

"I gather they started becoming assholes all of a sudden right about when the war happened?" Julius asked, orange eyes blinking at him from the dashboard. "I got that something happened when the circus got back, but your memories are such a mess from right about then. All the booze, I think."

"Heh. I'm afraid I was sloshed for too long. Couldn't deal. Anyway, Earth's uprooted every single wildcat colony they can find for over thirty years, before they can get a toehold," Joe explained. "Granted, a lot of them actually *were* ill-prepared, underfunded clusterfucks who needed someone to save their asses. Not every colony can succeed. But some of them were doing just fine. The Earth Stellar Navy didn't care. They just scooped the colonists off the planet like the Borg and glassed what was left."

"Ugh. Any idea what happened to the people?"

"Taken back to Earth, dispersed among the 'legit' colonies...some of 'em eventually ended up here thanks to that whole weirdness purge thing, or just from wanting to get as far from Earth as they legitimately could. There's a few towns in Laurasia and a few coastal ring settlements not quite big enough to be called polities that are basically made up of people from those places who found each other once they hit Zharus. Just search on 'New Such-and-Such' where 'Such-and-Such' is the name of one of those colonies; they're not hard to find."

"What a fucking travesty," Julius said.

"Socah was on one or two of those types of missions late in her career, I gather. Once there stopped being brushfire wars on Earth, they sent their seasoned forces to the stars. I'm not going to pry, but she said she'd retired because she hated being a 'grubby mitt'. I'm glad."

The Waltons' home had been recently rebuilt from the attack by three of Fritz's "Ascendant" groupies, one of whom had been a medium-sized dragon. Joe had watched everything unfold on the news, but his military contacts—sounding distinctly embarrassed—had actually refused to give him any more information than Kenyon and Nigella Walton had given to the Steader News Network. (Nigella's story about the "*darling* little mink" that had stood up to the big, bad AlphaWolf had been amusing, but even the reporters themselves hadn't exactly found it plausible. It had been amusing watching them struggling to suppress their laughter during the interviews.) That Kenyon Walton still sported the tags of AlphaWolf himself piqued Joe's curiosity more than a little.

Of course, the Waltons didn't know about Julius either. So maybe they had some stories to trade.

Mrs. Walton was waiting at the front door, mink RIDE by her side, as they landed and Joe climbed down from Julius's saddle. "Joe Steader, it's good to see you!" She stepped forward to greet him with a friendly hug. "You're looking well! The jaguar ears suit you."

Joe chuckled. "Good to see you, too, Nigella." Anyone familiar with Nigella Walton's aloof public persona might have been surprised to see her being so friendly. But she'd grown up playing the Game. Perhaps the only surprising thing was that her Nuevo San-born husband had learned to play it even better, when he wanted to.

"Nigella, I'd like to introduce Julius," Joe said.

The jaguar smoothly changed to Walker mode then padded up to rub noses with

the mink and give Nigella a friendly feline headbump. Nigella chuckled and reached down to give his head a rub. “Nice to meet you. My furry friend here is Melissa.”

“Hi!” the mink said cheerfully.

“Charmed an’ shi...uh, *stuff*,” Julius said.

“I’m so curious how you and Joe met, but it can wait until Kenyon is finished in the garage. He’s working on the Falcon again.”

“He’s still fiddling with that? He’s braver than I thought,” Joe said.

Julius facepawed. “You never could resist making references like that, buddy. Even when nobody else knew what the fu—” The jaguar stumbled over the cuss word. Somehow, Nigella’s presence had put the brakes on his pottymouth. “Um, when nobody else had even seen *Star Wars* yet. Yeah.”

“Hey, it’s me,” Joe said with a goofy grin.

“It is you, Joe,” Kenyon said. He was covered in oil and grease, like any good mechanic that had just spent hours rebuilding an antique Ford Windsor V-8 engine. His lupine ears and tail were covered in a plastic film to keep the dirt off. “When did you adopt a RIDE?”

“I’ll be happy to divulge if you’ll give me the lowdown on what happened here last year,” Joe said. “And how you got those. I’ve seen you Fused with AlphaWolf when you visit Camp, you know.”

“It’s...a complicated relationship,” Kenyon said. “Let me go clean up and we’ll talk over a few beers. *I* want to know what the hell turned you into Snidely Whiplash for a year.”

“Oh, come on. I wasn’t *that* bad, was I? I never tied any damsels to the railroad tracks. And I *donated* an orphanage, I didn’t foreclose on it.” He snorted. “Like you’d even know who Snidely Whiplash *is* if it weren’t for me. Besides, I’m more a Dick Dastardly. I built about five of his cars from *Wacky Races*.”

“Hold that thought. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Kenyon headed into the mansion, plastic-wrapped tail wagging.

“I must admit, I can’t remember ever seeing you this cheerful,” Nigella said, leading the way into the house. “I used to wonder if you *ever* smiled.”

“I’ve kind of been in a thirty-five year funk,” Joe said. “Is Lilibet around?”

“Not lately. They’re spending some time out in Sturmhaven. Politics.” Nigella wrinkled her nose. “Did you hear she actually *fought in a duel* there earlier this month?”

“I think I saw something about that on the news, but I was a little too busy with politics myself to pay much attention. You’ll have to tell me all about that.”

“I’ll be happy to.” She smiled. “Really, she’s becoming something of a stranger in her own home, lately, between that and Alpha Camp. She and Guinevere are out there practically every time we turn around. Even when they’re physically here, they’re just as often communing with Fenris remotely.” She shook her head, smiling. “It seems as though we shall have to surrender to the inevitable. We’re already looking into purchasing some land out there for a summer cottage.”

Nigella led the way into the living room and nodded to a fancy sofa. “That’s built at RIDE strength, by the way.” She took a seat in an easy chair across from it, Melissa sitting on her haunches next to the chair within easy petting distance.

Julius curled up on the couch, making a comfortable fur-lined place for Joe to sit. The jaguar groomed his forepaws while Joe gave him a thorough petting. “Very comfy, Nigella. Thank you.”

While they waited, a hovering servitor drone offered food and drink.

“Lay off the booze,” Julius said as Joe reached for the scotch decanter. “My Fusers are still working on your liver as it is, bud.”

“My conscience, hard at work,” Joe said, taking a ginger ale instead.

“I have one of those, too,” Nigella said, patting Melissa. “Old Clint always said you needed a keeper.”

“I’ll say he does,” Kenyon said, returning in a clean shirt and slacks and most, though not all, of the grease cleaned off. “Thought he’d found one for a while, then they let him out of jail.” He glanced at Julius. “I see you’ve been to visit *Signor Donizetti* lately?”

“That obvious?” Joe said.

“Donizetti RIDEs do have a certain look to them,” Kenyon said. “Something specific to the brand of hardlight emitter he uses. I suspect he tunes them specially that way, just so people know them on sight even in hardlight.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Joe said. “It’s hard to brag on how much money you spent if you can’t tell on sight. Maybe he imports them from Wednesday?”

Kenyon nodded. “One of these days we’ll see about getting a Donizetti for Melissa.”

“I’m still quite happy with what I’ve got right now, but I appreciate the offer,” Melissa said.

Joe pointed at the younger man’s lupine tags. “You know, it’s eating me up. How in the world did you and AlphaWolf pair up?”

“Well, therein lies a tale,” Kenyon said.

“Yeah, and a couple of fu—of *funny* ears, too,” Julius said.

“Please, Julius, you don’t need to spare our delicate ears,” Nigella said. “Kenyon’s a former gangbanger from Nuevo San’s mean streets. He can cuss in a half dozen languages—and often did, when we were first married. Rather endearing, really.”

Julius blinked. “No *merde*? Interesting friends you got, Joe.”

Joe grinned. “Hey, this is the first I heard of it. But now that I think about it, it makes sense. I expect the only thing they use golf clubs for in the mean streets of Nuevo San Antonio is whacking each other over the head with.”

“It’s a skill, picking the right club to whack the right amount of ass down the alley,” Kenyon said. “And I had practice. Unfortunately, due to the size differential, the best clubs for heads don’t tend to be the best ones for balls, and vice versa.”

“That explains your large handicap,” Joe said. “We’re gonna have to get together for another nine holes sometime, now that I’ve got my new caddy.”

“Hey, I’m a jaguar, not a Caddy,” Julius said. “Tail, not tailfins.” Joe thumped him lightly on the head.

Kenyon grabbed a bottle of Guinness from the servitor and popped the top. “Okay, so...where to start? Well, you already know something about what happened to us here. You and Julius act like old buddies and I know for a fact you didn’t have a RIDE just a few days ago. Explain *that*.”

“Julius here is an old soul,” Joe said. “About thirty-five years old, give or take.”

“I was mostly dead for almost that long,” Julius said. “Had a crack in the brain.”

“From saving my life,” Joe said.

“It’s what a bodyguard does, and I’d do it again,” Julius said.

“See, when RIDEs came out, I didn’t know the first thing about what they really

were, but I figured they had to be better than the Schnook that they'd issued me for keeping safe. So I asked for one, without knowing exactly what I was asking for. They say be careful what you wish for..." He chuckled.

"That must have been some first encounter," Nigella said. "I knew what RIDEs were before I met Melissa. Or at least I *thought* I did, and I'm still amazed at just how much of what I 'knew' was wrong. But to meet one with no idea..."

"He thought I was a fuckin' ELIZA subroutine, 'til I started cussing at him," Julius said. "I wasn't exactly fuckin' thrilled at first myself, given I was *supposed* to be smackin' Sturmites around on the front lines, not playing bodyguard for some rich schmuck, but orders is orders."

Joe grinned. "After that, Julius was the best part of my life for a couple of years. Then on Armistice Day, this lone-assassin nutjob tried to take me out, but got Julius instead. So now you know why I've been a mopey alcoholic the last thirty-five years." He shook his head. "Adding insult to injury, the whole thing barely even gets a footnote in the history books, when it gets mentioned at all. Because, after all, it was 'just a RIDE' who got kacked.."

"Wow, Joe. That's...heavy," Kenyon said. "Shit. It'd drive *me* to drink, too."

"Yeah. I ended up putting the core in a little box and carrying it around and talking to it," Joe said. "But really, it's kind of lucky I did. In the end, turned out they'd finally figured out how to fix cracked cores." He shook his head. "I don't like to think how many salvageable cracked cores must just have been thrown away or recycled over the years."

"Brrr," Julius said. "Yeah. Remind me never to give you a hard time about that ever again."

Joe chuckled, and reached over to give his head a rub. "Oh, you can keep on giving me a hard time. That's part of what I like about you."

"You know, I've got a Tornado and a...Chinook, in my garage." Kenyon said, obviously trying to change to a lighter topic. "I don't think I've ever turned on that Ad-I. I run Q-coprocessors running common AI instead. Still not a patch on Alpha."

"We called those Schnooks and Tomatoes during the War. There's a reason they refer to running an Ad-I as 'doing the hokey pokey,'" Joe said. "You want to put your left foot in. It tries to put your left foot out. You try to *force* it to put your left foot in, but what with the argument going on between the two of you, you effectively just end up shaking it all about. I think both sides spent half the war fighting their own gear rather than each other...but sometimes, that's what it's all about."

"Joe, we argue about a lot of things anyway," Julius said.

"We argue over what the hell the director of *Battlefield Earth* was thinking with all those screen wipes and tilted camera shots," Joe said. "Over and over, every single damned shot! Every! Single! One!"

"I still haven't forgiven him for making me *watch* the damned thing," Julius said, rolling his eyes. "I think I'd rather have taken another fucking bullet for him."

Kenyon started laughing. "You two are a riot, you know that? I don't think I've ever seen the vintage you're talking about. I've seen Zharus remakes."

"Oh good gawd, they *remade* it?" Julius said. "What, were they a bunch of masochists? Or sadists?"

"Cruise and Travolta cultists," Kenyon said.

"Oh, so both, then," Julius said.

“Anyway, they were only just able to bring him back last week,” Joe said. “And so my life has changed again, for the better. What about you?”

“As I understand things, it started because Fritz wanted some revenge after his cronies were curb-stomped on the Brubeck platform,” Kenyon said. “Basically, they went after us because of Lillibet’s connection with the Freeriders Garage and Zane Brubeck.”

Joe grimaced. He remembered Fritz ranting at him over that loss. He’d been convinced Zane must have had inside help, and had ended up skinning about half of those Integrates who’d managed to escape the assault on the principle that even if they *weren’t* the spy, they still hadn’t done enough to thwart the attackers. At the time, Quinoa was still in lockup, so all he could do was smile and nod, and hope whatever his niece was meditating to prepare herself to do would work. Between “Cylon” guarding her and Quinoa’s own ingenuity, she’d been rather more *direct* than usual with a focused dose of the legendary Steader Crazy.

He was *very* proud of her. That didn’t keep him from having her clean up the mess...or then again, perhaps it was the whole *reason* he’d had her do it. Being extra-hard on her to hide how proud he was? He shook his head and turned his attention back to what Kenyon was saying.

“At the time, AlphaWolf was feeling especially guilty about the whole trashing-the-garage thing. Not to mention having a lot of anger to work off over something unrelated that had just happened out at the camp. So when he got word of what Fritz was planning, he corralled Paul and Fenris—”

“—and this *darling* little mink Paul had been repairing at the time—” Nigella put in, reaching down to hug Melissa around the neck.

“—and off they came to the rescue.”

“Sounds super,” Julius said. “I’ve been reading up on AlphaWolf—including that fucking movie your media empire made about him, Joe. ‘So sayeth me’? What dafuq?”

“Hey, all good villains need a tagline,” Joe said. “I was kind of thinking of Serpentor’s ‘This I command’ but I wanted something a little more original.” He grinned. “Anyway, he’s pretty clearly taken the line and made it his own.”

“Frankly, I think the director took too many cues from Roger Corman,” Julius said.

“To make a long story short, Alpha and the mink were right with us when that stupid dragon collapsed the mansion,” Kenyon said. “So, to keep us from getting squished, they Fused up with us on the spur of the moment.”

“Always thought that cover story was complete bullpucky,” Joe said. “Of course, that does make it better than the truth for Nextus purposes, since Nextus *runs* on complete bullpucky.”

“You won’t find a better bio-power source than bullpucky,” Kenyon agreed. “We dumped a lot to NextusLeaks anyway. Not everything, but enough.”

“Melissa and I hit it off right away,” Nigella said. “I had never imagined that Fusing a RIDE could be like that. She’s such a little darling...” She reached down to stroke Melissa’s head, and the mink chirred happily.

“And Alpha and I found we had a few things in common as well,” Kenyon said. “Though our situation was rather more...complicated by our individual obligations, of course. I decided to keep the tags for a multitude of reasons.”

“It does tend to enhance both your *and* AlphaWolf’s mystique,” Joe said.

“My Kenyon’s *always* been a wolf in the boardroom,” Nigella said proudly. “Now he just has the outward signs to match.”

“In the *bedroom*, too,” Kenyon said. “Grrrr.” Nigella blushed and giggled.

Julius rolled his eyes. “A little TMI there...”

“I did consider getting another RIDE after that,” Kenyon said. “I even toyed with the idea of finding one of Fenris’s type. But somehow, it just wouldn’t be the same.” He shrugged. “So Alpha and I get together when we can, and we’re making plans for our retirements in a few years when we no longer have to worry about what other people think. Frankly, I don’t think he’ll stay more than two Camp Council terms. He’s like the George Washington of RIDEs, I’d say.”

“And Kenyon is laying the groundwork to step down from the board,” Nigella said.

“Already? You’re half my age, Kenyon,” Joe said.

“The way things are going, we’re talking lifespans of two hundred years,” Kenyon said. “And that’s not even counting the rumors I’m hearing that they’ve found out how to upload brains now. I’m not going to do the same job for a century or more. I’ll retire for a couple decades—or less—go back to school, learn a new trade, and start anew.”

“Who knows, maybe in a few decades we’ll be colonizing again,” Joe said. “With RIDEs and Inties to help us out. I’m sure there are plenty of good planets out there.”

“There’s just the little matter of Earth,” Kenyon said. “Your little planet-of-the-twentieth-century-otaku dodge won’t work forever, you know.”

“Oh, you saw through that?” Joe said.

“It wasn’t exactly hard, considering,” Kenyon said. He chuckled. “Though I suspect a lot of the youngest generation wouldn’t thank you. It’s become fashionable these days to wear a Proxima or Centauri flag on your gear when you travel to other colonies, just to avoid the ‘twentieth century hick’ stereotype.”

Joe grinned. “Seriously? Cool! We really are having an effect, then.”

“Yes, but again—not forever,” Kenyon said. “Earth might be a bunch of stuffed shirts, but I get the feeling even they are starting to take notice of all the mutter about ‘Integrates’ coming out of here lately. All it would take is them starting to pay attention to what their spies tell them rather than keep circular-filing it under ‘Not Invented Here.’”

Joe nodded. “Yeah, I guess more than half a century or so of stupidity is too much to hope for. But on the bright side, the military and police build-up that’s happened in all the polities since Integrates came to light will work just as well defending against Earth troops. Especially since we have RIDEs and Inties and they don’t.”

“Not that war’s something to wish for in any case,” Julius said. “God, Earth... bunch a’ fuckin’ assholes, all of ‘em. Wish they’d just leave the rest of us alone.”

“But hey...enough talk about depressing subjects like Earth and war,” Kenyon said, finishing off his beer. “Joe, why don’t you and Julius come out to the hangars with me and I’ll show you my latest projects. As one gearhead to another, I think you’ll appreciate them.”

Joe grinned. “Hey, works for me.”

Julius rolled his eyes. “Aw, great...more geeking.”

“Um...” Melissa said tentatively. “I...don’t suppose you’d care to play some Nature Range, instead?”

Julius perked up, his ears swivelling forward. “Hey...that sounds like fun, actually.”

“Great! Why don’cha come with me up to the belvedere and we can plug in?” Melissa said.

“Fuckin’ A!” Julius said happily.

Joe chuckled. “I guess I’ll see you later, then.”

“Have fun storming the castle!” Julius said as he followed Melissa out of the room and up the stairs.

Kenyon grinned. “RIDEs, huh?”

Joe nodded. “Gotta love ‘em.”

“I’ll just go make us all some lunch while you boys play with your toys,” Nigella said, getting up.

“That would be wonderful, dear,” Kenyon said. “C’mon, Joe, the Falcon’s in the same garage as my all my other Fords.”

“Well, that suits me to a Model T.” Joe followed him out of the house.

“So, where else can we show our faces?” Joe pondered once they’d returned to the penthouse that evening. “We could do Uplift again. You hardly got to see any of that place except the inside of a garage and the way out to the tunnel. And that’s where Socah lives...”

“Hey bro, something caught my eye on the feeds.” Julius threw a poster for the Califia Coastal Ring Grand Prix up on the media wall. “Perfect excuse to take the Big Jag out for a spin, you think? It needs a proper break-in.”

“I actually did that in the Mach 5 about fifteen years ago. It was a blast,” Joe said. “Unless the rules have changed, you can’t actually enter that one with a RIDE—has to be a single-mode skimmer within certain specifications, in the interest of keeping the playing field level. There are some freestyle touring races where RIDEs and EIDEs are permitted, though the soonest one’s not for a couple months.”

“Awww,” Julius mumbled.

“Nothing keeping us from doing our own tour, mirroring the route,” Joe said, trying not to laugh at his partner’s unexpected mope. “Give us time to get in some tourism at our own pace. Plus...maybe we could bring Socah along.”

“Yeah, I want to see this Califia place, and Burnside, Cape Nord, Baltica...dunno about Sturmhaven, though. Fuck those Valk bitches.”

“So,” Joe said, “Which one of us gets to be Martin Milner and which one is George Maharis?”

“I was kind of hoping to be Dan Cortese,” Julius said. Joe smacked him. “Anyway, give Socah a buzz. See if she’s game. I’ll warm up the Big Jag.”

“You’re really enthusiastic about this,” Joe said. “I’m surprised.”

“I think it’s actually sinking in that the fuckin’ war is over, that’s all,” Julius said.

“Hey, it’s only been thirty-five years,” Joe said. “Give it another thirty-five and life might return to normal.”

Outside, the flier pad split open, the Big Jag rising up on a lift. Julius padded outside and split his Minimus frame from the Ahnuld, which changed to dumb-skimmer mode. He then lifted to the hood of the E-type and plugged himself in. “Vroom fucking vroom. I’m the Jagmobile.”

Joe scratched his scruffy beard. “You know, let’s bring the bike along with us. I’m

sure Socah would love a spin on it.”

“Fuckin’ A, Joe,” Julius said. “I’ve got it on remote. Now you gonna call her or what?”

“Hang on,” Joe said. “I’m still trying to decide whether we should go clockwise or counter-clockwise. And should we start from here, Uplift, or somewhere else? We can fly up there in the Pan-Am...”

“Fuckin’ ask her what *she* wants to do, an’ do that,” Julius said. He changed the car to its large Walker mode and laid on the flier pad, covering much of it. He rolled his orange eyes. “Call her already. Jeezus. We’re not going anywhere ‘til you do.” Then he yawned, rolled on his back, shut his eyes, and started a catnap.

Joe chuckled, and reached for his comm. “Jenny, Jenny, who can I turn to...” he sang under his breath as he punched in her comm code.

She picked up on the second ring. “Hello, Joe. How are Julius’s new shells working out?”

“Better than we ever expected,” Joe said, looking at the great furry lump sunning himself on the flier pad. “But, it’s Donizetti, so it shouldn’t really be a surprise.”

“I salivated over his skimmers on Earth, but could never afford one,” Socah said. “So, why the call?”

“I’ve got this kernel of an idea here,” Joe said. “I’ve done the Coastal Ring tour a dozen times in my life, but Jules hasn’t, and neither have you. And we have all these new skimmers to break in. How’d you like to come along?”

“Is that a proposition, Joe Steader?” Socah asked coyly. Joe had an odd moment of cognitive dissonance at hearing those tones from the tough-as-nails mecha commander he’d known on Earth, but it quickly passed.

“You’re damn right it is,” Joe replied, pulling himself together again. “Maybe after that, Laurasia. Hell, we can even fly up to my space HoJo, Aloha counterweight mansion, or even the moon for a weekend. Whatever turns our fancy.”

“So much for subtlety,” Julius said.

“I accept,” Socah said.

“Any thoughts on where you’d like to start ze Gondwana Grande Tour, madame?” Joe said, putting a little bad French in his accent. “I can fly us anywhere on the Coastal Ring, then we can circle around ‘til we get back.”

“Not yet, but I’ll have made up my mind when you two get here,” Socah said. “What exotic locale to choose from, hmm...”

Julius rolled back onto his belly, then changed back to the skimmer. “Okay, Joe. *Now* we can head to the aerodrome.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Joe said dryly, getting into the driver’s seat.

“Jules is such a hoot!” Socah said. “Meet you at the South Uplift Aerodrome, boys. Are you bringing the Pan-Am you’ve talked about so much?”

“You’ve got it, Socah! She’s a beaut, I guarantee,” Joe said. He switched the dashboard controls into flight mode and lifted the E-type replica off the landing pad, Julius retracting the wheels. The skimmer had a smooth, aerodynamic shape even without a hardlight aeroshell, so he started out without one, descending all the way to ground level before extending the wheels again.

“Taking our time, are we?” Julius asked from the dashboard. “I’m not complaining, I’m just surprised.”

“When you get to be our age, Julius, you learn the value of slowing down,” Socah

said over the comm. “Let me know when you’re about to land, boys. Gates out.” She hung up the comm.

“Didn’t even let us say goodbye,” Julius said.

“Old habits die hard, I guess. She was military for fifty years,” Joe explained.

“The spaceplane’ll be ready to launch by the time we get there,” Julius said. “Take your time. I’m fucking enjoying these wheels. Vroom! Vroooooom!”

“Now who’s acting like a little kid?” Joe said, chuckling.

“Hey, learned from the best,” Julius said. “We’ll be at the aerodrome in twenty minutes.”

The Jaguar sports car pulled up short just inside the open doors to the Steader hangar where the Pan-Am Orion SSTO jet resided. “So this is it, huh? The end fucking result of me calling you in to laugh at the stupid-ass people in the lame gorilla suits?”

“That it is,” Joe said. “Well, one of them, anyway. Sometime we should go visit the Howard Johnson. But later for that. This thing’s my pride and joy. Hang on, I’ll lower the cargo ramp.” He tapped in a command on his comm, and a ramp at the base of the plane below the tail lowered. “Drive all the way to the front of the bay; it’ll chock the car automatically.”

“Got it.” The cargo bay took up perhaps a third of the plane’s length. There was room for several vehicles, though the bay was empty at the moment. Julius pulled all the way forward and killed the motor. Chocks raised out of the floor and slid into place. After Joe got out and closed the door, padded braces came out of the walls and ceiling to hold the car gently but firmly in place.

The motorcycle hovered up behind them a moment later. Julius popped out of the Jag’s hood and padded back to merge with the bike again, joining Joe in his two-legged Shell mode a moment later. “So, show me the rest?”

“Come on.” Joe tapped the comm, and the ramp raised closed behind them. He led the way through a hatch at the front of the bay, which led into a small utility kitchen type area with a fabber and tray cart storage. “There’s another room like this up front,” Joe explained. “The one back here is for the passengers further back.” He led the way further on into coach seating, where seats were arranged in two rows alongside viewports in the sides.

“You seriously built this thing like a fuckin’ airliner?” Joe said. “What, you ever carry passengers?”

“Well, no...but I wanted the ambiance,” Joe said. “Sometimes I’ll just...y’know... come down here and sit, and pretend to be Dr. Heywood Floyd. I even have one of those space pens. But the living quarters are upstairs in the First Class section.”

He led the way up through the next kitchen, then tapped in a five-digit code on a keypad next to the door. Musical notes sounded in time with the keypresses.

“You’re mixing your movies there,” Julius said. “That’s from *Close Encounters*. Or *Moonraker*.”

Joe shrugged. “I thought it was cool.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t. Just pointing it out is all,” Julius said.

Beyond the door was the flight deck, with seats adjustable for RIDEs or humans. “I’ll show you the living quarters later. Let’s go ahead and get in the air.” He slid into the pilot’s seat and started punching keys.

Julius sat in the co-pilot’s chair and eyed him suspiciously. “Joe? I just wanna

make this one thing crystal clear. If I have to listen to the fucking Blue fucking Danube all the fucking way to Uplift, I will be personally disemboweling *every fucking speaker on this tub* until it stops. *Capice?*”

“I think I’ve lost my taste for that song, really...” Joe admitted. “Used to have it on continuous looped broadcast everywhere I went, as kind of a personal signature. Ugh. I must have been out of my mind.”

Julius reached overhead and started to flip switches—all the right ones for a preflight. “Let’s see...aft impellers...check.”

“Sideloaded the piloting chip already?” Joe asked.

“Passed the sims in fast-time, got the license,” Julius said. “Been there, done that, got the fuckin’ t-shirt.”

“Well, I’ve flown this bucket a few dozen times by my lonesome. Let’s do this together,” Joe said. He picked up a tablet. “Control surfaces and RCS...”

The checklist went quickly, and by the time they were finished clearance had come from the tower. Joe shoved the throttles forward and the plane taxied along the runway. “In the book, I think the plane was launched by a catapult like they use on aircraft carriers,” Joe said. “But even *I* couldn’t get them to let me build one at the spaceport.”

“Oh you poor thing,” Julius deadpanned.

Joe tapped some more controls on the dash, and classical music started playing through the speakers—but not the Blue Danube. “There.”

Julius’s ears perked up. “Bolero? Okay, I suppose I can see that. Just like in *Legend of Galactic Heroes*.”

“And it’s just long enough for the flight to Uplift,” Joe said. “You feel like a take-off roll, or a lifter ascent?”

The jaguar put his left hand on the throttle, gripping the levers with a confident flex of his fingers. “Let’s goose this fucker.”

“Just don’t ask me to buzz the tower,” Joe said. “We have clearance.”

“Then here we go!” Julius pushed the throttles all the way forward, then grasped the control yoke with both hands. The starliner started to vibrate as the engines powered up. He grasped the yoke firmly, flexing his fingers. “*Damn*, this is great! I can’t wait until we can spread it around! It’ll be a fucking *revolution!*”

Joe raised an eyebrow. “You say you want a revolution? Well, y’know...”

Julius removed one hand from the yoke long enough to demonstrate his increasing mastery of their use for gesturing one more time.

Impellers on full thrust, the Pan-Am spaceliner streaked skyward. Joe grinned and hummed to himself. *Don’t you know it’s gonna be...all right.* “Next stop...Uplift!”

Chapter One: Uplift and the Tunnel

May 24, 151 A.L.

“Thar she blows,” Joe said, as the nose of the spaceliner dipped below the horizon. In the distance ahead, a twinkling object stood out amid the desert, just to the west of the Eastern Coastal Range. “Uplift, that toddlin’ town. Jewel of the Eastern Shelf, and so on.”

“It looks like one,” Julius admitted. “Shiny domes, huh?”

“Yeah. I remember when it was just a little research station, *way* back when I was in college. They had *nothing* there. Then the hardlight domes went up, more people came to do research, other people came to sell them stuff, more domes went up to make room for more people, and before you know it, boom. Polity.” He shook his head. “God, I feel old.”

The edge of the Domes skirted the foothills, stopping just a few kilometers short of the Traverse Tunnel mouth to the east. “Wow, I can’t fuckin’ believe that’s visible from all the way up here,” Julius said. “I mean, it was fuckin’ big when we went through it, but still.”

“Can be hard to get a sense of scale when you’re right up next to something,” Joe said. “I remember when they dug that thing. Finally gave up on the idea that this crazy Uplift thing was a passing fad, so they managed to get the one last working Neumon Former on the planet going long enough to burrow it out.” He chuckled. “It conked out for good right after it finished, and it took four times as long to dismantle it as it did to dig the tunnel. But on the other hand, it sure did provide the fabberies with a lot of useful raw material for shoring it up. Kind of like a build-your-own-tunnel kit.”

“So why don’t they just connect the fuckin’ Dome to the fuckin’ Tunnel? It’s *right there*,” Julius said. “That would give them what? Two hundred clicks of city?”

“Local politics. Why else?” Joe shrugged. “Remember that twenty-first-century Canadian mayor from all those Youtube memes? The one who admitted to taking drugs, but only in one of his drunken stupors? He basically got elected because the province had slapped some extra cities onto Toronto as part of a political thing, and those extra cities were the ones who voted him in. I gather the tunnel people are afraid of that kind of thing happening to them if they get merged to Uplift...and the Uplift people are afraid of that happening to *them* if they get merged to the tunnel.”

Julius snorted. “Human politics is fuckin’ nuts.”

The twinkling jewel grew larger and individual bubbles became distinguishable as “Bolero” changed key for its triumphal conclusion. Joe pulled out his comm and tapped in a quick text to Socah advising her of their imminent arrival.

“Uplift Center to Pan-Am one-niner heavy, enter southeast suborbital approach at five thousand meters at two zero zero knots,” the ATC AI said. It wasn’t strictly needed, but was part of the twencen atmosphere.

“Affirmative, Uplift Center,” Joe replied. “Coming onto final approach now. Pan-Am one-niner heavy.”

“This bitch flies really smooth,” Julius said as he turned the yoke.

“Damn right she does! Hope you enjoyed the experience.”

“Pan-Am one-niner heavy, cleared to land at Pad Four at South Aerodrome,” ATC said.

“I bet the Earth tourists think we’re all a bunch of Space Amish who want to do everything manually,” Julius said.

“Maybe,” Joe said. “The ‘no hidden depths’ rubes, sure. Anyway, there’s no runway here, so we’ll have to do a...”

“Vertical landing.” Julius tapped the side of his head. “You know, sometimes I think you forget I’m not made of meat. I take that as a fuckin’ complement.”

“Well, thanks,” Joe said. “I think. Braking thrusters...”

The domes grew and grew, spreading out before them. Individual blocks, then individual buildings and streets, became visible. Joe easily picked out the street on which the Freeriders Garage resided. Then it was time to see to the business of actually landing the plane. They passed over the garage, making a sweeping turn to come around to the bubble where the Uplift South Aerodrome was located while shedding momentum, then passed through the dome wall as they throttled back and redirected lifter thrust downward.

“Pad Four in sight,” Julius said.

Joe let go of his yoke and folded his arms. “The helm is all yours.”

“This ain’t the *Enterprise*, bro. Or are you planning to build that, too?” Julius quipped.

“I don’t know,” Joe said. “I get the feeling it’d be a long road, getting from here to there.”

“At least do the hard rock theme from the Whedon *Trek* series. Berman! Yech!” Julius stuck out his tongue. “Braga! Pleh!” He took the controls and carefully maneuvered the plane over the pad and lowered it to the tarmac. “All right, there. The jaguar has landed.”

Joe pushed the pilot’s seat back away from the controls and patted Julius on the shoulder. “Well done! Socah’s in the Aerodrome Lounge waiting for us. Why don’t we Fuse up?”

Julius got up as well. “Works for me. Which bod you wanna use?”

An image of Socah all gussied up in her flapper outfits gave Joe an idea. “Let’s go with the bike for now, but...download a Gatsby look for the mini, won’t you? I feel like a mint julep.”

“Sort of wet and sticky?” Julius said. “Right, let’s go.” He stepped up behind Joe and Fused over him. A couple of minutes later, they walked down the ramp to find Socah waiting. As usual, she had on one of her long dresses, her hair in its usual bob.

“You’re looking...amazing,” Joe said, giving her a feline grin with Julius’s muzzle. *She’s pure class. Pure class.*

:We’re still talking about the woman whose usual way of saying “hi” was asking what the hell damn fool thing you’d gone and done this time, right?: Julius sent, with overtones of amusement.

:It’s been almost sixty years. I think I’m entitled to a reassessment, Jules,: Joe replied.

“Is that a Donizetti you’re wearing?” Socah said. “Or are you just happy to see me?”

“Well, it ain’t Bugle Boy jeans,” Julius said. “God, I fuckin’ love this new bod.” He

flexed hardlight muscles. “That looks so badass, doesn’t it?”

“You’re both a very handsome kitty cat,” Socah said.

“Anyway, Julius here hasn’t seen much of Uplift apart from the Freeriders Garage,” Joe said. “So I was thinking we might start by showing him around some.”

“Damned good idea. What turns your fancy, Jules? Anywhere you want,” Socah said.

“Dunno. Surprise me,” Julius said. “What do *you* think a RIDE who just woke up from a fuckin’ thirty-five year nap would wanna see ‘round here?”

“Maybe the Creche,” Socah said. “Or the University? My grandson Ferris and his partner Franklin are adjunct faculty there. A number of RIDEs have elected to learn some topics that way rather than purely by skill chips.”

“I remember hearing something about a museum, too,” Joe said. “Never actually been myself. Until a week or so ago, it would just have stirred up painful memories.” He sighed happily. “I still can’t believe this...every time I wake up, for the first couple of minutes I’m *sure* it’s all just been a dream.”

“We’re still working on that,” Julius said.

“PTSD is no joke,” Socah said solemnly.

“Yeah, that was the diagnosis, way back when,” Joe admitted. “It’s funny...I thought PTSD was something you had to be in actual combat for months to have. Not something you could get in thirty seconds.”

“It just takes one traumatic memory,” Socah said. “You’re not alone. I saw plenty in fifty years in the Army that almost turned my brain to mush.”

“War sucks,” Julius said. “So, anyway, let’s beat feet. If there’s some fun places to see, let’s fuckin’ *see* ‘em!”

“Right!” Socah said. “Next stop, Uplift RIDE Museum, and after that, the Creche.”

“Well, *that* was fuckin’ weird,” Julius said as they left the creche building.

“A good weird?” Joe asked.

“The jury’s still out,” Julius replied. “I’m still getting used to this shit. I take a nap for a few seconds, and boom. I’m living in a whole new fuckin’ world.”

“Don’t you dare close your eyes?” Joe suggested.

“Don’t *you* start,” Julius growled.

“I thought it was interesting,” Socah said. “Of course, this isn’t the first time I’ve been to the creche. My granddaughter—my only *natural* granddaughter—works there.”

“RIDEs having kids,” Julius said. “What the fuck’s next? Having jobs? Holding political office? Yeesh.”

“I’d think you’d want those things,” Joe said.

“I’m still trying to deal with the idea of people not thinkin’ I’m fuckin’ *equipment* anymore,” Julius said. “Yeah, you think you fuckin’ know what you want, but then you up and *get* it just handed to you...yeah, yeah, I know, years of hard work an’ all that shit, but I wasn’t *here* for that.”

“Give it some time, bro. Relax,” Joe said. “Anyway, I thought the museum was pretty cool.”

Julius snorted. “Yeah, right. Like the world needed a fuckin’ retirement home for RIDEs.”

“You did meet a few people you knew there, though,” Joe pointed out.

“Ones I’d chatted with from the sidebands,” Julius said. “Which woulda been cool if they hadn’t all been all about how many fuckin’ years they spent mining, or whatevs. Some of us didn’t *get* years.” He snorted. “They sure were impressed at getting a visit from Joe Fucking Steader, though. You’d think he’d paid for them getting invented or something. Oh, wait.”

Joe cleared his throat. “I think we were going going to Martinez U next?”

“You don’t really seem like the scholarly type, so I thought we’d see what Rhianna is doing instead. I’m sure Julius would like to see her again, and maybe show off a little.” Socah winked. “She should be done for the day and on personal things now.”

“Hell, yeah!” Julius said. “Let’s go!”

“There’s nothing like the new Donizetti shell smell,” Rhianna said. She whistled as she examined Julius’s cycle shell with his hardlight off. “And it’s a work of art, as usual.”

“Watch this!” Julius said, de-Fusing into his Walker form. “This is an amazing body.”

“It really is,” Socah said with a note of envy.

Rhianna chuckled. “Wishing you were a RIDE now?”

“I suppose I’ve started feeling left out,” Socah said. “But I *like* my Zharus-modded Jane. I’m practically *unique*. That’s not something I want to lose.”

“Hey, watch this!” Julius dropped the hardlight on the shell, then opened the hatch in the back and jumped out in his Minimus form. “I’m a mini-me!”

“Nice,” Rhianna said. “Uncia’s got one of those. Looks like *Signor* Donizetti made some more improvements to the last prototype.”

“We don’t really use the Fuser mode that much, but it’s nice to be able to swap between the bike and the larger shell,” Joe said. “Not that we use the larger shell that much either, but we’re planning to hit the road in it soon.”

Rhianna blinked. “*Larger* shell? You got more than one?” She facepalmed. “Of *course* you got more than one. You’re Joe Steader.”

“*Crazy* Joe Steader, and don’t you forget it.” Joe grinned. “Wanna see it? I’ll call it with the auto-drive.” He pulled out his comm and tapped in a code.

“Just like in that silly *Super Force* show, huh?” Kaylee said. “Press the star if you want the suit’ and all that?”

“I’d have said *Iron Man*, but yeah,” Julius said.

“It’ll be a few minutes before it gets here,” Joe said. He had been looking around Rhianna’s workshop, impressed with the tools and the bits and pieces laid out on workbenches. “I’ve always been a tinkerer, myself.”

“You’re in good company, then,” Socah said. “Sometimes I think I’m in a family of tinkerers. My granddaughters tinker with RIDES and skimmers, my grandson tinkers with scholarship, and my daughter and son-in-law tinker with the law.”

“Back on Earth I was in the Reclamation Corps,” Rhianna explained. “We had to make the best out of the equipment they gave us, so I kept my contingent running on a shoestring.”

“That’s...the NGO that tore down and recycled abandoned towns, isn’t it?” Joe said.

Rhianna nodded. “Millions of people emigrated from Earth yearly. That kind of depopulation does things to towns, cities, and infrastructure. Even with most people

living in arcos. We'd go in, evaluate the site for historical value, tear down anything that wasn't and move anything that was into storage. Even whole buildings. When equipment broke down—lifter tractors, bulldozers, anything—I fixed it. Pretty much my entire job.”

“Wow. I might just have to go back there someday and see if I can have a look around where they put the historical stuff,” Joe said. “I wonder if they'd consider selling any of those buildings? Could rebuild them on Zharus brick by brick.”

“Rhianna dear, I always said you should have gone into engineering design of some kind,” Socah said. “You have a gift for putting mechanical things together.”

“I have a gift for improvisation more than original design,” Rhianna said. “Put me in front of a blank drafting table and most of the time I'm flummoxed.”

“You did pretty well with the mini shells, though,” Kaylee said.

“Well, there's a few exceptions, but I'm no Donizetti,” Rhianna said. “That's why we're working with him. He sees design flaws that I just don't.”

“Maybe you're more a *MacGuyver*,” Joe said. “Anyway, I've got to say between all the stuff I've heard, especially from Quinny, and the stuff I see here, I'm really impressed. Not least that you-all and Zane managed to knock some sense into her. I'd just about given up all hope.”

“If you want to thank someone, you should probably thank Tocsin,” Rhianna said. “He's the one who drove the lesson home.”

“If we stop in at Alpha Camp, maybe I'll do that,” Joe said. “Oh hey...car's getting close.”

A moment later, the sleek shape of the Jaguar replica cruised up the street and slid to a halt inside the garage. The garage lights played on its gleaming surface like a liquid, and the motor's noisemaker purred a deep rumble.

“Ohhhh,” Rhianna said, approaching it like Indiana Jones beholding a sacred relic. “I've seen his original skimmer designs, but this is something *else*. Reproducing a twencen design almost to the letter, but fitting in modern tech too...wow! And...this is a RIDE, too?”

“Like the meme says, let me show you it,” Julius said, springing onto the hood, then sinking in. A moment later, it unfolded into its giant jaguar cat shape.

“Baby!” Rhianna exclaimed. Julius lowered his big head down and she hugged him.

“Yep, she's in love,” Kaylee observed. “Sometimes I wonder if I gotta get me one of those big 'uns to get her full attention. But I wouldn't give up my double-o-one for anything.”

“Your ought-one's probably a bit too small to use a mini-shell with,” Rhianna said over her shoulder. “But I'll bet we could tweak it so you could treat *it* like a mini-shell and hook it into something Fenris- or Tamarind-sized. Um...if you wanted to, I mean. What can I say, I just love the big iron.” She stepped back and peered up at the big jaguar. “Wow. You're like one of the *heavy* heavies from the war.”

“It takes a little getting used to,” Julius said. “Everything looks smaller than it ought to.”

Socah shook her head. “Seeing all these miraculous machines makes me long for the good old days. I don't know how long it's been since I was last in the cockpit. I'm *almost* tempted to go back to a human body just so I could work a RIDE myself.” She chuckled. “Unless there's still some old IDEs floating around that would work with my

hardpoints. They didn't yank them when they decommed me, just erased the firmware, and I'm sure that wouldn't be much of an obstacle for you techie sorts."

"Oh, I'm sure I could..." Rhianna trailed off, looking distant.

"I know that look," Kaylee said, headbutting her partner on the chest.

"I'm sure Shelley will have no problem with the firmware," Rhianna mused. Her expression brightened like a rising sun. "Nana, this is going to take some time, but—I can build you something. It won't be a RIDE *qua* RIDE, though I think I could adapt a shell to the purpose. But it should have similar functionality. With what we've been doing with the mini and maxi frames..."

Socah clasped her granddaughter's hand. "I trust you, Rhi. I'm sure you'll come up with something I'll just *love*."

"Nana, do you want a female jag, or some other cat, or even something...else?" Rhianna asked.

"I have...no idea," Socah said. "You know me as well as anyone. Surprise me."

"Like I said earlier, I've got a warehouse full of old IDE-style mecha projects based on various anime," Joe said. "When we hit Nextus on our tour, or maybe afterward, I'll be happy to take you there. I've even got an N-1 replica."

"I'll look forward to that," Socah promised. "I think we destroyed the last ones on Earth that day in Cornwall."

"Kaylee..." Rhianna said. Her partner padded over and Fused up. "Oh, I'm getting ideas. I'm getting ideas... So, Nana, before you leave, we need to do a few things for Shelley, and *I'm* going to start looking into junk DEs that I can break for testing once we get a rig up..."

"But we still have a few things to show you," Julius said, sounding uncharacteristically petulant. She patted the RIDE on the foreleg.

"Forget it, Jules. I know that look," Socah said. "She's in the zone."

"Nana, have a seat and shut down your hardlight. I need to take some readings from the hardpoints." Rhianna graciously gestured towards the chair they used for making Integrate DINs.

Joe grinned. "The master at work, eh? Um...if you'd rather Julius and I wait outside..."

"No way, Crazy Joe," Kaylee said. "Come over here, you two. We want your questions *and* your contributions."

"That's...not really why..." Joe stammered.

"Bullpucky," Socah said. "There's nothing to see with the skin off."

"It's not that," Joe said. "I was just worried you might be...well, sensitive about not looking human underneath."

Socah snorted. "I got over *that* a couple of years after I got the damn thing. Hell, you should have seen me before we got here. I was a goddamn Barbie doll. Still am, underneath." She slid into the chair and continued, "Much's I like this new hardlight, I'm no wilting violet ashamed of the 'real me.' If I should want a new 'real me' Eleven has a slot reserved for me down at the hospital. Still ambivalent about that."

"It's got its pros and cons," Rhianna said. "I've chatted with people from both sides, and ex-metal folks getting reacclimated to life in 'real bodies.' I understand that having to go to the bathroom all the time again is one of the hardest things to get used to."

"Ugh," Socah said. "I have to admit, that's one of the things I *don't* miss. Once a

day is enough for me.”

“Uh...that might be too much information...” Joe mumbled.

“I sure am fuckin’ glad I don’t have to bother with that shit,” Julius declared. “I tried enabling the ‘realistic poops’ option in Nature Range for a day or so, and it was just...how the fuck can organics spend so much *time* that way when they could be doing something *useful*?”

“We all manage to get by somehow,” Joe said.

“It wasn’t the having to *do* it that was so annoying, it was spending several minutes afterward kicking dirt over it,” Julius muttered. “Couldn’t override it. It was instinct.”

“You hardly notice it if you grew up that way,” Joe said. “Or...well, you notice it but you put up with it because there isn’t a reasonable alternative.”

“I can’t say I would have gone to this ‘Jane *just* for getting rid of having to go to the bathroom,” Socah said. “But I do have to admit, it’s one of its better points.”

“That’s one of the things people like about RIDEs, too,” Rhianna said. “They make the process...simpler.”

“And for some reason, we don’t seem to mind when people take a crap in us,” Julius said. “Funny how that works.”

“*Way* TMI,” Joe muttered.

Socah smiled, then her skin turned off, leaving her with the unsettling Barbie doll looks she had explained. Rhianna probed specific locations on the surface of her skin on her arms, legs, back, and head with a diagnostic probe. Then the points she had examined irised open into peg holes about two centimeters wide. She packed the same nano-gel into each hardpoint they used to get the contact layout for Integrate DIN slots.

“Everything looking good here, Nana,” Rhianna said, closing them up again. “Shelly should be able to build the new firmware from these test results. You can skin up again.”

“Good.” She resumed her more organic appearance. “So when can I expect to hear from you?”

“At least a couple of weeks. I have to build Fuser test rigs based on your hardpoints, then start prototyping...I should have something testable on you by then.”

“We can fly back here from wherever we are at that point easily enough,” Joe said. “And then fly back again to carry on.”

“Wherever you are?” Rhianna asked, raising an eyebrow.

“We’re thinking of taking a coastal tour,” Socah said. “Seeing the sights all the way around Gondwana.”

“Sounds like fun,” Kaylee said. “We should do that ourselves one of these days, pard. I want to see the stretch of road where you met the landlord sometime.”

“There’s really not all that much there except redwoods and rain,” Rhianna said. “Which was kind of the point, I guess. But yeah, we should go sometime. When we can take some time off anyway.”

“So, say, twenty years or so?” Kaylee said dryly.

“I’m not *that* bad,” Rhianna said, chuckling. “...am I?”

“You inherited the family workaholicism, no doubt about it,” Socah said. “In fifty years in the military I can count the number of leaves I took on both hands. But it’s never really been ‘work’ for us, so to speak.”

“I, on the other hand, never had that problem,” Joe said.

Julius sneezed, twice. “Oh, gimme a fuckin’ break, Joe. You’ve worked harder than damn near everyone on this planet. Only difference is, you made it *look* like playing so you could claim it as the moral equivalent of a tax write-off.”

“Well, false modesty and all that,” Joe said. “All this money has to be good for *something*.”

“We don’t seem to have any shortage of billionaires around who feel that way,” Rhianna said. “You, Zane, the Waltons...you’d think there’d be at least one robber baron around, but no, we’re a planet of philanthropists.”

“Anyone who isn’t ends up someplace like Bartertown,” Kaylee said. “Rhi and I went through there, once, about four years ago. But, that’s a story for another time. Y’all had some other tricks to show us before we got sidetracked?”

“Oh, yeah!” Julius said. “Get a load of the upgrade hardpoints on this baby...”

A half hour later, the jaguar car was heading out of Uplift, with Joe and Socah in its two seats. Julius’s skimmer bike shell followed along behind on autopilot. “So what do you think?” Joe said.

“About what?” Socah asked. “There’s so many possible answers to that simple question. I think my granddaughter will come up with something just perfect for me. Maybe not on the first try, but she’ll come through. Once she broke free of Arlene spoiling her rotten she became a fine man...” Socah coughed. “I still can’t say something like that with a straight face.”

“You just need more practice, that’s all,” Joe said. “But I actually meant about the car. This is your first ride in it, after all.”

“The car is wonderful, as I expected it’d be,” Socah replied. She patted the dashboard. “Thanks, Julius.”

“No problem,” the RIDE said, looking back at her through the dashboard. “So, what’ll we do next? Back to Nextus to show Socah the big mecha hangar?”

“I’d love to play with Joe’s toys,” Socah said. “But not right away. I’m more interested in experiencing...and doing.”

Julius smirked. “Socah Does Nextus?”

Joe rolled his eyes. “Juuuules...stop trying to break me any more than I’m already broken, okay?”

“Hey, what have you got to worry about? You’re not drinking anything.”

Socah chuckled. “Right now, I’m most interested in this.” She waved a hand toward the tunnel entrance coming up ahead. “I’ve been through it once or twice—and the first time, our car actually broke down in it—but I’ve never actually *seen* it. Why is it even here to begin with?”

“I was telling Julius about that earlier,” Joe said. “When Uplift was founded, nobody thought it would last, and they didn’t really make any provisions for traffic. You had the old Nextus-Uplift Skimmerway, but given that it cut through a corner of the Dry to get here, it wasn’t really the friendliest route, especially if you broke down on the way. So, once they realized the place was a going concern, they cut this tunnel to link up with the Coastal Ring Highway.”

“So they cut this tunnel, you say,” Socah said. “As simple as that.”

“Heh. Well, no. They used the last Neumon Former to dig it. You know how huge those things are. It took two years just to make it functional enough to do the job. They just don’t make ‘em like that anymore. *Old* tech, but incredible. Of course, by then Uplift

was rich enough to pay for it out of pocket, so the main issues were political. It was a museum piece, after all. The whole museum, you could say.”

“And then it conked out completely once it was done, and they chopped it up for raw material,” Julius said.

“That *was* part of their original design intent,” Joe said. “They were built to be recycled after they’d done their job, because who wants big old rusting machines sitting around on your newly terraformed planet?”

“I hear some Inties made one of the daughter machines that conked out in the Dry into one of their Enclaves,” Julius added. “Fuckin’ brilliant if you ask me.”

“Anyway, someone had the bright idea that a hundred-klick-long tunnel would be a good place to live, and it developed into this,” Joe said. “One long rest stop and charging station, with hotels and resorts on top by the ventilation shafts.” He grinned. “You know, we could stop over for the night at one of them, continue on to Nextus tomorrow. I don’t think I’ve actually spent much time in the tunnel myself.”

“I gather it’s one of those places where people are *from* rather than a place to go to,” Socah said. “It’s no New York City, I bet.”

“Maybe, but I hear the resorts do a fairly decent job trading on the novelty of vacationing on top of a tunnel,” Joe said. “It’s just that I was always vacationing on top of a space elevator or the bottom of the ocean or somewhere else extreme like that.”

“So we’re going slumming now! Got it!” Julius said.

The towns inside the Tunnel were universally long and narrow, so their names reflected this. Longmire was the largest, about a third of the way inside from Uplift. They were also multilevel, built not just on the tunnel floor but also along multiple ledges and shelves that ran along the walls, connected by ramps and catwalks. Protective hardlight generators were spaced at intervals along the walls, to be activated by proximity sensors should a flier or skimmer go out of control.

“You know, I’m getting a Super Mario Bros. vibe from the layout of this place,” Joe said. “It’s all the narrow ledges. Like it’s built for sidescrollers. I could put up some lifter-supported question blocks over there. Maybe some Metroids floating here and there, or...”

Socah laughed. “That’s not something I thought of, but I haven’t been swimming in twencen for fifty-odd years. I’m going one decade at a time and I’ve barely gotten to Betty Boop.”

“I think it’s an acquired taste,” Joe said. “But somehow, I seem to have managed to get the whole planet to acquire it.”

“And he pins the blame for the whole damn thing on me,” Julius said. “All *I* ever did was fucking die. *He’s* the one who did all the work.”

“Never would’ve happened if Fritz hadn’t ‘loaned’ me some of his Integrates to swim through that massive, fragmented database,” Joe said. “Then we released newly decoded stuff to the RIDE sidebands first. Everything else seemed to follow.”

The avatar of Julius’s face in the dashboard rolled its eyes. “I still can’t believe how that guy turned out. What a whack-job. I mean, he was a little bit nutso even back in the day, but what kinda fuckin’ crazy you gotta be to make a whole fuckin’ society in your own image?”

“Uh...” Joe said. “I plead the Fifth.”

“Of vodka, no doubt,” Julius snorted.

“I went through three livers in thirty years,” Joe said. “I’m not proud of it or anything.” He sighed. “So, where do you two want to stay? There’s the Longmire Inn, or the Best Western Motel.”

“I’m a sucker for a good twentieth century name,” Socah said. “Let’s go with Best Western.”

“Sure, why not?” Julius said. “Only the *Best* Western for us. Not some fuckin’ *mediocre* one.”

“Righty-o! Take the exit to that lift shaft there.” Joe pointed. The sports skimmer pulled smoothly out of traffic, then directed its lifters down to rise up through a shaft in the wall near where one of the vent shafts cast a patch of sunlight on the tunnel floor. They emerged in a small clearing that had been made on the top of the mountain by dumping the stone debris from the tunnel around the shaft and then smoothing it level. A few buildings clustered around the shaft mouth, which had a safety railing and observation platforms for tourists. They headed for the building with the familiar late-1960s Best Western hotel sign and parked, then Julius popped his mini-shell out and followed Joe and Socah into the lobby.

In keeping with the twencen “everything is manual” theme, the hotel actually had a staff. The oblivious woman behind the lobby desk didn’t even look up from her paperback book and spoke in monotone. Metal keys were haphazardly left out on the counter. “Welcome to Longmire Best Western. Please sign the register and take a key. I don’t care which. We have a free non-fabbed continental breakfast...”

Joe looked at the book she was reading. It was one of those novels where the name of the author is three times the size of the title, none other than a saucy Iphigenia Rose book. “*The Lilac Garden*. You know, she was still a ‘he’ when that was written.”

“Uh huh,” the young woman mumbled, turning the page without looking up.

“We apologize for interrupting your reading,” Socah said testily. “We’re *only* customers.”

Joe grinned. “Actually, I think it’s part of the place’s charm.”

“Eh, give her a break,” Julius said. “It’s not as if you’re fuckin’ *Joe Steader* or anything.”

“Yeah, *he* usually gets better service,” Joe said. “C’mon, let’s leave her to her book.”

“There’s no need to be *rude* about it,” the clerk muttered as they took their key and headed up the hallway.

“You know, places like this are basically gone on Earth,” Socah said. “VL—Virtual Life—takes care of the need for personal meetings. That place you stayed at your first days on Earth was one of the last of its kind.”

“So I gather,” Joe said. “Kind of sad, really. It’s so much nicer to be ignored in *person*.”

“Think she knows who you are?” Julius said. “Wait, who am I kidding? She was probably keeping an eye on you the whole time with implants and cameras.”

“All part of the surly non-service atmosphere,” Joe said. “Our room is 115. Here we are...”

“It’s...clean, at least,” Socah said. There was a bathroom door just on the left of the short hallway, then along the wood-paneled wall was a wardrobe and a modest-sized CRT television right out of the mid-1980s. The air smelled stale and mildly of disinfectant. A wall-mounted air conditioner rattled under the picture window that

looked out on the parking lot with the Jaguar parked in view.

"I see they went the extra mile with the aircon," Joe said. "That rattle is hard to get right."

Julius slunk up to the offending unit and batted it with a forepaw, only to make it louder. "I think that's a *real* fan in there and not a fuckin' noisemaker."

"Nothing but the best worst for Joe Steader," Joe said proudly.

Julius sneezed. "I think you're off your fuckin' nut."

Socah sat down on the edge of one of the double beds, only to have it sag under her weight. "Well, this is embarrassing. I might have to get Rhi to install an offset lifter in my 'Jane. I suppose I don't really *need* a bed anyway."

"One thing I've learned in all my years is never to say anything about a lady's weight," Joe said.

"Probably wise of you," Socah said dryly.

"Well, if you don't need the bed..." Julius said. He jumped up next to her and promptly flopped down, easily taking up the entire space with his forepaws over the edge. "*Mine*."

"You don't need any sleep at all," Joe pointed out, his own tail twitching.

Socah reached back and stroked the jaguar's hardlight pelt. "You do make a fine cushion, Jules."

"I aims to please, Socah," Julius said, giving her an affectionate headbump. "You wanna see my Nature Range? You've got the bandwidth. We could hunt each other..."

"Jules..." Joe said warningly.

"Actually, I do believe that sounds like fun," Socah said. "I hope you won't feel too left-out, Joe."

Joe waved a hand. "Eh, that's all right. Nature Range never really did anything for me."

"That's because you don't know how to play it right," Julius smirked. "But then, *you* weren't never in the army."

"I'll just be over here, sleeping," Joe said, sitting down on the other bed. "Alone, I guess."

"Oh, you poor, poor thing," Socah said dryly.

Joe shrugged. "You can tell me how it goes in the morning." He unstuck the TV's remote control from the velcro on the side and picked up the issue of *TV Guide* next to it. "Let's see what's on the ol' boob tube. It's Saturday, maybe there'll be something on the *Wide World of Sports*."

May 25, 157 A.L.

Joe was awakened by the brush of whiskers against his cheek. He opened his eyes to see that he was nose to nose with a jaguar. "Well, good morning," he said. "I actually slept well for once. I think those anti-PTSD mods you've been running on me are finally starting to work. How was your night?"

"Joe, you fuckin' *gotta* keep her!" Julius said. "She's just the *best!*"

Joe raised an eyebrow. "Do tell?"

"She killed me with a *spear!*" Julius said happily. "A fuckin' *spear!* With, like, a flint speartip!"

Joe wasn't entirely sure how to react to that. He finally settled for, "Really."

“Yeah! I mean...I offered her her choice of weapons, all the way from, like, a twencen assault rifle up to a modern-day gauss gun. And she was like, ‘No, just make sure your physics model is realistic and there’s flint around, and gimme a few hours to get ready.’ And I’m like, ‘Dafuq?’ but hey. And so then I wait a few hours, and I stalk her, and there she is, but right as I pounce she turns around and brings up this spear, and boom! Right through my chest!” Julius sighed happily. “I think I’m in *love*.”

“Ooookay...” Joe said.

“And then she skinned me and tanned my hide!” Julius said. “Just like the Aztecs or Mayans or whoever would have done! What a woman.”

“What can I say? I enjoyed my survival training back in the day,” Socah said. “Enough that I did some research into how the primitive tribes did it. Even learned how to knap flint in real life. Never imagined it would actually come in handy.”

“Now I see why you called her ‘Captain Thermopylae,’” Julius said.

“Uh...” Joe said. “I’ll tell you this much, it wasn’t because I thought she was capable of taking down jungle predators with a spear.”

Socah smirked. “You’d be *surprised* what I’m capable of when I put my mind to it.”

“You have a stronger stomach than I do, Socah,” Joe said. “I was never a very good hunter in Nature Range as a jaguar.”

“He never bit down hard enough to actually *kill* the prey when he *did* catch ‘em,” Julius said. “Fuckin’ *newb*.”

“Well, if you don’t mind me, I’m going to take a shower,” Joe said.

“The hot water’ll cut out before you’re halfway through,” Julius said. “Did you see the size of those towels? You’d need to sew four of them together to get close to anything in your bathroom at home.”

“I know,” Joe said. “Isn’t it great?”

Julius sneezed. “You’re fuckin’ *weird*, Joe.”

“Yep! And you wouldn’t want me any other way.”

“Course not, bro.” Julius rubbed against Joe’s legs. “Now get a shower. You *stink*.”

“I’ll bring back breakfast from the lobby,” Socah said. “I think they have some kind of waffle machine.”

“Oooh, waffles. Sounds good.” Joe went into the bathroom and shut the door. A moment later, the sound of slightly asthmatic plumbing could be heard rattling through the paper-thin wall.

“They made the place look like it hasn’t been remodeled for twenty years at least,” Julius said. “Gotta admit that’s some impressive attention to detail. What’d you think the food’ll be like?”

“Can’t be worse than the rat bars from the service. Let me tell you, it was the only time I was glad I’d lost most of my sense of taste in this thing,” Socah said.

Julius rolled over on his back on his bed. “I’ll be waiting here. You tired me out last night.”

Socah reached over and rubbed his belly. “All right, kitty. See you soon.”

By the time Socah got back, a slightly damp Joe was sitting in a worn terrycloth robe at the room’s small table. Julius peered at the plates of waffles and sausage as Socah set them down on the table. “I don’t get it. Why make *real* food that’s fuckin’ worse than what you could fab? It’s like this whole damn planet took crazy pills while I

was sleeping.” He glared at Joe. “And *you* were the pharmacist.”

“It’s not really ‘worse,’” Joe pointed out. “Just different. And as close to authentic as they can make it. Granted, sometimes the authenticity is sometimes a little overdone, since some of what they’re aping was just that way because they didn’t have anything better at the time. But it was a different style of doing things, and people want to see what it would have been like back in the day when some of the best shows and movies were made.”

“Well, I’ve got the best tastebuds—not hardlight—technology can produce now,” Socah said. She pulled the cover off of the syrup packets and poured on several. “Smells decent enough. I hope I left ‘em long enough in the iron. It was a little dodgy.”

“It’s a nice change from the everyday,” Joe said. “Remind me to take you by a Waffle House sometime. Crazy little place. Half the songs in the jukebox are about Waffle House itself.”

“All right, I guess I would like to try that stuff, then.” Julius looked at Joe expectantly.

“Right. Be right back,” Joe said. “C’mon, cat, let’s go get dressed.” He went back into the bathroom, followed by Julius. A moment later he came back out again, covered in yellow and black fur, and a black pair of shorts.

Socah raised an eyebrow. “So that’s what the mini-shell looks like Fused?”

“This is it,” Julius said. “Feels a little like I fuckin’ shrunk in the wash, but hey. Any USB port in a storm. Now...someone said somethin’ about waffles?”

“Dig in. They’re getting cold,” Socah said. She sliced off a corner with the edge of her plastic fork, with a little difficulty. “Nice crunch, at least.”

Julius and Joe took the chair opposite and picked up their own fork, slathering on the butter from a packet, then adding as much syrup as they could squeeze out of the meager pouches, which wasn’t all that much. They waited for Socah to take a bit.

“Ladies first,” Joe said.

She nodded, then took the bite off the fork. “It’s...well, you taste it. I think I overdid them.”

“Looks underdone here,” Julius observed. He wrinkled his nose. “Well, it isn’t meat, but with Joe’s belly I’m no fuckin’ ‘obligate carnivore’.”

“I never can remember,” Joe said. “Are you able to taste sweet stuff or not? I thought I heard all cats were genetically incapable, or something.”

“I’m using *your* taste buds, bud,” Julius said. “So yeah. I kinda get a free pass on the whole no-sweet-taste-buds-because-of-genetics thing. I kinda *like* sweet stuff, in fact.”

The waffle put up a lot of resistance to being cut by Joe’s fork. All the butter and syrup had turned it rubbery. He picked up a plastic knife and sliced through the corner, revealing uncooked dough. On a hunch, he sliced through the opposite end, to find it overdone and still crispy.

“Sorry about that,” Socah said. “We could go get another.”

“Let’s see what’s edible here and we’ll go get another helping,” Joe said.

“And some bacon, sausage, scrambled eggs,” Julius added, picking at the waffle. There was only a narrow strip of edible waffle they finished in only a few minutes. He dumped the rest into the garbage can.

“Mine ended up a little overdone,” Socah said. “I can’t explain what happened to yours unless they were trying for that ‘genuine twencen’ atmosphere again.”

“They exaggerate and Flanderize sometimes, but it’s all part of the game,” Joe said. “And I guess if I’m honest, I tend to get it a little worse than most. Some of my ‘fans’ either have a weird sense of humor, or else they think *I* do.”

“No, really? The man who fuckin’ *made* Zharus into a twencen paradise?” Julius said. “Why would *he* have a weird sense of humor? Apart from bein’, y’know, fuckin’ *crazy* an’ all.”

“Crazy is as crazy does,” Joe said. “Now, I don’t want to break the atmosphere here, Jules, so could you...”

“Way ahead of you,” the jaguar said. Their feline appearance flickered away into a rumpled gray terry cloth bathrobe and fuzzy jaguar-paw slippers. “How’s that, bud?”

“Perfect! A bleary-eyed traveler,” Joe mussed up his hair to complete the look. “I could use some coffee, too.”

Socah laughed, but remained her immaculately-dressed, morning-person self, then she opened the motel room door.

About twenty people—humans, RIDEs, and Integrates—were crammed into the hallway. They wore telltale brown coats, or Alohan shirts, or knit caps. A few of them wore all three. The surly woman who had checked them in was right at the front with a scowl on her face. “Where’s the rest of *Firefly*?” she fumed. “The Longmire Browncoats would like to know.”

“Ah,” Joe said. “My adoring public. C’mon, guys, isn’t it a little early for this? I haven’t even had any coffee yet.”

“We wanted to be sure we caught you before you left,” the clerk said. “Now, c’mon, we *know* you’re holding back.”

“I’m not holding back anything. There was only one—just one—season,” Joe said. “I’d like to think we Zharusians have more than made up for that failing, Miss, what with actually building the *Serenity* and making *three* more seasons.”

“It’s not the same,” she said, pouting.

“Well, short of building a time machine and going back and changing history, there’s not a lot we can do about that,” Joe said. “Look, I know the rumors that go around about some secret ‘Al Capone’s Vault’ of stuff that I’m holding back for a rainy day, but I promise you there isn’t one. I’ve already given out everything I had. I’m sure ol’ Joss would be happy how his show has lived on.” He shook his head. “Now could you lot clear out? Please? I *really* want some coffee now.”

“I broke out the Keurig machine for you, Mr. Steader,” the Motel employee said with a sincere smile. “We hope you’ve enjoyed your stay at the Longmire Best Western.”

The *Firefly* fan club had a few more questions for Joe as he worked through breakfast—an actual *good* breakfast, this time—but dispersed before he was finished. Topping their stay, the motel employee showed off their manual credit card swipe machine, the type that took an impression rather than used a magnetic strip. “Carbon paper and everything,” she said. “This copy’s yours.”

“Gone the extra mile. I approve,” Joe said.

“Can we use that endorsement?” the canny woman said.

“Consider it on the yelp,” Joe said.

They gathered their few things and went out to the parking lot. Longmire was just on the eastern slope of the mountains that separated the Dry Ocean from the Thalassic—high enough that without the climate dome the low air pressure would have

taken their breath away. The vehicles detached from the recharging station as they approached.

Julius peeled away from being Joe's clothes, then hopped up on the hood of the Jaguar, opening the doors for them. "Fuckin' beautiful morning."

"Good day for a road trip," Joe agreed. Underneath he had put on a pair of slacks and a polo shirt that could have fit in any number of decades in the Twentieth.

"I was just doing a little math," Socah said. "One trip around Gondwana is comparable to circumnavigating Earth."

"Sounds about right," Joe agreed. "But in this case, we don't have to get our feet wet."

"And it won't take us eighty days to do it," Julius said. "We could do it in *eight* in this motherfucker."

"Technically, it wouldn't have taken eighty days even in Verne's time, but he thought 'Around the World in Eighty Days' had a certain ring to it," Joe said.

Socah chuckled. "Around the Continent in a Couple of Weeks' just doesn't sound quite the same, does it?"

"I think we can take as much time as we please," Joe said. "Okay, Jules, take us away. Next stop: Nextus."

The car revved up, and they pulled out of the hotel parking lot, then they dropped back into the Tunnel entrance. "And awaaaaay we go!"

Chapter Two: Nuevo San Antonio

May 26, 157 A.L.

A few hundred clicks southeast of Nextus, the Jaguar convertible skimmer zoomed down the eastbound lane of the Coastal Ring Skimmerway, the skimmer bike carrying on riderless by its side. The Jag's hardlight aeroshell was just permeable enough to let a slight breeze through to ruffle Joe and Socah's hair as they watched the scenery roll by...and others watched them.

"That's thirty fuckin' floaters," Julius growled, his projected eyes on the dashboard screen looking irritated. "Thirty! Let me pop 'em, Joe. I want to try these aft pulsers..." A veritable school of media paparazzi trackers trailed behind the Big Jag after they'd left Nextus. They came in all shapes, with a number of fish and tiny twencen aircraft.

Joe shrugged. "If you want to, knock yourself out. But they can replace them remotely from rest stop fabbers as fast as you can take them down. They've probably got us on satellite tracking by now, so it's not as if we can lose them. I usually figure it's best just to ignore them so it doesn't look like I've got anything to hide."

"Argh." Julius groaned. "Y'know, in some ways I fuckin' liked it better back in the war days. At least *then* the newsies knew their fuckin' place."

"The only time something like that is permissible is wartime," Socah said. "And even then, only enough to maintain opsec. Even on Earth freedom of the press is still sacrosanct. Or at least it was when I left."

"Very happy to hear that," Joe said. "I try and keep tabs on what Earth is doing through Mikey. But he's been in deep cover for a couple years now."

The verdant landscape passed beneath them as the Big Jag cruised at a leisurely 200 kilometers per hour. Faster traffic a kilometer above them were going twice as fast, but they were in no hurry. Socah spent her time looking out the window.

"East coast of Gondwana between Nextus and Sturmhaven was the first area terraformed, even before what became Landing," Joe said. "Nextus basically had the best climate on the entire planet. But later they realized Laurasia was more practical for large-scale settlement."

"Franklin found some interesting papers about that," Socah said. "They tried to work their way inward from here until they saw what Q-dust could do, didn't they? Then they just went around the coast in a ring and called it a day."

"That's about the size of it," Joe agreed. "And between the two inhabited continents, we've got living space like you wouldn't believe. More so now that Integrates are opening up with some of the techniques they use to build livable Dry Ocean hubs."

"Speaking of history, I was doing some of my own research on the Nextus-Sturmhaven War. I...don't wish to bring up bad memories, honestly," Socah said. "But I was reading about the early stages. We're headed towards this little resort town that was caught in the middle, aren't we?"

"No, it's okay." Joe sighed. "Nuevo San Antonio. They were like a little kid caught between a couple of bumbling high school bullies in a slap fight."

“A little kid who fuckin’ meets Mister Miyagi and learns that fuckin’ crane move,” Julius put in. “With dinosaurs.”

“They quite literally ripped *both* sides a new one that day,” Joe admitted. “I gotta admire their spirit and ingenuity. Always been a hardy bunch. But they have some odd tastes, even by my low standards.”

“I am curious,” Socah said. “I wouldn’t mind a stop there before we get to Sturmhaven. *That* place I need to psyche up before we enter their borders. Or I’m gonna *punch* the first Valk I see.”

“I hope you like burnt orange and avocado green,” Joe said. “Because in Nuevo San it’s always 1977.”

“I’m sure it’s always 1977 somewhere,” Socah said. “Especially here.”

Julius sneezed. “Dunno what the fuck you ever saw in that decade. Fuckin’ stupid synthetic fabric suits, fuckin’ stupid epilepsy-inducing dance clubs...”

“It was a different time,” Joe said. “You had to worry about all kinds of things that aren’t a concern now. Like being able to keep up the standard of living you were used to in a time when the oil crisis and the politics of the day made it tricky. It was all about...y’know...stayin’ alive.”

“Don’t make me fuckin’ *eject* you. I’ll do it.”

“So, dinosaurs,” Socah said. “I wonder why they chose dinosaurs?”

“Well, even I admit dinos are fuckin’ awesome,” Julius said. “They got the raptors for fast attack, the huge carnies for tanks, pteros for air, brontos and trikes for transports and APCs. And that’s not even their civvie racing stuff.”

“It’s not *just* dinos,” Joe noted. “They’ve also got a well-deserved rep for building light RIDEs of all species. It seems to be a common thing among the major RIDE-using polities that you get most known for one type, even though you still *make* all types. Nextus is known for cats and dragons, Sturmhaven’s known for wolves and rocs, but they dabble in each others’ specialties too.”

Socah nodded. “Makes sense. If you stick to just one kind of anything, it makes the weaknesses inherent in that one thing more pronounced. And by making units of other kinds, you learn more about that kind’s weaknesses.”

“Lucky for all concerned *I* don’t have any fuckin’ weaknesses,” Julius said smugly. “Pronounced or otherwise.”

Joe opened his mouth, considered, then just smiled and nodded.

The Border Checkpoint was a white stucco Spanish Mission-style building with a red tile roof and wrought-iron fences funneling travelers into the inspection area through an arch. There weren’t any fences to either side of the road, but a row of high-definition sensor posts was visible stretching away to either side. Anyone who tried to cross that border uninvited wouldn’t make it very far.

:*Now I could fuckin’ go for some Taco Bell,*: Julius sent.

Joe landed the skimmer in the space they were directed to and were met by a man in a Nuevo San Antonio Border Guard uniform who had saurian RIDE tags, and his dromaeosaur partner. “Hello and good morning,” the RIDE said. “Any fruit to declare?”

Socah looked at the man curiously. He didn’t have the everyday kind of tags. Normally they were rather obviously not supposed to be there, like Joe’s own jaguar ears and tail. The officer’s tags were rather more artfully blended, more like they had

somehow *evolved* as a natural part of his body. He had a lengthy tail, snub muzzle, feather-hair, and a sharp-toothed smile.

Julius sent an emoticon of a snort. :*Fruits, huh? Heh heh. I could name a few...*:

:*Shush, you. Humor isn't helpful at border checkpoints.*: Aloud, he said,

“Nothing, officer.”

The officer pursed his lips—insofar as someone with that degree of saurian tags had “lips” that could “purse”—and glanced over Joe’s shoulder. Joe turned to look, and as expected, noted a couple of dozen media drones had caught up to them since they’d stopped at the gate. “Those aren’t ours, officer,” he said.

“They ain’t *fruit*, neither,” Julius put in. “If you wanna shred ‘em, ain’t no fuckin’ skin off our teeth. We’d thank you for it, even.”

The guard actually *smirked*. “I suppose that’s what you get when you’re Joe Steader, and suddenly traveling in the company of the grandmother of Rhianna Stonegate and a RIDE no one’s ever heard of.”

:*Ha!*: Julius sent. :*Someone’s been followin’ the fuckin’ celeb gossip channels. Guess there’s not much else to do when you’re stuck in a fuckin’ border crossing booth all day, eh?*:

Joe sighed. “I suppose it is too much to hope for a little privacy when you’re Joe Steader.”

“I know many people who’d be happy to trade away their privacy for that much money,” the guard replied. “But go ahead and pull through. We’ll take care of this lot for you, but you should be aware their in-polity affiliates will replace them fairly quickly.”

Joe nodded. “Thank you, officer.”

The guard shrugged. “It’s really none of my business, but if you *do* want to shed the media attention, you might consider holding a press conference. They’re only after you because of the mystery. Remove it and you’ll be yesterday’s news tomorrow.” He gestured for them to pull ahead as a small pulse turret mounted on the top of the booth started firing at the media drones behind them.

As they pulled the Jaguar ahead, Socah poked her head out the window. “You know, you’re right, officer,” she put in. “It really *is* none of your business.” Then the window rolled up and they were gone before he had a chance to respond.

As they proceeded further along the winding road into the polity, Joe mused, “He did have a point, y’know. The more you try to keep a secret, the more people will pry into your business until they find out what it is. And given how famous I’ve been, and your granddaughter’s lately gotten, I’m afraid we may be waving a red flag in front of a bull.”

“Well, you’re looking at a prize media bullfighter. Before they up and tossed us off Earth for what Arlene and Roy did, we were dealing with this crap on a daily basis.” Socah shook her head. “Can’t say I ever expected to run into the same thing all over again when we got here on account of one of their *kids*. Sometimes I wonder if breeding was a mistake.”

“At least here it’s a *good* famous.” Joe grinned. “To be honest, I’ve been famous for so long, I kind of don’t remember what it’s like not to be.”

“Not like he’s fuckin’ let it go to his *head* or anything.” Julius snorted, eyes on the dashboard flicking from one to the other of them. “Long as we’re bein’ honest, it still kinda surprises the crap out of me to see just *how* famous. Back the first time ‘round, he

was rich an' all, but that was that. Now he's known for bein' fuckin' *crazy*, too. And apparently *I'm* the one who drove him to it."

Joe patted the dashboard. "All in all, I can't complain."

"What all is there to do around here, anyway?" Socah asked. "I could google something up, but I'm not here for book travel."

"Oh, it's a popular vacation spot, for one. Though I remember it used to be more so back in the day, before Aloha really got going and Sturmhaven was still for more 'exotic' tastes. As cheap as suborbital travel is, most people just go to Aloha now for Spring Break, but folks who don't like to fly or go that far from home still like to come here instead."

Socah glanced out the window at the palm trees they were passing. "They've certainly got the climate for it. Were those imported from Earth?"

Joe nodded. "The seeds were, I think. They've got some terrific saguaro cacti on the Dry Ocean side, too. So anyway, once the tourism mostly dried up they had to find something else to bank on to keep the money flowing. Which...turns out to be banking. They're pretty good at it, but they're still the smallest recognized polity on Gondwana. Just not a whole lot of draw here otherwise."

"They sure handed us *and* the Sturmites our asses back in the fuckin' war," Julius added. "Not such a fuckin' surprise, really. When you're a runt and bullies trample you all the time, you go find Mr. Miyagi an' take a level in ass-kickin'. And that's just what they did."

As they proceeded further down the highway, gradually more houses and other buildings started to appear—mostly roadside diners, skimmer charging stations, and convenience microfabberies. The architecture had a very specific flavor of its own, generally involving lots of stucco and (often fake) red tile roofs.

Socah raised an eyebrow. "This place feels like Texas."

"Well, I'm partly to blame for that. Nineteen seventies, remember? I mean, look at the size of these skimmers! You could land airplanes on those hoods."

"I don't think you forced them to use that style of architecture, though."

"Well, no. That's the original settlers from the *Santa Maria*. A bunch of Texans and Mexicans who managed to scrape together the cost of their own colony ship, and hit Zharus about four years after Nextus opened Gondwana. Just in time to lay claim to a choice bit of real estate that reminded them of home—and put up buildings that reminded them of home, too." Joe grinned. "Of course, all that stuff eventually went out of style...but then it came back in again once all the old movies Mikey and I dug up set in Old Mexico came into vogue. Zorro was very popular down here for a while."

Julius snorted. "Ain't no accounting for fuckin' taste. Or lack thereof."

The further they drove, the more buildings they started to encounter. "Shouldn't be too much farther before we hit the city. I've got a small bungalow in one of the nicer parts of town, or we could stay at a tourist hotel if you prefer."

"After seein' your 'little places' in Nextus an' Uplift, I gotta see what you consider a *small fuckin' bungalow*."

Joe chuckled. "Really, it is. I don't tend to spend all that much time here, so it's just a place of my own to sleep while I'm in town."

"Uh-huh."

Socah glanced out the window. "I see our 'friends' are back." A couple more drones had drifted in from the side of the road, and were now trailing along behind

them.

Joe nodded. "We're not exactly hard to spot."

"I can pop 'em if you want," Julius offered. "For that matter, if you're really pissed off, I think this thing has a nearly-fuckin'-military ECM suite. I might even be able to get rid of 'em permanently, though I might also blow out every traffic light we stop at."

Joe shook his head. "If you tick 'em off too badly, they'll just escalate. Better just to put up with 'em." He glanced to Socah. "Sorry about this. It's something I'm used to living with, so I hardly even notice it anymore, for myself."

"Huh," Julius said. "Joe, you've got a call from the local Steader Ent office here. Guess they know you're in town. Not as if that's a great fuckin' mystery at this point."

"My adoring...well, not 'public' exactly." Joe considered. "My adoring private? Sounds like some soldier has a crush on me."

"Your adoring *colonel*," Socah corrected. "Some soldier *does* have a crush on you, but a bit higher rank than that."

Joe was abruptly glad Julius was handling the actual driving, and that Zharus didn't use telephone poles, or else he was sure he would have wrapped the car around one at that point. "Er...yes. Well, I'll comm them from the bungalow, I guess."

They pulled off the main street and onto a side road just before the scattered buildings turned into a full-fledged city, and took a scenic route that kept the city on one side and open country on the other. The road gradually sloped upward as they headed uphill toward a small suburb with a good overlook of the city proper.

Socah looked around thoughtfully. "You choose a good vantage point, I see."

"Well, I liked the view. So do all the other rich snowbirds who buy houses in this neighborhood. I think the Waltons have one just down the block." Joe chuckled. "I had the money, so why not?"

Socah glanced out the window. "Not a gated community, though."

"No, they don't tend to go in for those around here. Why?" Then Joe glanced where she was looking, and groaned. "Oh, no."

On one side of the street was a group of people holding signs that said, in large flashing letters, "GO HOME, JOE!" On the opposite was another, friendlier group with "Welcome Back, Steader!" signs and cheering. Some of the especially creative signs from the latter group used the title card from the Steader-released sitcom *Welcome Back, Kotter* with the last word scribbled out and "Steader" scrawled in handwriting beneath it. Even more media floaters hovered over them, as if half of the crowd were holding carnival balloons as well as signs, and a good dozen or so Nuevo San Federales in light RIDEs were scattered out on the edges, trying to keep order.

"I sense a touch a' fuckin' ambivalence here," Julius mused. "At a guess, this is why you don't get out much lately?"

"There are reasons. Some vets still blame me for sparking off the War they were caught in the middle of, after all. Even if it was Ophelia's fault, by and large. Ah well."

"An' some blame you for makin' us the fuckin' laughingstock of the galaxy, I see." Julius snorted. "I guess nobody ever explained it to 'em."

"Well, unless we want to turn around and go back, I guess we'll just have to bite the bullet and face them." As they got closer, Joe blinked. "Well, *this* is new. What's *she* got to do with anything?" Some of the angry crowd's signs actually seemed directed at *Quinoa Steader*, featuring photos of her with the traditional "no" crossed circle over her.

“What the fuck is this supposed to be about?” Julius wondered. “Quinoa-busters? They ain’t afraid of no Quinoa?”

Socah raised an eyebrow. “Did your niece do something to anger them?”

Joe frowned. “If she did, given that the photos on the signs all show her as an Integrate, it would seem to be something fairly recent. And I still don’t even know all the things she did in that time—for the first few months of it, anyway.”

“From what you said, she wasn’t ‘zackly playing with a full fucking deck.”

“That’s one way of putting it, yes.” Joe rolled his eyes. “Knowing Quinoa, it could be practically anything.”

As the car approached, the “go home” crowd started to spill out into the street in front of it, waving their signs and yelling angrily. Then the “welcome back” crowd started to move in front the other side. As they met, fistfights started breaking out, and some members of the crowd started hitting each other with their signs. The police RIDEs moved in to try to separate the two factions.

Joe facepalmed. “Oh, hell. *That’s* sure going to make Nuevo San happy to see me.”

“Cops calling, Joe. I’ll put ‘em on,” Julius said.

A cheetah-tagged man’s head wearing a Federale motorcycle helmet appeared over the dashboard. “Move forward slowly into your garage, if you please. We’ll handle the crowd. Then we’ll have words.”

“Will do, officer,” Joe replied.

The bungalow turned out to be as small as Joe claimed—just less than a couple hundred square meters of living space. The garage was larger than the rest of the house. It was a red adobe building with a flat roof and cacti in the front yard.

“Reminds me of Norte Mexico, actually,” Socah said. “I like it.”

“The question right now is whether *it* fuckin’ likes *us*. I got the house systems booted, Joe.”

There was about a car and a half worth of room, which left just enough space for the Jaguar to park and the skimmer cycle to pull in alongside as the garage door closed behind them. As they got out, Julius’s mini-shell rose from the hood, then jumped over to the ‘cycle and sank in, converting it back to his usual jaguar Walker form. He took a stretch. “Ahhh! The Big Jag’s fun, but I gotta stretch my fuckin’ legs.”

“So do we all, I think.” Joe glanced back in the direction of the garage door. “Though not out there.”

“Perhaps that police officer will be able to fill us in on what the problem is.”

Joe rolled his eyes. “Yeah. And given the kind of messes Quinoa tends to get involved in, I can’t tell you how much I’m looking forward to *that*. She was just a *bit* of a problem child, and that was before she got Integrate super-powers.” He chuckled. “Not that I can actually be too upset with *her* anymore, after...well, you know. But I can still be exasperated by the situation.”

Julius padded over to the garage door, which opened before him. “Well, let’s go be exasperated in here. It’s more comfortable.” He sneezed. “At least, for some fuckin’ 1970s value of ‘comfortable.’ Gah! Brown shag carpeting? This shit’s getting stuck on my claws!”

Joe grinned. “Sorry about that, pal. Didn’t exactly have you in mind when I furnished the place.”

“Okay, I *have* to see this!” Socah said. She quickly went inside, followed by Joe.

Julius shook his head. “It’s amazing. It looks absolutely hideous no matter *what* color filter I use. Even fucking *monochrome*. Tell me, Joe, was the idea that it was *supposed* to look so awful you’d actually be glad when your vacation was over?”

“Eh. How horrible everything looked is part of the decade’s charm. It was *not* a nice decade in the United States. Energy crises, stagflation, Nixon, Vietnam. It’s like the ripe fruit of the 60s Jet Age and Psychedelic styles turned rotten and burst.”

“‘Charm,’ huh? One of us’s fuckin’ nuts, and I don’t think it’s me.”

Socah was all smiles. The living room had a giant wooden console TV that hummed to life when she turned it on via a corded remote control sitting on the coffee table. “Is this a full replica or just emulation?”

“Sears Catalog, 1979,” Joe said. “Vacuum tubes, CRT, and all. Put it together myself one afternoon—fabbed the cabinet and some of the parts here, but had to send away for the innards. Some of the electronics still require the extra precision of an industrial fabber.” He waved a hand around at the room. “Just about everything in here is Sears. Got a groovy 8 Track Hi-Fi stereo, too. How about some Bee Gees?”

“Maybe after we take care of this thing with the police and that mob outside,” Socah said.

“Oh yeah, them.” Joe went to the front window and drew back the curtain enough to look out. “Well, the crowds seem to be dispersing, anyway.”

“Which means the cops should be callin’ us any time. That one didn’t sound all that fuckin’ happy ‘bout it, neither.”

Joe nodded. “Well, it won’t be the first time I’ve ticked off authority figures.”

Socah snorted. “Really? *You*? I’m sure I can’t *imagine* how any reasonable authority figure could ever be upset with *you*.”

“You’re layin’ it on just a *leeeetle* fuckin’ thick there,” Julius observed. “Have I told you how much I fuckin’ admire you?”

“Oh, here they come up the walk.” Joe dropped the curtain and moved to open the front door. “Good afternoon, officers.”

The Federales rode Harley-style skimmers modeled after a few decades’ newer vintage than Socah’s Softail. One of them turned into a cheetah Walker and the other into a small ceratopsian with a single nose horn. The officers themselves wore light brown and green uniforms. Like the Border Guard earlier, the ceratopsian’s female partner had evolutionary-style tags. “*You*,” the cheetah-tagged officer observed.

Joe knew it probably wouldn’t do any good to escalate the situation, yet some imp of the perverse took over when it came to responding. So he simply nodded. “Me.” He waved a hand at Socah and Julius. “Us.” He paused. “You?”

“Calm down, Jerry,” the other officer said. “Mr. Steader, this isn’t so much about yourself as it is your niece.”

“I gathered that much, but I’m still at a loss as to why, exactly. She and I haven’t talked much about the time right after she Integrated, yet—emotions are still a little raw, so we’re working up to it. But please, come in. At least *we* can talk about it.”

“Overdoing it a bit on the period décor, aren’t you?” Jerry said, looking around the living room. “Shag’s been out of style for almost a decade.”

“I haven’t been in this house in years. Haven’t had time to update anything.”

“Besides, what’s a decade or two when you built your fuckin’ life on stuff that’s been outta style for *centuries*?” Julius asked.

Jerry’s RIDE partner stared at Julius. “Kind of a potty mouth, ain’t he?” the

cheetah said.

Julius gave him a narrow-eyed glance in return. “You gotta fuckin’ problem with that, *puto?*”

The cheetah bared his teeth. “Keep at it and we’ll have to cite you for swearing at Federales, *pendejo.*”

“Swearing? You ain’t fuckin’ *heard* swearin’. I could tell you—”

“*Julius.*” Joe rolled his eyes. “Guys, he’s an honest-to-God ought-one-A, military, one of the very first lines from the early days of the War. Like many vets from those days, his core has the odd quirk or two, but I like him that way. *Please* don’t bait him, or we’ll be here all night.”

“I see,” the cheetah said. “Forgive me. I didn’t realize you were a War vet, in that shell.”

Julius seemed mollified. “Eh. I got fuc—*furloughed* into bodyguard duty, so I didn’t see the front lines. So I wouldn’t say I’m a *vet* vet. And there was the little matter of thirty-five years I spent dead, and my pard got me this monkey suit as a welcome-back present. Forget it.”

“Moving on, I’m Officer Reynolda Valdez, my ‘saur partner’s Rosie. Jerry?”

“I’m Lt. Jerry Correa,” Jerry said.

“Chester,” the cheetah added. “Yes, yes, I *know*, don’t rub it in.”

Julius snorted. “And you had the balls to give *me* a hard time?”

Joe cleared his throat. “Me you know, Julius you’ve now met, and this is Colonel Socah Gates, ex-Earth military, retired. Nice to meet you all.” He waved them toward the sofa. “Please, have a seat. I promise the *décor* won’t rub off on you.” He went to pull up a couple of fur-covered chairs to sit across from the police officers.

“Down to business, then,” Correa said. “Mr. Steader, last year your niece committed a number of...offenses against the public decency. Corrupting the morals of the youth.”

Joe sighed. “Of course she did. She’s not terribly impressed by the ‘public decency’ of anyplace that has a ‘public decency’ law on the books. Neither am I, for that matter, but I’ve learned to have more of a sense of decorum. I can only *imagine* what she could do with superpowers. As for the ‘morals of the youth,’ well, *that’s* a remarkably loaded charge. Exactly how did she choose to thumb her nose at authority *this* time?”

Correa sighed. “She...it’s hard to talk about.” Officer Valdez reached across to pat him on the shoulder, and he smiled gratefully at her. “As I understand it, she...had a habit of...approaching attractive young men who wished to have RIDEs but couldn’t afford them. In return for...spending the night, she would *buy* them a RIDE.”

Socah raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t sound so bad. A little mercenary, perhaps, but given that she had the money to spare...”

Correa glared at her. “She would buy them a RIDE of the...*wrong sex.*”

Joe frowned. “Oh. I begin to see.”

“I don’t, but I’m new to this planet,” Socah said. “What’s so bad about that?”

“It’s just...*wrong,*” Correa insisted vehemently. “Not to say, sinful.”

“Nuevo San has a bit more conservative culture than the rest of the continent in some ways,” Joe explained. “Different cultural values, probably arising from the way all its founding citizens hailed from the same cultural background—particularly given that most of them were, and still are, Catholic. Pretty conservative religion, that, and slow to

change—it was the twentieth century before they apologized about Galileo. They only started allowing married priests again a hundred or so years ago, and it's still strongly discouraged. As for crossriding...well, suffice it to say 'casual' crossriding is anathema here."

"Crossriding without a finding of medical necessity by professional psychological counsellors or other medical recommendation as a therapeutic treatment is a minor misdemeanor here," Officer Valdez said. "Not subject to jail time, mind you, but the fine is scaled based on the convicted's ability to pay."

"Even that's not the worst of it," Joe said. "As I understand it, it's considered very shameful and reflects badly on the family of the one who did it. Which...would probably make it irresistible to Quinnie, the power-tripping frame of mind she was in with those new Integrate powers. Nose, thumbing, et cetera. I may have to ground her for a while when we get home."

"She still has charges pending against her," Valdez said. "Not of a sufficient severity to allow us to seek extradition, but should she ever show her face here again... well. A number of the families and their friends are up in arms over the matter, and there has even been some talk of attempting to kidnap you to force her to come and turn herself in to face justice."

"Kidnap Joe? Ain't that fucking rich!" Julius said.

"I seem to recall there were *two* mobs outside," Socah said. "What of the other one? They were willing to get into a fistfight over this."

"It seems to be composed largely of loyal fans of the various shows Steader Entertainment has released," Valdez said. "They disagree with the blame the other mob places on Joe for the actions of his niece. And there are also those who wish to know more about your new companions."

"My sympathies are with that first mob," Correa growled. "One of the boys she chose to toy with was my nephew. Now my *niece*."

"Ouch." Joe winced. "As her legal guardian, let me just say I'm really sorry about that."

Correa shrugged. "Unlike those out there, I will not let it affect how I do my job. So I have a particular reason to want to see you safe." His lips twisted in a grimace. "If I can't do anything about it, there is no reason why *they* should be able to."

"We're just here to do the tourist thing," Joe said. "Didn't mean to stir up any trouble."

"Be sure and visit the Nuevo Alamo while you're here," Correa said with a hint of sarcasm. "It's right under the airspace where we ambushed you folks back in the War."

"Oooh, even I felt *that* burn," Julius said.

Joe nodded. "Sure. We'll remember the Alamo."

"I suppose that's everything," Officer Valdez said. They stood up. "I hope you enjoy your stay in Nuevo San."

"Spend money," Correa added. "Nuevo San should get *something* out of this."

"I believe the current fine in the event of a conviction is three percent of income for one year?" Socah said. "I've been doing a little legal research. My daughter was a judge, remember. I know a few things about jurisprudence."

"Whose income? Hers or the crossrider's?"

"It's the penalty for misdemeanor crossriding. So the crossrider would pay it."

Socah peered at the media tablet she was using to review Nuevo San legal records. She could have done it internally, but this gave her something to show Joe at need. “Though the public record search says Quinoa paid those, too.”

“Of course she did. She was buying them a RIDE anyway, so why not?”

“Most of them left Nuevo San shortly afterward.”

Julius snorted. “Imagine the fuck that. I always thought this place was a little fucked in the head.”

Joe chuckled. “You just say that because they managed to kick both our and the Sturmies’ tails back in the War.”

“Well, duh! Seriously, what the fuck? They came outta nowhere with an army, and they didn’t even wanna join *our side* with it. Us, the *good* guys! I mean, what was wrong with ‘em?” Julius shook his head, and sneezed. “And here they are, acting all horrified and stuff about one of the things my kind were *built* to do. They don’t like it, maybe they should just fuckin’ *leave the planet* or something.”

“That’s rather uncharitable, Julius,” Socah reproved.

“I’m not feeling very ‘charitable’ towards these mooks. I wanna hit ‘em with a chair *and* a table. Especially Officer Punchface and his *pendejo* newb cheetah.”

Joe shrugged. “He’s had a trying time, given what happened to his kid and all. Given Quinoa’s recent history with Fritz, I can kind of sympathize.”

“That still doesn’t excuse cheesy Cheetos-breath.”

Socah sighed and put the tablet aside. “I don’t think there’s a great deal we can do about this situation, except to be aware of it.”

“I suppose I could call Quinoa and ask if she’d be interested in returning to face justice.” Joe snorted. “Like that would happen.”

“The worst she could probably expect would be a fine and probation, anyway. Certainly wouldn’t have any problem paying for a decent lawyer.”

“Oh hey.” Julius cocked his head. “Someone’s sneakin’ around behind the house again. Think it’s more fuckin’ paparazzi. They’ve already tried to comm half a dozen times.”

Joe rolled his eyes. “If it’s not one thing it’s another.”

“You want I should go bite ‘em on the butt for ya?”

“Not if you don’t want to give those cops an excuse for something.”

Julius snorted. “Terrific.”

Joe sighed. “Sorry about this, you two. Usually I find being famous more amusing than irritating.”

Julius sneezed. “It’s a new fuckin’ experience for me. Back in the day, nobody knew who the hell you were, ‘cept for being some rich guy whose cousin kicked off the war. And nobody wanted to fuckin’ *mob* you for that. Well, ‘cepting the Sturmies, and they couldn’t usually get to you. Except that one time, and then they weren’t even *trying* for you, just the big fucking gun.”

Socah nodded. “At least some of your mob are actually your *fans*. For us, it was all of the other kind.”

Then the doorbell rang. “They’re getting more fucking brazen, I see. Let me get it.” Julius pushed himself up and changed to shell mode.

Joe raised an eyebrow. “I’d say that actually ringing the doorbell is an improvement. So try not to be *too* rude, unless they deserve it.”

“Fair enough.” Julius stalked over to the door, tail switching back and forth in

agitation. He yanked the door open. “Can I fuckin’ help ya?”

“Uh...” The person on the other side was a fairly young woman with glasses, raccoon ears poking through a battered fedora with a “PRESS” card tucked in the brim. A light raccoon RIDE sat on her haunches behind her. “Nicki Conway, *Baltica Herald*. I was wondering if I could ask a few questions?”

Julius peered down at her. “*That’s* a fuckin’ question already.”

Joe glanced out the window. “You’re alone? Just you and your partner? I’d have expected a crowd.”

Nicki blushed faintly. “We all thought one of us might have a better chance than a mob, and I drew the short straw. The deal is I have to share anything I get with the rest, but I get a ten-minute exclusive.”

Julius sniffed. “Yeah, *sure* you drew a fuckin’ straw. They picked you ‘cuz you’re *little and cute*, didn’t they. Thought they’d play on Joe’s sympathy. Well, *I* don’t have any sympathy, so you can just—”

Joe cleared his throat. “Ah, Nicki, could you wait outside for a bit? My friends and I should probably discuss whether we’re in the interviewing mood right now.”

The woman blinked. “Ah. All right. We’ll just be right out here, then...” She took a step back, and Julius closed the door firmly.

“Scuse me a sec.” Julius stepped to the back door, opened it, and yelled out, “You bums got thirty seconds to get off our property, or I come out there and start fucking tazing you. Starting now.” He closed the door again.

“That probably won’t do us any favors in press coverage, you know.”

“Maybe not, but it made *me* feel better.”

“I’m not spending our time here cooped up in this little house. We’re going to have to do something better than just shutting doors on people,” Socah said.

“Okay, Socah. We’ll try it your way,” Joe said. “Jules?”

Julius went back on four legs. “Fine. I’m game.”

Socah opened the door again. The reporters had Fused and were just at the end of the walk. “Ladies, please, come back inside. Provided you don’t practice sensationalist journalism the way some of the trashy tabloids do, I believe we can have a conversation.”

“*We* don’t at the *Herald*, ma’am,” Nicki said, her voice echoing a trace from the Fuse. “I, uh, can’t vouch for some of the others once they pick up the story. Some of them are known for being, ah, inventive.”

“Well, we can’t control what they do, but we can control what *we* do.” Socah stepped aside for the Fuser to enter.

“Thank you, ma’am.” The raccoon Fuser stepped inside, and moved to sit down on the couch at Socah’s gesture.

“You’re going to record the interview, of course,” Joe said. “You’re a RIDE, how could you not? By the way, could you introduce us, Nicki? But no rebroadcasts of those recordings without our approval of the final copy, if you don’t mind. It’s far too easy to manipulate context in those.”

“No sir. I mean, yes sir. I mean—”

“She means, we agree to your terms,” the raccoon said in a slightly deeper voice. “I’m Fuji, by the way.”

Joe nodded. “Nice to meet you both.” He pulled up a furry chair and had a seat. “So, fire away.”

“Okay, first question,” Nicki said. She pointed at Joe and Socah. “You two...well, you have a *familiarity* with one another, which tells me you haven’t simply just met. But we know for a fact that Col. Gates—”

“Just Socah, please,” Socah said crisply.

“—Socah has been on Zharus a matter of months. And Joe himself hasn’t left the planet in decades. But we know you’ve been to Earth, in particular to retrieve the cultural records that formed the core of Steader Entertainment. There must be something there.”

“Well, we’re not gonna give you the whole story of our lives,” Joe said, grinning. “I have to keep something back for the movie rights, after all. But I expect the Earth embassy has Socah’s complete personnel files, and I’d be very surprised if some bright boy hadn’t already put in a request for ‘em. Hell, I’m surprised they didn’t leak already when she got here, what with who her granddaughter is.”

“I have them already,” Fuji said. “Decorated veteran of the North American Army. Participated in the Aleutian Wars and subsequently sent to uproot several wildcat colonies roughly fifty years ago. Including, we note, the infamous Endurance incident. Reassigned to Earth after disagreement with—”

“Yes, yes. Retired soon after I got all my points,” Socah said, waving her hand dismissively. “They even let me keep my Jane-8. I understand they’re up to Jane-12 now anyway.”

Joe raised an eyebrow. “And they *don’t* mention her time shepherding me and Mikey around while we dug for buried cultural treasures? At all? Geez, now I feel insulted. Jules, remind me to file a complaint when we’re back in Nextus.”

Julius nodded. “Noted.”

“The records were, ah, redacted in places,” Nicki said. “Including pretty much all the time you were on Earth. That’s one of the reasons I was curious, actually.”

Julius snorted. “Ain’t that them to a fucking T? And if you asked, they’d say they were all *trying to respect your fucking privacy*, when actually they just didn’t wanna give you any free publicity. Fucking dipshits.”

“So, yeah,” Joe said. “She and her Detached Company were assigned as our minders and bodyguards while we did our digging.”

“When my family touched down here, I looked him up, and we’ve been reminiscing about old times ever since,” Socah said. “And he’s showing me the supercontinent while we do. Nice supercontinent, by the way.”

“Mmmm, well, less detail than I’d like, but it’ll satisfy my editors,” Nicki said. She turned to Julius. “Now, you’re a bigger mystery, Julius. From what we’ve been able to piece together, our guess is that you and Joe were part of the RIDE Bodyguard Program during the War. Yet there are no official records of that—even the *Herald’s* experts at the Game can’t pierce the Nextus bureaucracy yet. But it’s the only thing I can think of that makes sense. There are just so many missing facts here I don’t know where to begin.”

Joe chuckled. “Well, as it happens, that might make a good human interest story. But it’s Julius’s story to tell, if he wants to. But fair warning, he’s pretty modest. Very *polite*, too.”

“Mark 1A core, right?” Fuji said. “No offense, but those had some design... quirks.”

“None fuckin’ taken,” Julius said amicably. “That’s me. Quirky as a fuckin’

seventies sitcom.”

“*All in the Family*, probably,” Joe put in. Julius favored him with a loud Bronx cheer.

“My story, is it? Shit. I don’t want a fuckin’ pity party, and I don’t think Joe does either. But that’s what we’ll get if and when it comes out. Brave RIDE, noble sacrifice, back from the fucking dead, *et fucking cetera*. But I guess it’s fuckin’ gonna happen sooner or later, so I guess I might’s well let it on my own terms. Look.” A hardlight panel winked out on Julius’s chest and a slot opened, and he pulled out the small rosewood box. Seeing it still brought a lump to Joe’s throat when he thought of all those years alone...

Julius opened it and thrust it at the reporter. “Lookie. Here’s where I keep my old brain. And a little something-or-other they pulled out of some Cracker-Jack Box and stuck on *him*. Never mind it was *me* what did all the actual fuckin’ *work* involved.”

“That’s...wow, Nicki, look at the crack in that core!” Fuji said.

“And look at that *medal*. That’s...not a Cracker-Jack prize.”

“You must’ve had to crash-shutdown,” Fuji went on, voice full of respect and wonder.

“No fuckin’ duh.” Julius closed the box again and returned it to its storage slot. “On the bright side, I got a nice thirty-five year nap out of it, and thirty-five years of interest on my bank account, while someone else took the long fuckin’ way ‘round.”

“One of the first Fritz incidents during the War involved a squadron of Sturmhaven Harpies attempting to sabotage the city’s anti-air defenses,” Nicki said. “They only partly succeeded, and would have been completely thwarted had Fritz given NextusMil the right intelligence.”

“That was also Sturmhaven’s first operational deployment of RIDEs in the field,” Fuji pointed out. “Now, we understand that one of those ack-ack guns was placed atop the Gilmore Building—at your residence, in fact.”

“Idiotic fuckin’ place to put guns, endangering civvies like that,” Julius said. “If I hadn’t been there it woulda killed Joe and half the building. Sturmites didn’t care. We took down the Harpy before she kaboom’d the place. Well, *I* did anyway.”

“I helped,” Joe said. “Anyway, if you want the last piece of the puzzle, take a closer look at the records around the Armistice Day ceremony. Not a red-letter day for either of us, and that’s all I’ll say there.”

“There was an assassination attempt—” Fuji mused. “Oh. Oh! Oh my.”

“Then Quinoa Steader found the box with me in it, the Freeriders gave me a wake-up call, Joe spent *way* too much money at Donizetti RIDEworks, and here we all fucking are.”

“Our editors are going to *love* this,” Nicki said.

“I hope so, because that’s all we’re going to give them at this point,” Joe said. “We’ve pointed you at where to look for the rest, and to be honest I’m kind of looking forward to reading what you manage to pry out of the Nextus bureaucracy.”

“But please *don’t* bother my granddaughter too much,” Socah put in. “She’s rather fed up with the attention she’s gotten already.”

“I, ah, can’t make any promises on behalf of everyone else, ma’am, but we’ll do our best.”

“Anyway, if you and your fellow press will leave us mostly alone for the rest of our Coastal Ring Tour, I’ll see about putting together a press conference or something

when we're all back in Nextus, and share a few more details or something," Joe said. "That means no more skulking around our house or playing 99 Luftballons with all those drones. Though we get that a *few* are inevitable. But if they're willing to share you, maybe they'll be willing to share some drone feeds, too."

"Tell your little jerkwad friends outside they better take care if we find they been creeping round our fuckin' back stair." Julius chuffed. "This is supposed to be a *fun* fuckin' trip, so stop being ants at our picnic."

"I'll make sure they know they'll burn through the drone budget in days if they keep at it," Fuji said. "Thank you all. We'll be going now and not darken your doorstep again. We appreciate this opportunity."

"You've been considerably more polite than most of the newsies we've encountered," Joe said. "Probably because you're new and relatively uncorrupted yet. So, if *you* want to darken our doorstep a time or two, as long as you don't wear out your welcome, we won't be too upset. And you won't have to share us with the others next time. Meanwhile...there's your scoop for now."

"It's a good scoop. Don't waste it," Socah said.

Nicki nodded. "We're already writing it up. Thanks again." The Fused reporters slipped back out the door. Fuji converted to skimmer mode and they flew away.

Julius closed it behind them. "Well, that's fuckin' that then." He picked up one foot to un snag his claws from the shag carpeting. "Fucking damn it!"

Joe sighed. "Nice we could put out *one* fire, at least."

"Let's go see some sights," Socah suggested.

"I'm calling someone to replace this carpet while we're out," Julius said. "I'm *not* walking on this shit."

"Have you considered maybe wearing hardlight galoshes?" Joe suggested. "Oh, nice, you're really getting good with the manual dexterity there. I think that was your most elaborate gesture yet."

"I meant every fuckin' movement of it."

After waiting about half an hour to make sure the crowds had dispersed, Joe and Socah pulled out of the garage riding pillion on Julius's bike form. They'd opted to leave the car at home in the hope of attracting less attention that way, and besides, the weather was perfect for riding in the open air.

As they proceeded down the hill, Joe still caught the odd glimpse of a balloon-like drone hovering along behind, but for the most part they remained circumspect. And that was fine with Joe.

"Been doing a little historical research," Socah said. "The founders were from Norte Mexico just after it joined the North American Union. They didn't agree with the unification, so they bought their own colony ship and headed for Zharus."

Joe nodded. "You'd know more about that end of things than I would. But my understanding is, it took in an awful lot of people from the Texas side of the union, too. Friends and family from across the border, and other people who didn't agree with the unification. Apparently they were unified in being disunified."

"Yeah. The Third Texas Republic was next to join the Union. Or rejoin. The old USA broke up and reunified a couple times the last five hundred years or so. They must've seen the writing on the wall."

"I'm surprised they didn't go wildcat on us," Socah said. "But I suppose their

founders were pragmatic enough to know not to buy extra trouble. Why try for a whole planet when you only have enough of you to populate a chunk of one, and there are plenty of chunks for the taking on the newest ‘official’ colony? So, a hundred thousand Nortemexicanos and Texans set themselves down here and managed to keep most of the independence they wanted.”

Joe nodded again. “Lucky for them, and us.”

“Not so fuckin’ lucky for us during the War.”

“Well, you never know. If they hadn’t made us take our fighting somewhere else, it could have led to even more casualties.” Joe shrugged.

“I’ll just console myself that they kicked as much Sturmhaven ass as they did ours,” Julius said. “Speaking of ass-kicking, Alamo Battlefield Monument coming up in a minute.”

Joe chuckled. “Gotta love it. Fled halfway across the galaxy to get away from an oppressive regime, and the first thing they do when they get here is build a replica of a building famous for its occupants dying because they wanted to stay in that one place.”

It was an arid landscape, a mixture of Earth and native Zharusian plant life. The Dry Ocean itself was still several hundred kilometers to the west, but its influence was felt here. The homes and ranches in the area they passed by often had climate domes to keep too much water from evaporating. There were billboard ads for CascadiaPūr Water, advertisers having long since learned the value of targeted marketing.

Joe grinned. “All day I face the barren wastes, huh?”

“Y’know, you’re the only one of the three of us who actually *needs* much water.”

“Oh, gee, thanks for reminding me. Now I’m thirsty.” Joe chuckled as they passed through a residential neighborhood on the way to the park district. “Have you ever been to the ‘real’ Alamo? It’s been so long, I forget whether Mikey and I visited that place before or after we joined up with you in DalWorth. We did some of the standard tourist stuff while we were still waiting for the permits to come through.”

“I don’t think we did,” Socah said. “But I’ve been there. The real building collapsed a couple centuries ago from age and fracking quakes.”

Joe nodded. “I think it’s actually collapsed and been rebuilt two or three times by now. Limestone’s not the sturdiest building material, long-term, and it didn’t help that they spent a hundred years or so feuding over exactly who was responsible for its upkeep. By comparison, this version of it’s all shiny and new—or would be if it hadn’t been artificially weatherbeaten.”

“You humans are fuckin’ nuts. If you’re gonna build a new building, why make it look like an old one?”

“Just one of those great mysteries of life you’ll never understand.”

“Sometimes I don’t think I *want* to. But it does remind me of something.”

“What’s that?”

“That fucking mansion you used to tell me about. The one you gave up as part of the war effort. I saw it in the ‘pedia while I was doing my thirty-five years of catch-up.” Julius’s eyes peered at him out of the dash. “It was Spanish Mission style. Like half the fucking architecture around *here*. Why build something like that in fuckin’ *Nextus*?”

Joe laughed. “You really have to ask? You remember how utterly same-like all the rest of the place was. How completely *bland*? Mikey and I felt that as citizens of Nextus, it was our solemn *obligation* to bring a little more color into that place. So we had it built as soon as we got back from Earth, where we got the inspiration for it after seeing

the originals they modeled this place after. Then when I had the opportunity to hand it over to NextusGov, in the middle of a war so they didn't have the resources to raze and rebuild it...so they *had* to use it as it was, ridiculous red tile roof and all..." Joe grinned. "I counted that as one of my all-time favorite wins in the Game. And the fact that Nuevo San then came along and made both sides look stupid, and here was this reminder right in the middle of town, was just icing on the cake."

"I guess I can see that, you being you and all."

Socah chuckled. "That *does* sound rather like the young men who delighted in causing *me* so much exasperation."

"We didn't *delight*..." Joe began. "Well, all right, maybe we did. A little. I was barely in my thirties. A callow stripling, me."

Julius snorted. "Yeah, like you've fuckin' changed any since. You just got more ambitious. Instead of thumbing your nose at a few people here and there, you made it your life's work to do it at an entire fucking *planet*."

"A man has to have a hobby."

At last they pulled into the park district, home to a number of green, grassy expanses with sparkling brooks, where a number of people, RIDEs, and natural animals could be seen at play. In the center was a familiar building of old-Earth Mission-style architecture—an old-style Spanish mission, seeming only a bit incongruous on a planet eighteen light-years from home.

"Well, here we are, then." Joe pulled to a halt in the parking lot, then climbed down. Socah followed a moment later, then Julius converted back to Walker form. "What do you think?"

Julius peered at it. "I think it's a building. Got a hard time seeing what's so fucking special about it. It's not even the building people died to protect—it's a carbon copy, and that one's on the other fucking side of human space. And even *that* one isn't even the original building, either, as many times as it's been rebuilt because *limestone*."

Joe waved a hand. "It's a symbol."

"It's a fucking *tourist trap*." Julius sneezed. "But hey, if this does it for ya, don't let me rain on your fucking parade."

Socah cocked her head as she regarded the building. "Going by my own memories, they did a good job copying the original—or at least, the original as it looked when I saw it."

"And I have my doubts about what that cop said, that *this* is where the fucking battle happened." Julius sneezed again. "This is in the middle of their settlement. Didn't the battle happen out in the fucking desert somewhere?"

Joe shrugged. "That guy wouldn't have been alive when the battle actually happened. Who knows what they teach in the history classes here? Anyway, like I said, this place is a symbol—of independence. Maybe not the same independence as the original, but it's *their* independence. Symbolically, you could say the battle *did* happen here."

Julius rolled his eyes. "Symbolically, I think your head's up your—"

"Hey!" The angry shout came from a woman at the other end of the parking lot. She was standing by a skimmer truck with a small crowd holding more of the anti-Quinoa protest signs that had shown up outside Joe's bungalow earlier. "We don't want you Steader *gringos* here, after the disrespect you've shown us! You need to leave!"

"Looks like another fuckin' battle's shaping up," Julius muttered.

“We’re not here looking for trouble,” Joe said. “We’re just taking in the sights, same as anyone.”

“Not looking for trouble? Tell that to my son—who is now my *daughter*. It’s *chaos* in my family because of your niece!”

“I’m sorry about that, ma’am,” Joe said. “It’s often chaos at home with her around, too. She’s just like that. But is your *daughter* unhappy about it?”

“Her feelings are beside the point,” the woman continued.

“Scuse me, but if she’s legally an adult, they *are* the fucking point,” Julius put in. “Adults get to make up their own fucking minds ‘bout things on this planet.”

“*Adults* also realize how their choices reflect on the rest of their family! I raised a *son*, not a *daughter*!” There were a few shouts and mutterings of general agreement around her.

“Let me guess. You think because your son ‘switched teams’ as they say here, that means you’ve somehow failed as a parent?” Socah said.

“It’s not just what *I* think. Everybody thinks it! Old family friends will not talk to us anymore! We were kicked out of our church! His niece has *ruined our lives*!”

“If your friends won’t talk to you anymore, how good of friends can they have really been?”

As Socah continued to argue with the woman, Joe turned to Julius and pulled out his comm. Lowering his voice, he said, “Time for me to use my annoying rich guy powers for good. Or maybe evil. Can you use image recognition to work out who that woman is, and find out how to get in touch with her daughter?”

“No fucking sweat. The police records are pretty complete, including forwarding addresses.”

“I thought they didn’t usually make that information public.”

Julius smirked. “They don’t. Annoying rich guy powers, remember?”

“Touché. Can you put me through to her on my comm?”

“What am I now, your fucking switchboard operator?”

Joe grinned. “Nah, just my part time secretary.”

“Tou-fucking-ché yourself. Okay, looks like she’s in Cape Nord. Seeing if I can get through now.”

“Cape Nord? Why not Sturmhaven?”

“Ask her yourself. Here she is. The name is Malaguena Ramirez. The mother over there is Juanita.”

The woman who appeared on the screen on Joe’s handheld was a raven-haired Latina beauty with matching dark feline ears, as expected from a crossride—with perhaps a little extra Cape Nord styling added on. She was wearing a nice dress and seemed to be sitting behind a desk. “Can I help you, sir?”

“I hope you can, Miss Ramirez. This is Joe Steader.”

The woman’s eyes widened. “Oh! *Señor* Steader! One moment, please.” She muted the audio for a moment and turned to speak to someone offscreen, then got up, pulling out a comm of her own. A moment later the image source switched from the desk pickup to her handheld as she stepped away—into what seemed to be a powder room judging by the background. She bit her lip, then spoke again. “I was expecting you to call sooner or later. I want to assure you I did *not* take advantage of your niece’s generosity—”

Joe smiled. “Oh, don’t worry about it. I know you didn’t. If anything, *she* was

taking advantage of *you*. Or maybe you both took advantage of each other, in which case it evens out. But that's not why I called."

She blinked. "It's not? Then...how can I help you?"

"Well, I came down to visit Nuevo San and do a little tourism, but it seems my niece's reputation precedes me. I don't know if you can hear the argument going on behind me, but I'm currently being picketed by your mother." He held up the comm and tapped the "flip camera" button to give her a view out the rear camera, where the woman with the sign was still angrily arguing with Socah Gates.

Malaguena facepalmed—carefully, so as not to disturb her makeup. "*Caramba*. She will not let it rest, will she?"

"I should, and *do*, apologize that the only reason I'm bothering to get in touch with you is a personal inconvenience. But this incident has brought it home to me that I should probably take more responsibility for what my niece has done, so I guess I'll be making a call like this to a lot of 'new girls' in days to come." Joe sighed. "I take it your relations with your mother haven't been cordial since the change?"

Malaguena frowned. "They have not. I finally had to stop taking her calls." She rolled her eyes. "I had *thought* she had finally simply disowned me and gotten over it, but I suppose that was too much to hope."

Julius sniffed. "Seems a little fuckin' cold to me." His comm image appeared inset in the screen as he spoke.

"Believe me, I tried *everything* to reconcile, but she was simply not interested. I do not plan to change back; she does not plan to change her mind. So I stopped taking her calls—there was nothing more to say. I love her, but there was just no point to the frustration. I really didn't want to have to deal with it again—at least not for a few years, by which time she might have cooled down."

"Feel like trying one more time? As a personal favor to me? I know it's an imposition, but I figure maybe it'll mellow her out toward *me* just a little if I'm able to give her another chance to talk to you."

Malaguena smiled wanly. "Ordinarily, I would not. It will probably spoil my mood for the rest of the day. But...how often would I have the chance to do a personal favor for the wealthiest man on Zharus? Besides, my life is so much better since your niece, ah, changed my situation that I almost feel I *owe* you a favor. Just let me make sure I will not be disturbed." She turned and locked the door.

Curiosity got the better of Joe. "If I could ask...why did you choose Cape Nord? Why not somewhere like Sturmhaven?"

Malaguena's smile widened. "Quinoa suggested it. She said it was a place where they would pamper me as a woman without demanding more than I wanted to give in return. And she was right. After growing up in Nuevo San, it was just the change I needed."

"Ah. Well, just a sec. Jules, get ready to switch this to your hologram projector, okay?"

"Check!"

"—then that's a problem with your society," Socah was saying. "It doesn't mean you *have* to agree with it."

Joe cleared his throat. "Sorry to interrupt, but someone would like to speak to you, Mrs. Ramirez." He nodded to Julius, and a moment later Malaguena flickered into being in life-sized holographic form.

Mrs. Ramirez lowered her sign, her mouth falling open. “Martin!”

Malaguena sighed. “It’s Malaguena, *Madre*. I keep telling you.” She put her hands on her hips. “Why are you bothering these people?”

“How could *you* bring shame to our family like this?” Juanita retorted. “I raised a son! A good boy! Not whatever you pretend to be!”

“It was my choice to make, *Madre*. And you know it was the only way I could ever have afforded a RIDE. Felicia and I are very happy together, and happy in our new life.” She shook her head. “You used to say that all you ever wanted was for me to be happy. I am sorry that turned out to be a lie.”

“You were never good at making you own decisions, Martin. You could barely choose what to wear in the mornings.”

:*Fuck, really?:* Julius sent. :*Dafuq is this?:*

:*It’s not a pretty thing when families air their grievances in public,:* Socah sent. The small crowd that had been supporting Juanita had put some distance between them and her—while an entirely new crowd was taking shape to watch the drama, and the newsdrones were closing in again.

:*I’m not proud of making it happen,:* Joe sent. :*But we could have been here all night.:*

“I made one I’ve really been happy with. The first big decision for *myself* I was ever able to make,” Malaguena said. “So please stop being outraged on my behalf.”

“You slept with a common floozy and bartered away your manhood for a cheap trinket!” Mrs. Ramirez insisted.

“I’ll have you know that Felicia was hardly cheap,” a new voice put in. “She was the best shell on the lot, in fact. Nearly ran to six digits, but I was able to haggle him down. And I may be a floozy, but *hardly* a common one.”

“Quinnie!” Joe said, as the air shimmered next to to him and a red sphinx stepped out of nothing.

Malaguena blinked. “*Leonita!*”

“Hey, Unca Joe, hello again Mallie. How’s life among the he-men treating you? Here to clean up my mess—after that time Uncle Joe made me spend in orbit, it’s getting to be a habit.” Quinoa saluted. “I’ve been keeping tabs on the newsfeeds. I put the juice on when I saw this.”

“*You!*” Mrs. Ramirez tightened her grip on the sign. “*You* did this to my Martin!”

“Yes, Mrs. Ramirez, I did. And I’m very sorry for the pain it caused you. I was... somewhat immature back then.” She glanced at Malaguena. “But I’m *not* sorry that your daughter is happy as she is. I always try to choose people who honestly *want* the change. I have never *forced* anyone.”

“You just appealed to their avarice!” Mrs. Ramirez fumed.

“Maybe so, but I delivered on what I promised. And I’ve rarely had an unhappy customer.”

“I’m certainly not unhappy!” Malaguena said. She smiled at Quinoa. “When are you coming by Cape Nord, *Leonita*? We can have a party!”

“It may not be for a while. If you think I’m in trouble *here*...” She grinned. “Anyway, I came to try to make amends if I can, and to turn myself in and face whatever they consider justice here. At least I know that, unlike Cape Nord, they won’t try to make me crossride myself. That would be messy.”

“You... But...” Mrs. Ramirez sputtered. “They will do *nothing* to you, except make

you pay money you have plenty of!”

“I suppose you’d rather see her fucking drawn and quartered?”

“Mrs. Ramirez, is there *anything* I can do that would make things easier for you?” Quinoa asked. “Bearing in mind that Malaguena is probably not going to change back even when she can.”

“I’m happy as a *mujer*, Madre. For the first time I have control of my life. Even the silly ‘Men’ of Cape Nord can’t change that,” Malaguena said.

“Trust me, getting upset about it isn’t going to help,” Socah said. “I’ve been through it with two grandsons turned daughters myself. She’s going to go on with her life whether you’re in it or not. If you want to know your grandkids, don’t burn any bridges.”

Mrs. Ramirez was taken aback. “But...I don’t...she can *have* children?”

“Yes, I can. Thanks to modern nanotechnology, I have a womb like every other woman does,” Malaguena said. “What did you think really happened? I’m not just woman-shaped, I’m a woman completely. Like you, *Madre*.”

“Are you planning to?” Quinoa asked slyly. “Have a young man in mind, perhaps?”

Malaguena blushed. “Well...there *is* a boy...I’m still figuring things out, but it’s fun to find myself.”

“You see? You’re already missing important developments,” Socah said. “Madam, trust me on this. It’s a lot better to have family than not to have family, whichever restroom they end up having to use at the end of the day.”

“How about this?” Quinoa said. “I’ll establish a trust fund for any potential kids of *everyone* I bought a RIDE. In addition to whatever fines they impose here. Something to cover their education, and the cost of the shell for a RIDE when they’re ready to partner up. It wouldn’t do for them to have a hard time because they have less family support.” She glanced at the other protesters, who had fallen silent as Mrs. Ramirez and her daughter had their conversation. “How’s that work for you?”

“If you think you can buy all us off, *Señorita* Steader, you’re sadly mistaken,” one man said. “We want you held accountable for what you’ve done.”

“Just hold on there, Carlo,” a woman next to him said. “Money would not be unwelcome to some of us. Even if it’s only for the third generation, that would be a help. We’ve considered moving out of the polity since this happened.”

“It’s not a bribe,” Quinoa said. “It’s...reparations, and I’m doing it because it’s the right thing to do—*not* because anyone’s forcing me to. I might be able to help with family relocation expenses, too—at least on an individual basis—but I’m not going to buy people yachts. I’ll also get back in touch with the ‘new girls’ and do what I can to ease their relations with their parents. And if any of them *do* want to change back, I’ll pay for that once the cooldown expires.”

“You would do that for me? For us?” Malaguena asked. “But you have already done so much for us...”

“It’s not *just* for you.” Quinoa looked back at Mrs. Ramirez. “Well?”

“I need to think about this,” Mrs. Ramirez muttered.

“Don’t take too long, *Madre*,” Malaguena said. “Here’s my comm, when you make your decision. If you are willing to accept me *as I am*, I will speak to you again.” She nodded again to Quinoa. “It was good to see you again, *Leonita!* Please do look me up sometime.” She winked, then disconnected.

“This won’t fix everything!” The protester behind Mrs. Ramirez said. “Many of our children won’t even talk to us anymore, after you corrupted them!”

Quinoa shook her head. “That’s not on me. I never tried to persuade anyone who wasn’t interested after the first ‘no.’ Lots of your young men turned me down flat. The ones who didn’t..well, they were probably going to go that route anyway, sooner or later. Like I said, I’ll try to get them to talk to you again. Where it goes beyond that is up to you.”

“Well, I guess that’s that!” Joe said cheerfully. “Why don’t we all just head off over that-a-way, and you can talk about this among yourselves.” He nodded to the protesters, half of whom seemed to have forgotten they were even carrying signs, then put an arm around Socah’s shoulders and the other around Quinoa’s as they walked back away from the Nuevo San Antonians and their truck. Julius padded along beside.

As they walked, Julius cocked his head, ears flicking forward. “Hey, what’s that? I hear sirens. Shit.”

Quinoa smirked. “I guess they’ve finally noticed I’m here. Looks like it’s about time to turn myself in.”

“Do you need me to call you a lawyer? Come by the police station for moral support?” Joe asked.

“Thanks, Uncle Joe, but I’ve already checked with Steader Ent’s legal division and they recommended a good local solicitor. He’ll be meeting me down at the station. You two enjoy the rest of your trip. Hopefully this’ll take the pressure off you.”

Socah raised an eyebrow. “I can’t say as I meant our sight-seeing tour to get you *arrested*.”

“Usually, that was Mikel’s and my job. You remember that night in Tijuana, when you had to come down and bail us out in the middle of the night?”

Socah snorted. “And when I got there, you were watching Mexican wrestler movies from your comm with the jailer.”

“Hey, he was a fan. And he gave us a good steer on where to find some more stuff, remember?”

Quinoa smiled. “It wasn’t anything you did. It was old-me. I’d have had to take care of this sooner or later anyway. I really should have given the local culture here more thought.”

“So you’ve learned your lesson now, Quinnie?”

“About messing with people who care about something so deeply? Yes.” Quinoa shook her head. “I did what I did here in part because I knew the prevailing culture didn’t like it—and I wanted to rub their nose in how *wrong* they were about it. Just like with Cape Nord. But I forgot that unlike with Cape Nord, here it was *people* getting hurt by it, because of their genuine beliefs—not some abstruse nonsensical system of rules and regulations.”

“So, no more ‘helping’ people crossride?” Joe prompted.

“Well, no more doing it *here*. Not where it would really hurt people.” Quinoa smirked. “In the rest of Zharus, people are more acclimatized. Well, except for maybe Cape Nord. A girl has to have a *few* harmless foibles. It’s just a question of exercising them where they *are* harmless.”

“I see.” Joe favored her with an old-fashioned look. “We’re not going to run into *more* trouble on your behalf when we get to Cape Nord, are we?”

Quinoa shook her head. “Oh, no. Their ‘problem’ with me is more on the order of

a governmental thing, and it's with me only. No actual feelings involved. They might not like to admit it, but Nordies are rather more flexible on gender roles."

"'Flexible,' huh? That and a mustache will get you a Man Card in those parts."

Quinoa giggled. "Well, not *me*. That's the whole problem."

Socah frowned. "Do I even want to *know* 'what problem'? Or am I just going to end up rolling my eyes and muttering about a planet of lunatics again? Lunatics I apparently can't even blame *you* for, this time."

"Actually, you kind of still *can* blame me...sort of. It's complicated. We'll get to Cape Nord in a few weeks, you can decide for yourself then," Joe said. "I need to change my Eternal Bachelor status when we get there anyway. That's going to cause a ruckus. Or maybe a kerfuffle. I can't decide which."

"What's this, then?" Socah said. "I'm not going to research, because I don't want to spend the rest of the day as an irritable hag."

"Tell you later, maybe. For now, let's go see the Alamo."

"Oh, look. It's fuckin' Sharkboy and Lavagirl. Or Cheetah Boy and Dino Girl. Whatever." Julius nodded toward the two skimmer bikes that had just pulled up with their lights and siren going. A prowler car was right behind them.

"I've got this, Uncle," Quinoa said. "My mess. I'll clean it up. You three enjoy yourselves."

Joe nodded. "Comm us if you run into trouble."

"I'll do that." Quinoa turned and walked toward the Federales, holding her arms out. "*Hola*, officers. I surrender; take me into custody, *por favor*."

"Gladly!" Officer Correa said, going into Fuse with his partner. "And none of your Stupid Intie Tricks. We're wise to them."

"Yeah!" Chester added.

Joe cleared his throat. "Well, Officers, you seem to have what you wanted. I don't want any police brutality, now!"

"We'll do our jobs," Correa replied. "We couldn't be 'brutal' if we wanted to, what with all this media attention. Thank you *so much* for that, by the way."

"Just our way of keeping you honest, Officer. Take care, now."

The flotilla of media drones closed in around the Federale cruiser where Quinoa was being taken. With Correa reading her her rights, she waved at the crowd and got inside. Every drone but one followed the cruiser when it left.

"The poor little fucker doesn't know what to do," Julius said. "Go on, git! Story's over! Done with! Finito! Completed! Go *the fuck* away!"

Joe waved a hand at it. "Th-th-th-that's all, folks. Move it or lose it. And we *do* mean lose it."

The drone hesitated a moment, then drifted away.

Joe sighed. "Well, there we go."

Socah chuckled. "Well, I can't say the day's been uneventful thus far."

"Hopefully the rest of it will be. Come on, let's look over the tourist trap and see what we think, and perhaps look at a few more local attractions. Then maybe I can call an old friend from the circus days who settled here after the last time the tour made it this far. I think you'll like him."

"Fuckin' A." Julius scratched briefly behind an ear. "Now we've got the *annoying* part out of the way, let's fuckin' enjoy ourselves."

Socah nodded. "I'm always glad to meet new people. Especially well-traveled

ones. And after we finish here, what then?”

“I expect we’ll give Sturmhaven a miss, considering. You didn’t sound too interested in the place, and there might still be some hard feelings about me helping bankroll our side in the War back in the day.”

Socah chuckled. “Besides, they probably wouldn’t like it too much if we gave them a mister.”

“So we’ll just keep going around the Ring. Works for you two?”

Julius nodded. “Sounds like a plan!”

“I’m looking forward to seeing somewhere you’re *not* either mobbed or reviled.”

“We’ll hit that one of these stops, I’m sure.” Joe grinned. “C’mon, let’s go get some souvenirs.” He led the way in the direction of a nearby souvenir booth, and the other two followed along behind.

Chapter Three: Sturmhaven

May 28, 157 A.L.

“Well, that went about as well as could be expected.” Joe Steader leaned back in the driver’s seat of the Jaguar as Julius handled the driving. “All the same, I’m not exactly sorry to be looking at Nuevo San Antonio in my rear view mirror.”

“That makes two of us,” Socah agreed. “Are you sure Quinoa will be all right?”

“Overall, yes.” Joe shrugged. “They have to give her enough grief to make it clear they’re not going easy on her because we’re filthy stinking rich. Then they’ll go ahead and go easy on her anyway, because they don’t want to come off as backward in the midst of all this enlightened liberalism about RIDEs being people after all.”

Julius snorted. “Fuckin’ jerks. Why do humans have to be so fuckin’...*human*?”

Joe grinned. “Hey, RIDEs can be just as human too, y’know.”

Julius’s eyes, on display in the dashboard panel, rolled. “There’s really no need to be insulting, Joe.”

“So what’s our next destination, then?” Socah asked.

“Well, the next polity clockwise from us is Sturmhaven, but I think we both agreed to give that one a miss.”

“Like Socah said, we don’t wanna give it a mister,” Julius said. “They don’t fuckin’ *like* misters, there.”

“Quite. Anyway, beyond that is the Carroll Mountains, then the Southeast Rift lake settlements, and Nautica. We might swing inward toward the desert and stop by Alpha Camp, too—it’s barely out of our way.”

“You know, to get where we’re going we still have to go through Sturmie territory,” Julius said. “Less we want to dogleg through the Dry.”

“I’m not too worried about passing through their turf. The Skimmerway’s neutral ground, pretty much. As long as we don’t leave it for the polity proper, they won’t even care. Trust me, I’ve driven the circuit a half-dozen times, passed right through Sturmie turf every time, and never had any trouble.”

“You know what ‘famous last words’ are, right?” Julius asked. “Ya know, ‘invoking Murphy’?”

“I’m sure we won’t have any problems this time,” Joe said, waving a hand nonchalantly. “Really, what could go wrong?”

“You’re fuckin’ doing that on purpose,” Julius said. “Aren’t you.”

“Well how was I supposed to know that invoking Murphy actually *works*?”

“You, the SOB who brought all of Earth’s old shit here, didn’t pay attention to how it works *every fuckin’ time it happens* in the stories?”

“Those are just stories. This is *real life*.”

The first day or so of their trip had been smooth sailing. The palm-and-saguaro vegetation gradually grew more prevalent as they headed toward the tropics. But the farther along the southeastern coast, the more the region became the battleground of two airmasses—cool and dry, and hot and very moist. As the air from the Dry rose in

altitude, for much of the year it actually cooled enough to be *cooler* than the hot moist air coming off the southern Thalassic Ocean. Between the Dry and the Wet, no matter the time of year, there was always extreme weather. “Sturmhaven’s right on one of the main hurricane tracks,” Joe explained as raindrops the size of marbles pelted the car. “That’s why it’s called—”

“—the ‘haven of storms,’ yes,” Socah said. “Do we need to land and take shelter somewhere? A boomer this big could produce a number of tornados.”

“We’ll get a warning from the local weathernet if that becomes necessary, but it almost never does. The Coastal Skimmerway has a series of strong long-distance hardlight generators. They call it the ‘Mesocyclone Disruption Net’. It can disrupt any tornado that comes near—or, as an emergency backup, shield any nearby vehicles with a hardlight field as strong as Uplift’s outer wall. They can’t keep it up for very long, but an hour or two is usually enough. That’s one of the reasons why it’s a good idea to stay on the Skimmerway, especially in these parts.”

The trouble came when the Skimmerway made its closest approach to Sturmhaven proper, coming within about fifty clicks of the city’s outer limits. They’d been cruising along at speed, enjoying a rare stretch of fair weather, when an abrupt appearance of flashing lights in the rearview mirrors had coincided with a comm ping bearing a law enforcement code, demanding they set down immediately.

As they settled to the ground beneath a Skimmerway marker buoy, Joe took a good long look at the Sturmhaven *Polizei* prowl skimmer car behind them, and asked his rhetorical question about invoking Murphy.

“Joseph Steader, you are hereby placed under arrest for the crimes of war profiteering, perpetuating a patriarchal system—” The arresting officer—who was actually a man with floppy golden retriever ears—paused. “Wait. That law was stricken from the books ten years ago. Our apologies, none of this makes sense, yet the warrant is confirmed as valid.”

Joe sighed. “Of *course* it is. After all, it’s not as if it was any great mystery we were heading this way, is it?”

Socah pursed her lips. “This is a completely bogus warrant, officer. Probably politically motivated, unless I miss my guess.”

“It’s fuckin’ *bullshit* is what it is,” Julius agreed. “But I give ten to one it’s not bullshit *enough* that the nice man’ll just tell us, ‘sorry we bothered you, have a nice fuckin’ day.’”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to come along back to Sturmhaven with me so we can sort all this out,” the policeman said apologetically. “This is all *well* above my pay grade.”

Julius snorted. “Especially with you being *just a male* and all, right?”

“Well, we don’t want trouble,” Joe said. “How is this going to work? Are you going to handcuff us and put us in the car?”

“I hope that won’t be necessary. If you’ll agree to peace-bond your vehicles’ onboard weapons, you can just follow us to the station and we can get matters sorted out there.” He rolled his eyes. “I’m *sure* whoever set this up would love those media drones up there to get footage of you being taken away in a prowler car, and I see no need to oblige them. But I can’t guarantee my superiors won’t overrule me when we get to the city proper.”

“Fair enough,” Joe said. “Jules, can you see to it?”

“If you fuckin’ insist,” Julius grumbled. “Fine. Handshaking with your RIDE and setting the fucking seals now. I *still* say this is bullshit.”

Joe smiled wryly at Socah. “Well. Looks like we’ll be giving Sturmhaven a ‘mister’ after all.”

Soon after, they were on their way again, following the prowler car up the Skimmerway exit lane to Sturmhaven proper. “I guess this’ll be a new experience for me,” Joe mused. “I haven’t visited Sturmhaven since before the war. Stopped in a time or two with Mikel and Isabella while the Circus was planetside the first time, but never stayed very long. Even then we male-types weren’t exactly wanted.”

“I’m sure I can’t imagine why.” Socah frowned. “It’s a good thing this hardlight exterior doesn’t develop frown lines. I get the feeling I’m going to be frowning a lot over the next few days.”

Joe grinned. “The funny thing is, of any of us, you have the least to worry about here. If there’s one thing they respect, it’s strong women, and if there’s another, it’s women warriors. They’ll probably *love* you.”

“The feeling is most assuredly *not* mutual, I assure you.” Socah rolled her eyes. “But...now that I think of it, it might just be my turn to get us out of a sticky spot with a comm call. Julius, could you ring the Freeriders Garage for me? I seem to recall my granddaughter has highly-placed friends in Sturmhaven.”

“One comm call, coming up!” Julius said cheerfully.

Joe chuckled. “Hey, what happened to not being a switchboard operator?”

Julius sneezed. “Colonel Thermopylae is a special case.”

A moment later, the dashboard monitor switched over to a view of Lindae the Tigress. “Freeriders Garage, can we help you? Oh! Hi, Mrs. Gates! Did you want to talk to Rhi?”

“If she’s around, please. It’s mildly urgent.”

“Only *mildly* urgent? Just a sec, I’ll go get her.” The screen blinked to a “please hold” pattern for a minute or so, then Rhianna was there, wiping her hands on a grease rag.

“Hey, Nana Socah. How’s your trip going?”

“Right at the moment, it *could* be going better. As we were passing Sturmhaven, the local constabulary stopped us to arrest Joe on a decades-old warrant of questionable validity.”

Rhianna facepalmed, leaving a smudge of grease across her feline nose. “Of *course* they did.”

“I seem to recall one of your apprentices is now a person of some importance in Sturmhaven, and wondered if we might prevail on you to put us in touch.”

“Oh, sure! That’s Lilibet Walton and Guinevere. As it happens, they’re in Sturmhaven right now campaigning for next month’s election. I’ll let them know what’s going on and see if they can meet you at the police station.”

“I should have thought of that myself,” Joe said. “I was just chatting with her folks before we set out on this trip, and they mentioned the ongoing election thing. Thanks, Rhianna. We owe you another one.”

“Don’t worry about it. Any friend of RIDEs is a friend of mine. I’ll give her a call right now.”

“By the way, you need to wipe your—” But she dropped the connection before Joe

could finish. “Oh well. She’ll see a mirror sooner or later, I guess.”

Socah chuckled. “That’s my grandchild.”

“I wonder if the election is why they dug that warrant up?” Joe mused. “Make it look like they’re Doing Something about old issues.”

“Wouldn’t fuckin’ surprise me. Probably those stiff-necked Valkyrie bitches. I’ll bet they still haven’t forgiven us for taking out their sappers that time they attacked your penthouse gun turret. Mebbe you should wear that fuckin’ Cracker-Jack prize while we’re there, just to rub their beaks in it.”

“Maybe *you* should wear it. You’re the one it really belongs to.”

Julius chuckled. “Y’know, I just might.”

It was only a few more minutes before they fetched up to the exterior of Sturmhaven proper. The city was laid out inside a giant ring of hardlight projector emplacements, though unlike Uplift’s they were powered down at the moment.

“So they only put up their dome when it rains?” Socah asked.

“Not even then, mostly. They don’t mind a little rain, or even a *lot* of rain. But when it’s tornado or hurricane weather, that’s when the generators see a lot of use.”

“Or when there’s a fuckin’ air raid on, I’ll bet.”

“Well, that’s a fringe benefit. But they’ve actually backed off from their war stance considerably. I understand they used to have turrets all around, like the ones they tried to knock out on our roof, but they ripped all those out as part of the peace settlement.”

“Be still my fuckin’ beating heart.”

As they proceeded past the outer ring, they were met by an honor guard of four more cop cars who surrounded them on all sides, lights and sirens going. At least, Joe chose to *regard* them as an “honor guard,” rather than “making sure the war criminal can’t get away.” But at least nobody insisted that they pull over and submit to handcuffs, which was something anyway.

Finally, they pulled up in front of the station. Joe and Socah climbed out of the car, while Julius popped out of the hood and padded over to his motorcycle shell. A compartment on the side slid open, and Julius grabbed the rosewood box in his teeth. “Joe, can you help me on with this thing?”

Joe chuckled. “Really going through with it? Sure.” He took the box, opened it, and brought out the medal on its thick ribbon. He hung it around the neck of Julius’s minimus shell. “How’s that?”

“It’ll do, thanks.”

Joe put the box back in the compartment on the bike, then turned to the police officer and his golden retriever RIDE who were now standing in front of them. “All right, Officer; lead the way. Let’s get this over with.”

Polizeizentral had been added onto over the decades rather than demolished and rebuilt. At the southwest corner was what had been a little wooden hut for the then-resort’s security staff. There were six layers, all of which had their own style, culminating in a 27-storey glass office building. At another corner was what might have been intended to be a charming statue of the blindfolded Greek goddess of Justice—except this goddess was built like a Norse shieldmaiden, and Joe got the distinct impression she’d been captured just as she was about to start laying about blindly with her sword in one hand, while whirling her scales around her head like a mace and chain

with the other.

A small crowd had gathered, apparently prompted by local news media. Most of them were women, though a handful of men were present, too. For a wonder, most of them didn't seem to be wearing collars and chains or falsies. Much like the picketers in Nuevo San, the crowd seemed to be divided into separate groups—a small group looking somewhere between angry and smug, and a larger group hooting and jeering at the other one. Many of the members of the smaller crowd were wearing large eye-blocking goggles and body armor with Valkyrie stylings. The larger group tended more toward togas and midriff-baring (or breast-baring) dresses, and was the one that had most of the men in it in addition to the women who mostly made it up. Rather than escorting Joe and Socah into the station, the polizei from the cars that had escorted them through the polity now spread out to serve as crowd control. More media drones hovered overhead.

Some of the jeering portion of the audience were holding signs. Socah peered at them. “Playtime is Over”? What does that mean?”

“We're three for fuckin' three for mobs on this tour,” Julius said.

“At least the first one in Longmire was friendly,” Joe pointed out.

“The one in Nuevo San was half-friendly. This one seems to be somewhere in the middle.”

The cop and his RIDE led the way up the steps and into the building, while the other officers kept the crowd back. The lobby looked much like police stations everywhere, form following function as it did. Several people were standing at the information desk, including a young woman in Valkyrie armor and a tiara whom Joe immediately recognized. “Lilibet Walton! Good to see you!”

Another woman, standing at the opposite end of the counter, glowered. She was wearing more impressively-ornamented armor and a stern expression, aided by the avian tags she wore—orange eyes, feathered hair, and rigid half-beak lips. “You!” she rasped. Her eyes narrowed as she took in Julius padding along at his side, Nextus Silver Medal of Bravery dangling from his neck. “I should destroy you where you stand for the dishonor you did to us!”

Joe raised an eyebrow. “Have we met?”

“Well I'll be fuckin' flea-dipped,” Julius said. “I know that voice. Madame ‘Sacrifice,’ is it? You're lookin' well—the post-war tags agree with ya. How's the birdie? Joe's still got that carbine we took offa you mounted over his fireplace in Uplift. Never expected it'd be a *real-life* Chekhov's Gun. You two put up a great fight!”

The sheer cheerfulness in Julius's tone made the Valk open and close her mouth, speechless, her train of thought utterly derailed.

Lilibet looked between Joe, Julius, and the Valk. “You know...things suddenly seem a *little* clearer.”

Joe raised an eyebrow. “You know, you could just have sent us an invitation and we'd have been glad to stop by to say hello. An arrest warrant seems a little much.”

“Wait a second,” Socah said. She'd heard the tale from Joe and Julius a few times by now. “This woman...she's the one you two took down that night, the one who tried to blow up the building you were living in?”

“Apparently. Though she looked a lot different back then. Early avian RIDE tags were something else.” Joe shook his head. “Sturmhaven was in a hurry to field their air power and didn't put a lot of effort into minimizing the effect. Nextus never actually had

any air RIDEs of its own during the war, because our brass felt it was just too big of a trade-off before they worked out a way to minimize the tagging. Anyway, air RIDEs never had as much of an advantage over fighters as infantry units did over skimmers.”

“First field deployment for both sides. I remember what that reporter in Nuevo San said,” Socah said. She gave the Valk a hard look. “I’m sure she knew who lived in the building.”

“Joe Steader was a secondary target,” the Valk said. “Even now, he is a *war criminal!*”

“Hold on there, Olivia!” Lilibet said. “Those warrants were cancelled as part of the Peace Treaty. I don’t know how you managed to reactivate this one, but this is beyond the pale. This isn’t going to help win the Valks any seats.”

“That cancellation was never properly ratified by the Zemstvo! It was imposed under duress and has no validity!” Olivia crossed her arms. “It’s long past time we *did something* about our old grievances!”

Julius shook his head. “Damn. And I thought *I* was good at nursing a grudge. She fuckin’ brought *hers* the long way around.”

“Valkyries are like that,” the ocelot by Lilibet’s side put in. “Guinevere, by the way. You must be Julius? Been wanting to meet you!”

Julius chuffed at the ocelot. “Charmed! Nice ta meetcha, fellow South American feline.”

“Is it considered SOP here for a member of the Parliament to use the apparatus of the state to settle personal grudges?” Socah said. “Because it’s clear that’s what’s happening here.”

Lilibet shook her head. “I don’t think she’d have gotten very far if it was just her. This smells like party politicking to me, what with the election coming up in a couple of weeks.”

“Sturmhaven is in a very weird spot,” Guinevere said.

Olivia glared at Socah. “Is he *yours*?”

“Oh, *here* we go,” Lilibet said, rolling her eyes. “Sorry about this.”

The policewoman behind the information desk cleared her throat. “I believe that will be about enough of *that*.” The matronly older woman had grey wolf tags and greying hair, and a stern expression on her face. “Whatever means she used to do it, the warrant still shows as valid in our system, which means we’ll have to carry it through to a hearing whereby your attorneys can move to dismiss it. On the bright side, trial by combat is no longer permitted except in *very special* circumstances, so it will be in a court of law instead.”

“Hey, I’d be fine with a trial by combat!” Julius said. “We fuckin’ beat her once, we can do it again—specially with this new Donizetti shell I got.”

“The soonest we can schedule the hearing is the day after tomorrow, I’m afraid. So I’ll have to ask you not to leave the polity until then. You’re released into the custody of Col. Gates.” She gave Socah the nod of one warrior to another.

Joe grinned at Socah. “Hey, you hear that? I’m *released into your custody*. It’s just like old times! Man, if only Mikel were here to see this...”

Julius snorted. “This really *is* a fuckin’ nostalgia trip, innit?”

Socah chuckled. “Now let’s see, how did that go?” She cleared her throat.

“Joseph Cassius Steader, what the *hell* damn fool thing have you gone and done *this* time?”

Joe clapped. “Oh, *very* good. Only in this case, I actually went and did the damn fool thing thirty-five years ago.”

“Sometimes it takes that long for the chickens to come home to roost,” Lilibet said. “Or the owl.”

“Well, we’d love to hang around and talk about old fuckin’ times,” Julius said. “But I guess we better find a hotel or something.”

“Please, stay over at my place,” Lilibet said. “I’ve got a pretty big one, thanks to recent events. Bigger than I can use by myself, anyway.”

“And if the political fallout goes how we think it will, it’ll do us good to have you associated with us,” Guinevere added.

“Be happy to,” Joe said. “I hadn’t planned on getting involved in Sturmhaven politics, but it looks like I’ve been overruled.” He smirked at Olivia. “Thanks, really.”

“Yeah!” Julius said. “We oughtta get together for drinks, talk about the good old days or something. Give my love to the birdie!”

Olivia opened her mouth, but the only sound that came out before she closed it again sounded distinctly like a squawk.

Lilibet smiled wryly. “In Mother Sturmhaven, politics play you.”

The crowds had largely dispersed by the time they left the station. “I’ve gotten authority to release the peace-bond on your weapons,” Guinevere said as they came back down the stairs. “Given that you’re not going to try to run or anything.”

“Thanks!” Julius said. “I feel fuckin’ nekkid without ‘em.”

“Besides, you never know...some Valkyrie might decide to challenge you to a *duel* or something.” Lilibet rolled her eyes.

Joe raised an eyebrow. “Is that likely to happen?”

“It happened to *me*. That’s how I ended up with all this.” She waved a hand at the Valkyrie outfit she was wearing.

Socah frowned. “I find it so hard to believe, in this day and age, that anyone can seriously expect to get away with this kind of behavior.”

“They’ve got a long tradition of it,” Joe said. “And you know, when you grow up somewhere like this, you tend to get indoctrinated into it at a young age.”

“We’re working on changing that, but it needs positive examples,” Lilibet said. “Through no fault of my own, I ended up one of those. It’s a bit of a pain, as I’d much rather be back in Alpha Camp tuning up RIDEs. But as a good little girl of Nextus, *I* was indoctrinated into the idea of always doing my civic duty. Some habits are really hard to break.”

“So, fill us in,” Joe said. “I’d heard there was a no-confidence vote, but beyond that, I have no idea what Sturmie politics is like.”

“Though something tells me we’re in for a fuckin’ crash course.”

Lilibet sighed. “Okay. Here goes...”

As Lilibet explained it, Sturmhaven had three major political parties, which were as much about gender roles as they were about politics. The Valkyries were the ideological descendants of the polity’s founding group, the former administrators of the resort. “They dominated how things worked here until after the War,” Lilibet said.

Socah frowned. “I’m not sure I quite understand.”

“To be perfectly frank, Sturmhaven started as a rather extreme sexual role-playing resort,” Guinevere said. “The original Walks considered men sub-human. They

didn't have rights. They were chattel."

Julius smirked. "The women got to be on top."

"When they organized as a polity they ended up having so many sanctions against them they pretty much had to be completely self sufficient," Guinevere said. "Then Nextus Nano created sarium batteries...and, well."

"War," Socah said. "Joe told me about his and Mikel's part in how that got started."

"Fuckin' A," Julius added.

"After the War the Gaians were voted in," Lillibet said. "A lot more moderate. The 'Male Transgression Laws' were mostly repealed. If you see a man with breasts, he's probably a Gaian. They idealize the female form and change themselves after their 'fatherly duty' to share the nursing. But the Valks have remained a significant bloc."

"Then there's the Athenas, who Lilli and I represent," Guinevere said. "Newbies. Matriarchal—we still have a 'female primacy' sort of view—but otherwise men are about as equal as in Nextus. Dress in a Minoan style. Bare-breasted women, svelte men."

"We'd personally like to move the scale even further, but you can only do so much against the weight of a whole society." Lillibet shrugged. "Maybe in future generations."

"Honey, I've been alive long enough to watch Earth go from being largely free to the authoritarian hellhole it is now," Socah said. "It didn't happen overnight. And *how* old are you to be in the middle of this?"

"I'm old enough to drink...coffee." Lillibet grinned. "But I'm very much looking forward to seeing what this place looks like when I get to be your age."

"Thirty-nine?" Joe put in. Socah swatted him.

"Anyway, you guys follow us and we'll show you to our penthouse." Lillibet nodded to Guinevere, who dropped her hardlight and converted to skimmer bike form.

"Will do." Joe returned Julius's medal to its box, then the three of them got back into the car and followed, the Ahnuld bike trailing along behind on autopilot.

The penthouse in question was located on one of the more impressive high-rise apartments in downtown Sturmhaven. After they'd parked in reserved spaces in the underground garage, and Julius had resumed his bike body and fetched their luggage in shell mode, they were met at the elevator by a black wolf Fuser. "This is my majordomo, Gloria," Lillibet said. "Gloria's the RIDE. The human's Annalinda—the one who challenged me to that duel I was telling you about. But she doesn't talk much."

Socah raised an eyebrow. "Your prisoner?"

"Not *exactly*."

"She's my thumbs," Gloria said. "In the Alpha Camp tradition."

"Considering what she was going to do to Lillibet if she won, I think it's more than fair," Guinevere said. "Anyway, she can leave any time she wants to—but she wouldn't have a penny to her name since she lost the duel, so on the whole she figures it's less embarrassing to stay and get four square meals a day instead of end up in a public indigents' shelter. Isn't that right, Annie?"

"You don't have to rub it in," the black wolf grumbled in a different voice.

"Besides, she means a lot to me," Gloria said. "After she took care of me for so long, now it's my turn to take care of her."

"We figure once she's had a few years to learn some humility, she might turn out to be almost human after all," Lillibet said. "And at least it keeps her off the streets."

“So anyway, c’mon, I’ll show you to the guest rooms.” Lilibet led the way into the elevator.

“You know, we could have carried our own suitcases, Jules,” Joe said as the three of them closed the door behind them. “You’re not supposed to be my manservant.”

“Meh. I’m fifty times stronger than you are, and I don’t get tired. It’d be fuckin’ stupid to make you carry the heavy stuff when I’m better suited to it.” Julius put the suitcases on the bed. “But you can *unpack* them yourselves.”

“You know, *I* don’t get tired either,” Socah pointed out.

“Yeah, but you killed me with a fuckin’ flint spear. *You*, I show deference.” He paused a beat. “I’m still not unpacking for you, though.”

“So, how about this place, then?” Joe looked around. “I suspect Lilli redecorated, because this does *not* look like somewhere a Valkyrie would stick guests.”

Socah raised an eyebrow. “The décor seems Germanic to me. All the trophies on the walls, paintings of hunters and hounds...”

“Yeah, but it’s Germanic *masculine*. It’s done up like a German hunting lodge. This is more what I’d expect to find in Cape Nord than Sturmhaven.” Joe grinned. “Well done, her. Anyone she has stay over will get a pretty pointed message just from spending the night in this room.”

“And all those trophies would make a great fuckin’ place to put cameras,” Julius mused. “Or just creative lighting effects. Make it look like they’re *watching* you.”

Socah raised an eyebrow. “Thank you, Julius, you and my imagination are going to give me nightmares tonight.”

Julius flicked an ear. “I think it’d take a lot worse than this to give *you* nightmares.”

Joe walked over to the glass door set in the wall and slid it open. “Well, good view from the balcony, anyway. Looking directly downtown. I think I can see the Zemstvo building from here.” He chuckled. “I must admit, this is one place I never thought I’d ever find myself, back in the day. Right in the heart of the enemy’s seat of power. Really, this place is pretty much equivalent to my own penthouse back in Nextus, just on the other side of things.”

“Yay, we’ve got fuckin’ box seats in crazytown.” Julius shifted back to Walker form and padded over to peer out the door. “Meh. Seen better.”

Joe turned back to Socah, who had her suitcase open and was peering into it. “Maybe all this was a bad idea. I didn’t mean to get you involved in all this...craziness that seems to be the default state of my life lately.”

Socah laughed. “This? This is hardly even an inconvenience. Before we left Earth, Roy, Arlene, their kids, and I spent weeks living hand to mouth in crowded corridors, under constant harassment by the local law. Compared to that, *this* is no hardship—and, in fact, it’s actually kind of fun.” She grinned. “I will admit, one thing life *never* was when you and Mikel were around back on Earth was ‘tame.’ I’m beginning to remember just how much I missed that once you two left. Though you couldn’t have gotten me to admit it for a good ten to twenty years or so.”

Joe chuckled. “Well, I hope you still feel that way by the time we’re done here. Who knows what that crazy bird-woman is planning to throw at us next?”

“Whatever it is, we’ll fuckin’ deal with it.” Julius snorted. “Man, would you believe it? Another piece of my past I thought I’d lost, and right there she is. I know that

crazy-ass Valk bitch will do us any fuckin' bit of harm she possibly can...but that doesn't keep me from being happy to see her all the same."

"If her RIDE's anything like she is..." Joe muttered.

"I asked around on the sidebands, and it turns her name is Naomi. I've put out an invitation. If she wants to face off in Nature Range, I'm game for that."

"Do you think she'll go for that?"

"Oh, ya never know. But there's a good chance. RIDEs have a different perspective from their partners, lotsa times, and don't have so many hard feelings 'bout wartime crap. We'll see what she says."

"Well." Socah pulled a small pistol out of her luggage. "Got a feeling it might be best not to go 'naked' while I'm here." A section of hardlight on her hip winked out and a compartment slid open. She slid the gun into it, then pushed it shut again.

Joe grinned. "Hey, just like in *Robocop*! Too bad I don't have something like that."

Julius snorted. "Well, you got me. 'Concealed carry bodyguard,' remember?"

"Yeah, there is that."

"So, what are you planning to do this evening?" Socah asked.

Joe shrugged. "Dunno. After the exertions and excitement of the day, maybe just turn in early so I can be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed...well, as bushy as this tail gets... for doing tourist things tomorrow. I'm not as young as I used to be, you know. And I don't much fancy wandering around after dark in a polity where part of 'em hate my guts for who I am and the rest have a more equal-opportunity hate thing going on account of my chromosomes."

Socah nodded. "Mmm. You won't mind if I have a look around, do you?"

"Oh, no, by all means go out and enjoy yourself. At least you don't have my handicap when it comes to the chromosomes. And you a warrior, too? They'll probably love *you* here."

Socah chuckled. "We'll see about that. I'll confess to harboring more than a little curiosity about this place, and given that I ended up here against all expectations, it seems only right that I get to satisfy it. I'll probably start by asking our hostess and her staff a few questions before I go out."

"Well, comm if you need anything. You've got Lillibet's code, right?"

"Sure do." Socah closed her suitcase. "I'll be back later, then."

"See you then." As Socah let herself out, Joe peered at the vid screen at one end of the room. "So, let's see what's playing in Peoria..."

It only took a few minutes of looking for Socah to find the first person she was looking for. "Ah...Gloria, was it?"

The black wolf Fuser was in one of the penthouse's salon areas, supervising several male staff as they vacuumed carpets and polished furniture. She looked up as Socah approached. "Yes, Ms. Gates. Is everything all right with the room? Can I help you with anything?"

"Everything's fine, thank you." Socah smiled. "I was wondering if you had a few moments to talk?"

"Of course! Come with me." She led the way to the next room over, a study with bookshelves, a desk, and several comfortable chairs. She turned one chair to face another, then closed the door. "Did you have some questions about Sturmhaven?"

Visitors from outside usually do.”

“As it happens, I did. And I was wondering if it would be all right if I asked some of...Annalinda her name was?”

Gloria tilted her head. “Certainly. I can’t promise she’ll answer, but you can ask if you want. In fact...” She stood up and split apart, de-Fusing and stepping to one side.

A moment later, a dark-haired woman with black wolf tags stood there for a moment, before sitting back down in the chair. She had the light coating of black fur and lupine nose that bespoke spending a lot of time in Fuse. Her clothes were simple and utilitarian—a plain spandex halter top and a thigh-length skirt. She also had a bright red sword scar on each cheek. She frowned at Socah, then glanced at Gloria. Then she shrugged. “Fine, ask. It’s not like I have anything better to do.”

“You challenged Lillibet to a duel. Why?”

Annalinda pursed her lips. “You can read about *that* in the news.”

“I’m asking you.” She considered. “Maybe this will make it easier for you to answer.” Her flapper-chic outfit blurred away, replaced by her mohawked and ribbon-bedecked uniformed guise. She backed her voice with military authority when she spoke again. “Well, missy?”

Annalinda’s eyes widened. “I...uh...” She swallowed. “Well, it was...politics.”

“Ah, yes. Politics. The one constant anywhere you go in the universe. *Whose* politics, and why?”

“Er...”

She waved a hand. “Oh, don’t worry, this won’t be used for anything but to satisfy my own curiosity. I’m no inquisitor. But this is one of the strangest spots on the planet from my Earther perspective, and I want to *understand* it. Including understanding the ‘other side’ of it. And I have a feeling I’d more easily get answers out of *you* than that harpy Olivia.”

“You might as well,” Gloria put in. “You don’t owe them anything anymore. It’s not like any of them has tried to do anything to help you, even though they *could* have asked. But it’s your choice.”

“Of course they didn’t,” Annalinda said bitterly. “I failed. *Goddess above*, did I fail.” She snorted. “Fine. The Valkyries put me up to it. They wanted an interpolity incident they could use to embarrass Nextus *and* the Gaians who were in power. I was the ‘lucky’ stalking horse who got the cherry assignment.” She shook her head. “I was third in my fencing class at academy! How could I have imagined that...*rich girl* was trained by *Tocsin*?”

Socah pursed her lips. “I...see. And they’re still up to it now?”

Annalinda shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. They don’t talk to me very much these days. And I don’t watch the news.”

“That harpy Olivia somehow reactivated an old arrest warrant against Joe Steader right as we were motoring by,” Socah said. “And so, here we are.”

Annalinda goggled. “She did? *Really*? Are they really *that* desperate for an incident now?”

“If you haven’t been watching the news, I have,” Gloria said. “The polls are going pretty badly against the Valks. Lillibet’s campaigning has been super-effective—especially with Bertha and Fenris helping.”

“I doubt there’s going to be much of an incident there, either,” Socah said. “Unless they decide to challenge *me* to a duel.” She smiled thinly. “I almost hope they

do.”

“They won’t,” Gloria said. “Not since your service record was plastered all over the news a couple of hours ago. If anything, they’re more likely to ask you to join their party. Or, well, they *would* have if they hadn’t already blown their shot by arresting your boyfriend.”

Socah snorted. “Pity, that. Turning them down would’ve been nice.”

Annalinda shook her head. “You have to watch out for Olivia. She might be part owl, but she’s *definitely* a hawk. She feels like the brass made too many mistakes during the old war days, and the biggest one was surrendering.”

Gloria smirked. “Of course, if they *hadn’t* surrendered, who knows how long it would have been before the prisoner exchange got her out of jail and Naomi out of mothballs.”

“So noted.” Socah nodded. “Now for you, missy. What they said earlier—is it true? If you wanted to leave, you could?”

“As far as I know.” Annalinda shrugged. “I’ve never asked to. Don’t guess I will.”

“Why?”

Annalinda sighed. “It’s like they said. If I asked to leave, I wouldn’t have anything—not even the clothes on my back.”

Gloria shook her head. “Oh, Lilli would let you keep those.”

“I’ve never had a real job in my life, and if I were...out there in a shelter, after I failed my mission...I might even get crossride lynched.”

“By custom, she *should* have had to crossride after she lost the duel against Lilibet, but I asked Lilibet not to do it.” Gloria gave Annalinda a lick on the cheek, and Annalinda reached up absently to pat her head.

“It’s not too bad here, on the whole. The work’s not too hard, I’m safe from reprisals, and...Lilibet doesn’t even seem to hold a grudge.” She shook her head. “I don’t get it. *I’d* hold a grudge...and force me to do scut work all day and other embarrassing stuff...but she doesn’t.”

Socah smiled. “Some people are just like that. There’s an old book that says, ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’” She rose to her feet. “Well, thank you for answering my questions, Annalinda. Best of luck to you.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Annalinda rose as well, then held out her arms and Gloria Fused back over her.

“What are you planning to do now?” Gloria asked.

“Oh, I think I’ll go out for a while and see a few sights. See what the local culture is like at street level.” Socah smirked. “Besides, after so many times bailing Joe and Mikel Steader out of trouble, it feels like it’s my turn to raise a little hell for a change.”

Gloria looked at her appraisingly. “Well...I guess you won’t get into too much trouble. Even in your other outfit, you’re *definitely* a woman, which makes you a first-class citizen around here.”

“Funny you should mention that. I was considering going like this.” Her body blurred, and she was replaced a moment later by a young man, in slacks and sweater. She glanced at herself in a hall mirror and frowned. “Hmm. I look too much like young Joe Steader this way. Let’s see.” Her hair color changed to blonde, and a moment later was joined by a bushy mustache fit to have come from a Miyazaki movie. “That’s better,” she said in a deeper, masculine voice.

Gloria blinked, ears flipping forward. “That’s...uh...unsettling.”

“There was another story from that old book about an angel showing up looking like a bum to see how ordinary people treated him. Seems like a reasonable idea to me. You wanna see what people are really like, see how they treat *second*-class citizens.”

Gloria frowned. “As a foreigner, you should be safe from the worst persecution regardless—tourism marks *are* important, and they didn’t want to discourage that tourism too much even when the Valks were fully in charge. Now, and especially since the No Confidence vote...I think you’ll be all right. But comm us if you run into any trouble.”

“I think I’ll be all right.”

A light mist was falling and the sun was setting as Socah Gates stepped out onto the street, secure in her guise of a young man about the town. She looked around for a taxi stand. (She knew she should be trying to think of herself as “he” at this point, for verisimilitude, but she simply couldn’t do it. Her body didn’t *feel* any different; it just had a different coat of paint on it. *Haven’t ‘gone native’ enough yet, I guess. Something else to try if I ever pull the trigger on a clone-bod.*)

She’d checked the local yelp for nearby attractions, and found a few that looked potentially interesting. But first, she thought she’d see what passed for booze around these parts. In her long and broad military experience, she’d learned you could tell a lot about a place by what it had that came with alcohol in it. (Also, what came with caffeine in it, but it was the wrong time of day for that.)

The skimmer taxi waiting at the stand she chose was driven by a young woman with light brown hair in a pixie cut, wearing a fairly conservative tunic and dress. The woman glanced up at her uninterestedly. “Evening, sir. Where can I drop you?”

“I’m just in from out of town, and I’m looking for a good bar. What do you think of...uh...The Snare Drum?”

The woman frowned. “Not really the place I’d pick, if I were you. It can get a little rowdy there. I’d suggest The Loving Cup, instead. It’s technically a singles bar, but they don’t make a thing of it if you want to be left alone—and they’re more likely to let you have your drink in peace without something getting broken over your head.”

Socah nodded. “Good enough. Take me there.” She climbed into the cab. The driver started the meter and pulled away from the curb.

“So, I hear this isn’t the best place in the world for people like me.” Socah wondered if the line sounded anywhere near as cheesy and artificial to the driver as it did in her own ears.

Apparently not, as the woman answered, “There’s some of that, yeah. Not near as bad as it used to be. But I’d still not go walking alone down any dark alleys in some parts of town.”

“What about all that stuff about ‘male transgression laws’? Aren’t some of those still on the books?”

“Meh. Lots of stupid laws are still on the books. You know in Nextus it’s still *illegal* to use the wrong color e-ink on official forms?” The woman waved a hand dismissively. “Most of those laws are only still there to make a bunch of past-their-prime Valkyries feel better. Most of the cops these days are Gaia or Athena, and they’d laugh off any serious attempt to enforce them.”

“So I’m not going to have someone march up to me and say they ‘require my

services’?”

The driver snorted. “That kind of thing only happens in bad melodramas and Iphigenia Rose novels. Besides, there aren’t a lot of women around who’d want to kiss someone with a mustache like *that*.”

“Good to know.”

The taxi pulled to a halt in front of a bar with a neon sign featuring a big pink chalice. “That’ll be three *mu* fifty.”

“Here you go then.” Socah sent payment with a decent tip over from the anonymous cash wallet she was using for transactions tonight.

“Thanks.” The driver reset her meter as Socah opened the door and climbed out. “Oh, by the way. You’re not the first foreign woman to dress in male drag and ‘test’ the waters here to see if they get arrested or propositioned or whatnot. Especially since the no-confidence vote.”

Socah laughed. “Is it that obvious? I suppose I should try harder.”

“It’s the way you walk. Have a nice stay, ‘sir’.”

The décor in the bar was feminine, but not overpoweringly so. There was a lot of pink in the signage and accent lighting, but otherwise it was a standard bar and grill establishment. There were a lot of couples, either male-female or female-female, with a few male-male pairings off in darker corners. It was moderately busy, but there were a few spare seats at the bar. Socah took one and asked for a beer menu. As expected, the beers on offer mostly had German names: hefeweizen, doppelbock, oktoberfest, dunkel, and so on. Socah ordered a pilsner, and it came in the tall, narrow glass named for the form.

Socah sipped it, and found it not at all bad as beers went. There were still plenty of good microbrews back on Earth, of course, but she hadn’t exactly been in a position to sample more than a thimbleful at a time of them for decades, until coming here and getting those new tech upgrades. It really was remarkable how well Zharus tech worked, in fact—she was able to taste this beer as well as any she’d ever had in the old organic bod. In fact, she suspected she could taste it *better*, as she didn’t remember ever detecting quite this many different hints of flavor before. Or maybe it was just a really good beer.

As she sipped, she looked around, using the mirror behind the bar to observe how the others in the room were behaving and see if any were paying any undue attention to her. (*Him*, she reminded herself.) So far, no one seemed to be. Most couples were paying attention to each other, and most singles seemed to be concentrating on their beers. Socah was almost disappointed. Realizing that, she frowned into her beer. After all, she wasn’t some kind of hormonal teenager, going out in search of a fight. If she could get through the night *without* someone picking on her, why, that was what she wanted, wasn’t it?

“You look like you’ve got something on your mind.” A woman with a pleasant tenor voice sat down to her right. “Doppelbock, please, Joan.” The bartender nodded and set a bulb-shaped snifter in front of her.

Socah shrugged. “Just thinking about things.” She glanced over at the woman, reminding herself again she was “supposed” to be a young man. The woman was dressed fairly conservatively, in a simple black skirt and cream-colored top. From what little she knew of Sturmhaven politics, she was inclined to suppose that might mean the

woman was a Gaian. But on the other hand, surely not every member of the Valkyries clanked around in operatic armor and wrap-around goggles all the time, nor did every Athena wear Minoan robes everywhere. So perhaps that might be a risky guess to make.

Her hair was dark green and reached the small of her back, and her face had that ageless quality you saw on a world that had cheap nanotech bodysculpt clinics on every street corner. It was really hard to tell someone's age around here if they weren't giving off obvious cues. Of course, Socah could probably have made a fairly good guess using the Jane's sensor package, even if she limited herself to just passive scan mode—but it felt too much like an invasion of privacy to do that except in dire need.

"Things. Now there's a topic with potential. One-third of all potentially available nouns, leaving out people and places."

Socah snorted. "Next you're going to be asking me if I come here often."

"Well, no. I *do* come here often, and hadn't seen you around before. And your accent definitely pegs you as foreign. Probably extra-planetary, in fact. If I had to guess...North America, Earth?"

Probably should have picked another accent when I changed my voice. Guess I'm out of practice. "Pretty good guess, miss."

She smiled. "Oh, not as good as you'd think. I'm interested in North America, so I've developed kind of an ear for the major accents."

Socah nodded. "And I'm rapidly developing an interest in Zharus. Not looking to get picked up, though. Just in here for a drink."

"Very well. I'm not looking for romance either, as it happens. But good conversation makes a good drink taste better."

"Fair enough." Socah sipped her own beer. *She didn't press the issue, and hasn't tried to "neg" me either...so I guess she's on the level.* Once again, Socah reminded herself that it was a damn fool thing to go out *hoping* to run into trouble. "So, why North America? A lot of people I knew back there couldn't wait to leave the place."

"Oh, I don't want to go *live* there. Spending a few months touring sites of interest was enough for me—though I might not mind going back for another look around sometime. Even if their attitude toward women *is* fairly provincial. But I'm kind of a history buff."

"That's about all the old place has left—history. The future's being made out here."

"Don't I know it. There's more future being made *here* practically by the hour." She nodded at the vid screen over the bar, where a newscast was showing a story about the recent arrest of Joe Steader, complete with one of the most unflattering photos of him Socah had ever seen.

Socah smirked. *Must remember to show that to him tomorrow.* "The latest manufactured story. I guess the news media never changes no matter what planet you're on."

"It's not *entirely* manufactured. The man *did* finance a large portion of his polity's war effort, and doubtless indirectly cost many Sturmhaven lives." She shrugged. "But then, his counterparts on this side of the fence did the same for us, and I understand one of his own family ended up playing both sides. I personally think arresting him was a mistake, but I stay out of politics these days. It's been years since I agreed with my party's leadership."

Socah raised an eyebrow. "You're remarkably...civil, for a Valkyrie. I'd have taken

you for a Gaian. But then, I'm not from around these parts."

The woman snorted. "Don't believe everything you read. We're not all sword-swinging Brunhildes who believe the right place for all men is kissing our feet. There's more of a spectrum than outsiders appreciate, but the squeakiest armor gets the grease—especially when our party's leaders are mostly squeaky themselves. I'm more toward the left end of the spectrum, and probably *would* be a Gaian if it weren't that I'm not fond of how *their* party leadership has been behaving either. Besides, we Valkyries have a proud history—even if parts of it have gotten a little tarnished."

"Even so, I'm a little surprised you're willing to talk to me at all."

She shrugged. "As the old saying goes, I prefer to live and let live. Life is easier that way. I might personally believe your gender is inferior to mine—no offense—but if I had started out by rubbing it in your face, we would not be having this interesting conversation."

Socah chuckled. "Well, at least you're honest."

"Travel broadens the mind. Can you imagine a Brunhilde trying to get along on an Earth tour? She'd stab some poor man for looking at her funny before the day was out. I understand the Sturmhaven contingent of the Zharus Embassy on Earth does a brisk business in diplomatic outreach to local law enforcement. Mostly Athenas there, I gather."

"That sounds about right."

"How long have you been in Sturmhaven? Seen many of the local sights yet?"

"Just got in today. Haven't had much chance to look around—this was the first stop I hit after the hotel."

"Ah. Well, one local attraction you should be sure not to miss is the Terran IDE history museum. We have one of the best on Zharus."

Socah blinked. "Really?" *Did she see through my disguise somehow?* She decided to play it cool until she knew for sure.

"I know, it's not the sort of thing you'd associate with Sturmhaven, but given the polity's strong martial interest, it's only natural some of us would turn to big iron as a hobby. Including me—I'm a co-curator. Iria Parzival, by the way."

"Uh..." Socah hadn't thought as far as when she would be asked to give a name. And she didn't like to lie—any more than she was already, at least. "You can call me Scott. For now."

Iria grinned. "Ah, a man of mystery. Very well, 'Scott.'"

Socah chuckled. "As it happens, I do have some interest in big iron myself, but I hadn't known Sturmhaven had a museum for it."

"It's not so much an 'official' museum as it is a few private collectors getting together and deciding to pool their collection for public display. For all that IDEs were never terribly useful here, a number of them were imported in the early days and the ones that weren't lost in the desert tended to find good homes."

"How many of them are yours?"

"Just three, at the moment. An N-1 that, nearly as we can tell, came over on one of the original terraforming ships, an XF-3 Block 1 that was used by the colony police in early days, and—the real jewel of my collection—an XF-3 Block 5 that some Keplerian mercenaries had to sell off about three years back to finance repairs to their ship to get them home. Well, those are all the originals with made-on-Earth stampings I have, anyway. I've had three or four models fabbed to design spec, but I don't really count

those. They're just my play-toys for clomping around in so I don't put wear and tear on the display pieces."

Socah raised an eyebrow. "You can afford upkeep on a fleet of mechs and you're down here drinking with ordinary people instead of sipping fifty-year-old Scotch in a penthouse?"

Iria smiled ruefully. "It's *because* I keep up a fleet of mechs that I *am* down here drinking with ordinary people. It's where all my money goes."

"I can sympathize. If I had that kind of money, I'd probably pour it into something like that myself. In fact, I've harbored the idea of shopping around if I decide to sell my—" *Careful there, Socah.* "—my investments I've been holding onto for a while."

Iria nodded. "Thank you for not making the usual joke, by the way."

"The usual joke?"

"Oh, you know. 'IDE of the Valkyries.' If I had a nickel for everyone who thought they were being witty, the upkeep wouldn't be quite so personally costly."

"Seems to me like applying that pun to all the RIDEs around here would be the more appropriate joke."

"They get a lot of that, too." Iria drank her beer.

"So what's your interest in big iron?" Socah asked. "I can't imagine you ever drove one professionally."

"No, but I would have liked to." Iria smiled. "More than once I've almost been tempted to join a mercenary company myself—I think I'd be pretty good. But I recognize that for what it is—a foolish daydream. I'd more than likely end up dead—and besides, I'd probably have to contend with taking orders from *men*. No offense. So instead I collect them, and stomp around in replicas and daydream."

Socah chuckled. "At least you're realistic. I actually did serve in a North American Army mech division—the 56th—shifting around the big iron. It wasn't always fun, but now and then I do miss it."

Iria's eyes widened. "Really? So you would have used, what, the Block 6? The new F-7s?"

"The Block 6, yes. Some of the older blocks, too, as trainers." Actually, she'd mustered out before the 6 came into widespread use, let alone the entirely new F-7, but her disguise didn't look old enough for that. "I'd be right at home in your Block 5, for sure."

"Oh, really? Tell me...didn't the fives have that faulty tokamak ignition circuit that needed manual firing half the time?"

Testing me, is she? "No, that was the four. Fives used the new polywell, which didn't have that problem. So did the six, but by then the limitations of the overall design were becoming apparent, and they finally got around to opening bidding to design a new IDE type, which became the F-7. Dropping the 'X' since by then they'd decided the design class wasn't experimental anymore."

She drained the last of her beer. "Of course, by then most of the fighting was over—Earth had pretty much tamed all the uppity colonies and resettled all the wildcats—so they never did build or deploy a whole lot of them. But as far as I know, they keep tinkering with the design, just in case they should decide to look in *this* direction. Let that happen, and their industrial fabbers kick into gear, then boom—instant army." She shook her head. "Which is why I got out when I did. No desire at all to go off and die on

account of some REMF's wish to add another star to a flag." *Of course, I got out about twenty years earlier than you probably think, but the reason was the same.*

Iria's eyes widened further. "You really *do* know your stuff."

"Yeah. Like I said, it wasn't always fun. But there's just something about stomping around in big metal seven league boots you kinda miss."

"Wow..." Iria breathed. "I *really* don't want this to come off like I'm trying to pick you up—I don't swing that way, anyway—but I'd really like to take you over to the museum and show you around. It's closed right now, but as a curator, I have a key."

Socah blinked, as her desire to prowl around and see what Sturmhaven was like after dark warred with her ever-present itch to fiddle with big iron. "I...do believe I'd like that."

"Excellent!" Iria waved to the bartender. "Joan, check please—and I'm paying for his drink." She nodded to Socah.

"Oh, there's no need for that," Socah said.

"Personal policy. Any time I meet up with a *real* mech pilot, I buy them a drink, as a gesture of respect."

Socah shrugged. *What have I gotten myself into? How long can I keep up this fiction?* "Well, I guess I can't say no to that."

"Excellent, Scott. Now, follow me—it's just a couple of blocks down the street, which is why this is where I most often drink."

"All right." Mindful of what the taxi driver had said, Socah pulled up her Jane's seldom-used options panel and adjusted a few sliders to try to make her walk more gender-neutral before she got up and followed.

The streets were well-lit in this part of town, and a couple of blocks of walking brought them to a large glass-fronted building that bore some resemblance to Joe's mecha garage in Nextus. A number of familiar shapes, lit by security lighting, were visible within.

"You have a few TX-series in there," Socah said. "Fussy things, those."

"So I've heard. The gal who owns those has some contact with the Munns—Aloha's founders. They used them for years after they arrived."

Socah nodded. "I've—" *met them* "—read about them. They were mech drivers back on Earth, too, in the old days."

Iria pulled out a key card and unlocked the door. "Well, come on in and you can see our collection." She held the door for Socah to enter, then followed her in. She did something to a panel on the wall, and a moment later bright spotlights overhead come on over each of the mechs.

Socah whistled. "Now this brings back some memories." She walked from one giant robot to the next, glancing at the display plaques and examining them from all angles. "Now that isn't this unit's original arm, is it?"

"No—this one's really kind of a chimera, made from putting together parts from several mostly unsalvageable units. The arm is the most visible cosmetic blemish. Lotta's considered fabbing one to original spec to replace it, but the arm is an original Earth part. Just not an original part of *this* specific IDE."

Socah nodded. "You saw that sort of thing a lot in field-expedient repairs, so keeping it like this actually *is* authentic, in a way."

"Lotta will be glad to hear that."

They walked on, discussing the various IDEs on display, including Iria's own. She was especially interested to see the Block 5 from the Kepler pirates. "I wonder...can I see the serial number on the chassis? I'm curious whether it came from the 56th."

"I've never been able to learn much about its background—the Earth embassy's not really interested in helping mech enthusiasts with their hobby. Anything you could tell me would be welcome." Iria wheeled over a ladder and leaned it up against the back of the IDE. "You know where to find it?"

"Of course." Socah climbed up the ladder and took a good look. "Huh. I do believe this *was* originally from the 56th. If I remember the serial number prefixes right, this one would have been surplused out back in '65—that's 115 A.L.—for the new Block 6 to come in." *Just a few years before I was "surplused out" myself.* She chuckled inwardly. *Funny. I could have been on maneuvers with this very IDE more than once. Even though I think this one was used in Kincaid's company, not mine.* "Uh...before my time, of course."

"And Earth just...sold it to Kepler pirates-I-mean-mercenaries?"

Socah snorted. "I doubt it. They probably sold it to some scrap dealer in whose mouth butter wouldn't melt, who virtuously provided them with all the forged paperwork they needed to show it was melted down for recycling. Then *they* turned around and sold it in the colonies for three times what they paid for it. It could have gone through half a dozen owners before the Keplers got their paws on it."

"Well. Anyway, that's more than I knew about it before. Thanks for that. Do you think it ever saw combat? Under its original owners, I mean."

"It might have. There were still wildcat mop-up actions going on back then."

"Mmm. Possibly a real piece of history, then."

"Very possibly." Socah nodded. "So, what else have you got?"

There were relatively few original IDEs newer than the 100s, because the sheer machine toxicity of qubitite had made paying the cost to ship them all the way out here a foregone conclusion—and Ad-IDEs and RIDEs had come along to make them unnecessary anyway. However, the fabbed replica section did have a number of newer models, both from Earth and some of the colonies. The Eridanite law enforcement designs in particular were rather interesting.

"They're very...shiny," Socah said.

"Shiny and chrome, yes," Iria said. "Can I ask a personal question, Scott?"

"Of course."

"Are you a brainboxer? I know the higher brass wanted officers to switch. Looks like you've gotten some Zharusian mods if you have, though. Is that a Joe Eight you're wearing under the hardlight?"

"You could tell?" *Oh, of course. With a collection this valuable, the museum door would have had sensors in it, and as a curator she'd have access to their readings. Socah, my lass, you're getting feeble in your dotage.*

"The odd thing is, they stopped using Eights about the same time they surplused my Five."

Socah sighed. "I'm afraid I haven't been completely honest with you, Iria. I disguised myself because I wanted to see for myself how Sturmhaven treated its second-class citizens, then there wasn't any good opportunity to drop it once you struck up a conversation. The truth is, it's not *actually* a Joe." She dropped the disguise, once more resuming her Earth military uniform and mohawk. "It's a *Jane* Eight. Colonel Socah

Gates, 56th Heavy Mech Infantry, North American Army, retired.”

Iria stared for a long moment. “Well. That does explain how you know so much about the older models.”

“Afraid so. I’m a bit of an older model myself.”

“You do understand, there’s something of a question of honor involved.”

Socah sighed. “I was afraid you’d say something like that. If you’re going to challenge me to a duel—” Her hand moved close to her pistol compartment.

Iria smiled. “Oh, don’t worry. Not even most Valkyries do *that* kind of duel anymore. I *am* going to challenge you...but I think you won’t mind so much.” She did something to a panel in the wall, and the lights except those over four of the reproduction IDEs dimmed. “These are the ones I personally own. Pick one of those...” Then the wall at the far end of the room slowly slid open, revealing a giant elevator. “... and meet me downstairs.”

Socah blinked. “Are you serious?”

“Perfectly.” She smirked. “We can’t use real weapons this close to city center, and we really don’t want to do more damage than necessary to our museum pieces—but simulated weapons and physical contact will be good enough.” She rubbed her hands together. “There are so few *real* mech pilots of any real skill around, how can I pass up the opportunity to duel a decorated veteran?”

Socah grinned. “That’s the *real* reason you asked ‘Scott’ down here, isn’t it? You’ve got an arena downstairs where you do IDE laser tag.”

Iria matched her grin. “Of course! How could I let any *real* mech pilot escape? I was going to have to manufacture some offense for a pretext, but happily you took that out of my hands—and this should be even more fun than I expected.”

“So you know, I won’t be held accountable for any physical damage to either your or my mechs.”

Iria waved a hand. “That’s understood. Mechs can be repaired. But people can’t.”

“Actually, *I* can, mostly, but point taken.” She considered the IDE replicas. “And what will you be in?”

“What else? My Block 5. I bring it out on special occasions.”

There were possibilities, especially since Socah’s clever granddaughter and her equally-clever business partner had reactivated the hardpoints on her Jane 8. It was the entire point of being in a Full Body Replacement brainbox—direct connection to the mech’s systems to make it an extension of her own body, rather than using clumsy controls or cyber linkages of limited effectiveness (though they generally still had those as backup). This would be her first real opportunity to try out the new firmware.

But would that make it a fair fight?

Among the replica mechs was an N-1, which the 56th had faced in Cornwall. It was about two-thirds the size of the Block 5, which made it a smaller target. It was an ungainly beast with a humanoid torso stuck on four spidery legs, a cramped cockpit, and armed with simulated missiles mounted on the shoulders and a pair of autocannons on the arms. The Block 5s were superior in every way, but in the hands of a skilled pilot... *Which that crazy Baron way back when certainly didn’t have. Well, why not make this a challenge?* “Well, time to saddle up.”

Iria raised an eyebrow as Socah headed for the N-1. “Seriously? You’re choosing *that*?”

“In addition to all my experience, I also have my Jane—with connect hardpoints

fully active. I might beat you too easily in something else.”

“In addition to all your other virtues, you’re *modest*, too, I see.”

Socah smirked. “If you beat me in this, I’ll pick something better to go for two out of three. You could say I feel a little nostalgia for this model. I’ll tell you *why* after.”

“Oooh! A duel *and* old war stories! I really lucked out tonight.”

Socah laughed. “See if you still feel so lucky *after* the duel.”

The elevator doors opened onto a fairly large empty space. The ceiling was about thirty meters high—ample for some minimal jump jet use if you were careful. The arena itself was about a hundred meters across. Fairly small as battlefields went, but still room to maneuver for a couple of mechs. At the opposite end, Socah saw the Block 5 emerging into the same space. *Well, there’s a role reversal.*

The controls for the N-1 were working exactly as well as they’d ever had under the old regime, before the Jane’s firmware had been wiped on her retirement. The system readouts were right there in her field of view, and she could sense every limb and system of the mech just the same as in the “good old days.” It was still every bit as weird as it ever had been, feeling like she had four legs, but the sense memories were coming back to her.

The N-1 had never been one of her favorites, due to the four-legged issue and a few other idiosyncrasies, but she’d logged hundreds of hours in the trainers and the simulators all the same, because it was a credo of mech pilots from that era to remember where they came from—and given how many of those units were still in use by other armies, it was helpful to know from the inside what they were capable of in case you ever came up against them yourself. Like that time in Cornwall—not that *those* had been any particular challenge. In any event, she was glad for all that practice time now.

Iria’s voice came over the comm circuit. “I’m calling up a terrain map now. Randomly generated, so I won’t get any advantages from familiarity.”

“Thoughtful of you,” Socah sent back. “Really, you should take any advantage you can get. This ain’t a Jackie Chan movie, where the handsome young hero can kick the ass of the older, more-experienced guy just ‘cuz he’s got script immunity.”

“Either you’re *really* that good, in which case it will be an honor to be trounced by you, or I shall enjoy making you eat those words. Either way, I’m going to enjoy this. It will be a *learning experience*. For one of us, at least.” She paused. “And just how ‘young’ do you think I am? But thanks for the compliment anyway.”

Between them, the air blurred, and then hardlight terrain features solidified into view. A burned out urban landscape, littered with rubble-strewn streets and halfway-demolished buildings. There was no longer a clear line of sight to the opposite side, where the Block 5 had been. And the N-1’s sensors were treating the hardlight terrain as if it was real, blocking off a reading of the enemy amid all the ground clutter.

Socah grinned, feeling the old adrenaline surge. Granted, she hadn’t actually had real adrenaline *to* surge since the Jane replacement, but she still felt that same heightened sense of awareness and the feeling that time was slowing down. She wasn’t sure what collection of bio-mimicking subsystems was responsible for that, and she’d never really inquired because she enjoyed the feeling too much. It was a feeling she hadn’t had in far, *far* too long.

But she didn’t allow herself to get lost in it. She ran a quick mental replay to see whether Iria had been holding her beer in her left or right hand as she drank it. Most

people tended to have a prejudice toward their handedness when picking a random direction, so if she wanted to get in behind her it would be a good idea to go the other way. *Right it is...so I should go right, too. Unless she knows about that and intentionally chose to go the other way to cross me up...but no, can't second guess myself. Either she went that way or she didn't, and if she didn't I'll deal with it when it comes up.* Socah began scuttling to the right, picking her way amid the rubble with the sure-footedness of four legs, keeping an eye out to the left for any signs of movement between buildings and rubble.

She'd worked her way about 90 degrees around the space with no sign of her enemy yet. *Let's poke at something and see what comes back.* Setting target coordinates approximately but not quite directly across from herself, she fired off a couple of rockets. She had plenty to spare, and it might just provoke a response.

The volley found empty air. *Wait a second...the Fives had a silent running mode for urban combat...*

Socah ducked just as Iria made a swing for her head with a battleaxe. The 5s were slower while in silent running mode, which gave her time to rotate the N-1's torso around and fire the autocannons. Iria only *just* managed to get behind a building, but still took some glancing shots off the 5's shoulder armor. "I think that counts as first blood," Socah said.

"I think it does," Iria replied. "Well played. But this isn't over yet. I almost had you, Colonel."

We'll see if you can catch me. The N-1 had a partial transformation. Wheels extended from its feet, legs locking into place, and the torso sunk down into the chassis. Iria had chosen an urban environment, and despite the rubble around, there was more than enough good surface for the wheels to roll on.

What the N-1 *didn't* have was any kind of silent running. *So she'll know exactly where I am. Very well, let's use that.* She glanced up at the buildings as she rolled, carat-marking certain spots as she passed while keeping half an eye on the rear cameras. *She knows better than to follow me directly, which means she's one block over, cutting around. The other side street's blocked off by rubble, so it has to be that one. And at the five's best silent-running speed, she ought to be right about...*

Two quick bursts from her auto cannon took out the only remaining structural framework of a three-story building, and it canted over and collapsed. Socah jinked over into the other street just in time to see the Block 5 stagger under the impact of several large chunks of rubble. Never one to waste an opportunity, Socah launched several rockets and let her have it with both auto cannons before continuing past the intersection and putting more rubble between herself and her enemy.

"Ow!" Iria yelped. "How did you...grrrr!"

Socah grinned. "This really is just like riding a bicycle. Funny how quickly it all comes back." Socah kept one eye on the sky and the other on the ground as she slid into a firing position. *She can't pick her way back through that building collapse, so she either has to come on straight ahead or use the jump jets. Either way, I've got her.*

Instead, she heard another building collapse. Not one near her, but on the other side of the street. *Making her own intersection. Clever.* Socah lobbed a couple of missiles over there to bracket the positions on the next street over that she could have taken, and kept moving further away. The rubble in this section was relatively flat, so silent running or not, she'd see Iria approaching unless she went all the way around the

outside of the area. *Which she might just do...*

Socah kept her sensors peeled. The thing about the Five's silent running mode was that it overheated easily, which meant Iria couldn't do it continuously—especially if some of the damage she'd inflicted had knocked out a heat sink or two. So if she listened, she might just get a clue or two which way Iria was going. Just to keep her guessing, she fired a couple more missiles to drop in the general area of where Iria would be if she were trying to work her way around.

There was a sudden bloom of heat from her nine o'clock. *And there go the heatsinks.* Socah turned to face the threat and unloaded her remaining ordinance. The Five fell to one knee and collapsed from simulated damage.

"I give! I give! That was amazing!" Iria exclaimed. The hardlight ruins started to dissolve around them and the Five got back to its feet. "I barely got a single hit on you."

"And then you only scratched the paint," Socah said. "Still, you did very well with the silent running mode. You just used it too long."

"The others won't let me use it at all when we play matches like this anymore. And you did all of that in a century-old *N-1*."

"The benefit of being an old fogey. When you've been at it as long as I was..." She shook her head. "Sometimes I think the only reason the North American Army was willing to let me go at all was that there just wasn't anyone worth fighting anymore."

Iria whistled. "I'd ask for best two out of three, but I don't believe my ego could take being beaten so badly twice in a row."

Socah grinned. "You're too kind."

"Please, come back upstairs and we'll meet the others. I let them know what was going on before we started the match, and they've been watching remotely. I believe they're all on their way over to congratulate you in person now."

"*That's* going to be terrible for *my* ego. I fear there's a risk I might become insufferable for a few days."

"I'm afraid they may beg you for lessons. I know I certainly want to." The Five fell to one knee again. "Teach me, *sensei!*"

Socah laughed. "Well, you never know. I just might, at that. After I get bored with touring Zharus, I'll have to find something to do with myself. Let's go park these and meet your friends."

By the time they were finished parking the mechs, running post-combat diagnostics, and doing an orderly shutdown, a group of about a dozen women had gathered in the museum lobby. They'd brought out a table and chairs, and even bottles of prosecco and a cake decorated with a fair depiction of an *N-1* in frosting.

Socah raised an eyebrow. "Well, now. This is something."

There were women from all three of the major political factions—Valkyries, Gaians, and Athenas. Some of them were dressed formally or semi-formally, with ceremonial armor or the breast-baring Minoan robes, while others were in street clothes that would be equally at home in Nextus or Uplift. "Congratulations!" one of the Minoan-garbed Athenas said. "That was amazing. Iria's one of our best pilots, and you took her out just like that."

"Ladies, I have over forty years of experience in one type of mech or another. Given the same amount of practice, any of you could have done the same. Well, the same amount of practice and a full-body prosthetic—that counts for something, too."

Iria made introductions all around. “Nobody’s more delighted than I am to have seen a true ace pilot in action. Please warn us if we start to get too annoying, as I fear we might be inclined to fangirl all over you.”

Socah chuckled. “So noted. But it *is* nice to be appreciated—especially as old and rusty as I am. If I hadn’t been so long out of the cockpit, I’d have remembered first thing about that silent running mode.”

“If that’s you *old and rusty*, you must have been fearsome in your prime,” a Gaian put in.

“Well, I don’t like to brag,” Socah said, taking a sip from a flute of prosecco. “But...yes. Yes, I was.” She grinned. “By the way, I’m a little surprised to see so many people from all different factions together like this. How on Earth—or Zharus, rather—do you all manage to get along?”

“Oh, we have a rule that we leave politics outside,” Mindy, the Athena who’d spoken earlier, said. “If we should *want* to argue politics, we’ll go to the Loving Cup or some other pub and have flaming rows. And we often do. But that’s for out there. In here, it’s all about the giant robots.”

“Not as often as all that, really,” Iria said. “Certainly not as often as in the early days. It gives me some hope for the future of the polity. If we could only get *everyone* interested in giant robots, we’d have enough in common that there wouldn’t be so much fighting anymore.”

One of the other Valkyries rolled her eyes. “Again with the ‘giant robots for peace.’”

“Well, it’s just an *idea*.” Everyone else around the table chuckled.

“We were...wondering,” Mindy said. “Is there any way we might ask you to give us lessons at some point? We could pay a fair rate for expert instruction. Next to you, we’re all just fumbling around in the cockpit.”

“Well, it is nice to meet some real enthusiasts. I’m sure once I make the full round of the supercontinent with Joe and Julius I can find some time.”

“Oh. Have you been to Cape Nord yet?”

“No, we started out from Uplift and headed clockwise. It’ll be a while yet before we work our way around to there.”

“Well, I have. And a little advice. Try not to laugh too hard. They’re only men, after all.”

Socah chuckled. “I’ll keep that in mind.” *I’m certainly getting plenty of practice at not laughing too hard here!*

After that, they cut the cake and shared out pieces, and a number of them had questions about Socah’s G.I. Jane prosthetic. A few of them had considered buying a body replacement unit themselves, given how many of them were on the market from other veteran immigrants, but hadn’t quite managed to convince themselves that replacing their entire body for the sake of their hobby was a quite sane thing to do.

“I’d hold off on that, if I were you.” Socah shook her head. “There are a lot of things you can do with a flesh body that you simply couldn’t in this metal and plastic thing, and I kind of miss them sometimes. About the only thing that’s kept me from swapping back now I’m here is inertia. I guess I’m not in that big of a hurry to make a major change to things either.”

After the cake was gone, and they’d collectively emptied a couple more bottles of

prosecco, Socah regaled them with some of her war stories—the time she'd fought N-1s in Cornwall while escorting Joe and Mikel Steader, and some of the other times she'd been in combat. The tales were from the early part of her career, before Earth had started shipping her out to roll up wildcat colonies and she'd gradually lost the taste for the military life. All the same, it was fun reliving some of them for a receptive audience.

By the time some of the mech collectors began drifting away, it was well after midnight. Socah got more than a few requests for another duel from the other collectors, but demurred. "Tomorrow, maybe. Or the next day. Joe and I are in town for at least a couple more days, and after this warm welcome we might even see about staying on a couple more. By the way, I might bring him and Julius by tomorrow, if you wouldn't have any qualms about letting a 'mere man' in your museum."

"Oh, no problem at all," Iria said. "I brought you here when I thought *you* were a man, after all. We're absolutely an equal-opportunity establishment. We'd even be open to a male co-curator, if we found someone with the interest and wealth to join—which has been pretty hard around here until recent developments."

"Joe's almost as interested in the big iron as I am." Socah chuckled. "Back in the day, I used to use the promise of cockpit time in one of our trainers to try to keep him and Mikel out of trouble. Occasionally it even worked. Of course, lately he's been interested in building designs from some of the TV shows he uncovered, but I'm pretty sure you could still find some common ground."

"We'd be pleased to meet him," another Valkyrie said. "We even wouldn't give him a hard time about the war days. Well...*much* of a hard time..."

"You'd have a better chance of taking *him* in a mech duel, at the very least." She chuckled. "It might be interesting if he brought along one of the custom toys from his warehouse. Oh, that reminds me. Did I mention that my granddaughter Rhianna is now the main mechanic for Clint Brubeck's old IDE Chauncey?"

Iria raised an eyebrow. "The one that could supposedly turn into a fighter plane or submarine?"

That led to another half hour of conversation and stories.

By the time the last of them left, it was halfway to sunrise. The last to leave was Iria, who offered to escort Socah back to the building where she was staying. "It's not that far to walk from here, especially for a 'Vooman uf Zturmhaven' and a G.I. Jane."

"Sounds good to me. I'd rather work my own servos than someone else's lifters anyway. But just a sec." She shifted from the uniform back to her usual flapper chic outfit. "The uniform's great for reminiscing, but this is how I usually dress these days."

"Oooh! You're so *cute!*" Iria squealed, before blushing and clearing her throat. "Er...I mean, that's a very nice look for you."

Socah chuckled. "Thank you. Just so you know, I *am* already spoken for right now."

"So I figured, the way you talk about Joe Steader. Still, there's no harm in looking!"

Now it was Socah's turn to blush. "Thanks for the compliment, but there's not a whole lot about this old metal body that's really worth looking at in *that* way."

"Oh, I don't know. I can appreciate a fine painting or pretty statue without wanting to cuddle up with it." She blushed again. "Pardon me. I may have had a little too much to drink tonight. Not *all* Women of Sturmhaven have a high alcohol

tolerance.”

“Oh, that’s quite all right. Apart from Joe, it’s been a long time since anyone thought I was worth getting excited over.”

That killed conversation for a few minutes, then Iria changed the subject. “So, have you made any plans for places to visit tomor—er, today? I can offer a few suggestions.”

“I’d be glad to hear them. We didn’t exactly plan this stop, so we didn’t look into an itinerary. Is there a lot to see from a cultural standpoint?”

“Absolutely! There are three museums just within two blocks, not even counting our own. Listen...”

They talked companionably as they walked the rest of the way to the skyscraper with Lilibet’s penthouse on top. As they approached, Socah said, “By the way, you should come and speak to Lilibet Walton sometime. She’s something like you—a ‘VINO’ or ‘Valkyrie in Name Only,’ she calls it, having won the wealth and trappings in her duel. Though her sympathies are more to the Athena than the Gaian side, you might have some things in common. If nothing else, you’re both gearheads.”

“I just might do that.” Iria smiled ruefully. “It’s not as if anything I do at this point can burn any *more* bridges with the Brunhilde leadership of the party.”

“Perhaps it’s time for new party leadership. If the Valkyries lose the upcoming election as badly as it appears they will from the polls, there might be room for a reform movement. Lilibet might have some ideas there.”

“Well, it’s a thought. Though I don’t know if I want to go into politics. It’d leave less time for messing around with giant robots.” Iria grinned. “Well, here we are, then. Have a pleasant rest of the evening.” She yawned. “It’s time for my beauty rest.”

Socah smiled. “Thank you for a lovely evening. We’ll come by the museum this afternoon.”

Iria nodded. “We’ll see you then...*sensei*.”

Socah laughed. “We’ll see about the ‘*sensei*’ part, but I’ll definitely see you at the museum.” She nodded farewell and proceeded back up the elevator.

The silent eagle owl giving Joe a Death Glare on the branch above had hardly moved since arriving in Nature Range. After a few attempts to make conversation had been met with icy silence Joe had given up and decided to take up as much room as he could—as was appropriate for a large jaguar like himself. He stretched languidly, eyes on the hovering scoreboard that currently displayed a tie between Julius and Naomi.

Joe yawned and tried to doze. His own body was technically asleep. *So, if I catnap while I’m sleeping...ugh. No thinky too hard about this one.*

The score was, so far, tied at twenty. The game was prey-hunting rather than trying to take down one another. There was a time limit on each hunt, with the environment appropriate for owl or jaguar. But no matter how many rounds the two RIDEs went, they ended up tied.

“They’re really going at it,” Joe said offhandedly. “You must be proud—not just anyone could keep up with Jules like that.” *If friendly conversation doesn’t work, maybe a little needling will.*

It was enough to get a rise out of Olivia. “Your Julius is...formidable in battle. *Unlike yourself.*”

“According to the people who built him, one of the purposes of RIDEs was to

complement their partners. He's the fighter—I'm the lover." *Though you should see me at the controls of a hovertank. There's another big owl out there who'd disagree with you...* Joe considered bringing up the matter of the medal they'd earned for *fighting* during the war, but decided against it. There was no point in needlessly antagonizing her.

Olivia hooted derisively. "I doubt *that* very much."

Joe's tail swished placidly. "You'll never know."

The scoreboard ticked over to 21 for Julius. Then, a second later, Naomi's counter ticked over to the same score. Joe chuckled. "I get the feeling they could keep this up all night."

"Okay, this is fuckin' pointless!" Julius growled from his part of the arena. "I'm calling a goddamn tie."

"I reluctantly agree," Naomi said. She glided down from altitude and settled on the branch next to Olivia. "But I must *again* remind you, *language*."

"Hey, it's not *my* fault I have fuckin' RI tourettes."

"I wouldn't have him any other way," Joe added, getting to his haunches.

"Anyway, you're good," Julius said. "As I'd expect from a Harpy."

Naomi dipped her head. "You are...better than *I* expected from a rich man's bodyguard."

"Hey, I gotta be in top form. There are crazy-ass *Firefly* fans out there, y'know."

"So, *they've* reached a detente," Joe said. "How about us? I don't have any hard feelings, for my part. You were just doing your job as a Sturmhaven soldier; I was just doing mine as a Nextus citizen. It's in the past. Why dig it up again?"

"It was our first mission together," Naomi said. "While I spent the next few years in storage, she was in a Nextus POW camp."

"I was hardly a green recruit at the time," Olivia added. "We were all volunteers for the Harpies, all of us experienced airwomen of many battles. We were told just how extreme our bodies would have to change. I was more bird than woman. I volunteered, because that sacrifice was necessary, for the greater good of the Motherland."

"And we were taken out by the likes of Joe Steader's bodyguard," Naomi said. "We honestly expected to kill you that night. *How* could Nextus be so stupid as to mount weapons on civilian buildings?"

"You'd have to ask General Latimer," Joe said. "He was in charge of the Home Guard. Oh, wait. He's dead." He licked the back of his forepaw.

"Or maybe he's an Integrate somewhere. Wouldn't that be a fuckin' hoot?"

Joe stopped licking to stare at him. "Don't even *joke* about that."

"Oh, c'mon, don't tell me you never once thought it. Skimmer accidents were a favorite of the 'jacks, weren't they? I'm just sayin'..."

"Well, I think I just threw up in my mouth a little. Ugh."

"You're such a...child, even among Sturmhaven men," Olivia huffed. "More than twice my age, and you act in this manner. We'll see you at the court hearing. Naomi, we're going."

Naomi glared at Julius. "I don't hold grudges. But don't think for a moment that we're friends now."

"Yeah, that would be too fuckin' much to hope for. You ever hit Uplift, be sure an' stop in at the Brubeck museum. Maybe some people there you should talk to."

With a derisive snort in stereo, the two eagle owls faded out of Nature Range.

“That actually went better than I expected,” Joe said. He turned his head to look at himself. “And I think I’m getting the hang of this bod.”

“Looks good on you, Joe,” Julius said. “Man. Just another fuckin’ day in the life of a G.I., Joe. Tell you what, though. She’s gonna be like that, *next* time I won’t hold back and give her a draw.”

I’m sure Naomi’s saying the same sort of thing to Olivia just about now. “What time is it in the Real, anyway?”

“Pretty late. Socah just walked in the door. All smilin’ and happy. Looks like she had a fuckin’ good time somewhere.”

“A good time? Here? That’s unexpected. Shall we go inquire?”

“Yeah, why the fuck not. Wakey-wakey comin’ up in the Real...”

Socah opened the door and walked quietly into the room, using her Jane’s low-light vision so as not to disturb potential sleepers. But as she entered, she saw the bed was still unused. Then the jaguar Fuser standing statue-like in a corner stretched and opened his eyes. “Morning, O Mighty Huntress!” Julius said cheerfully. “Be just a minute for Laughing Boy to wake up here...you can go ahead and get the lights, I’ll filter my optics.”

Socah nodded, hitting the switch. “I’ve just had the most *wonderful* time tonight. I might have to change my mind about this place. Or parts of it, anyway.”

Joe yawned. “You sound happier than I’ve heard you in a while. What gives?”

“I went out for a drink, and I had the most wonderful random encounter...”

Socah sketched it out for them, and transferred video footage of the battle across. Before leaving the museum, she’d downloaded the imagery from all the spectator cameras, including the ones in the cockpits of both IDEs, so there was enough to give an excellent view of what had happened.

“You were in an N-1 and she was in a Block 5? The reverse of Cornwall? That *does* sound like fun. I’d heard something about an IDE museum here, but never was more than mildly curious about it, given how unlikely it was I’d ever end up here. But now that I am, I think I *would* like to see the place.”

“Funny thing—Iria seemed a pretty decent sort for all she’s nominally a Valk. But even the other Valks were all acting like reasonable people. Not a ‘Brunhilde’ in the bunch.”

Joe chuckled. “Maybe we should have them talk to Olivia. I’ve never seen an owl with such a stiff neck.”

Socah raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Sounds like you had an interesting evening, too.”

“Watched Jules and Naomi’s Nature Range competition. Olivia was there spectating as well.”

Socah listened as Joe described their conversation. She nodded. “A ‘Brunhilde’ of the old school, that one. I don’t expect she and Iria would have much in common.”

Joe chuckled. “Maybe we should invite her to the museum and then I could face *her* in single mech combat. I’m not *you*, but I’m no slouch either. If she really thinks I’m no fighter, she might be in for a shock.”

Socah snorted. “Assuming *she* even knows anything about giant robots.”

“Haven’t you seen any anime? *All* warrior women know about giant robots.” Joe grinned. “Anyway...we can talk more about that in a couple hours, I guess. You’ll be needing your own beauty rest, after all.”

“I could think of a few interesting things to do during naptime, if Julius doesn’t mind lending us his VR.”

“Do I get to watch?” Julius asked innocently. “Oh yeah, sure, go ahead. Do your constantly-in-heat human things. I’ll just be, I dunno, screening old episodes of National fuckin’ Geographic or something.”

Joe rolled his eyes. “Thanks for understanding.”

A couple of hours later found the three of them sitting around a breakfast table with Lilibet/Guinevere and Gloria/Annalinda. Joe and Julius were showing off Julius’s minima shell, which also had the advantage of not needing a RIDE-sized chair for eating. Guinevere kept casting glances of undisguised envy in his direction.

Lilibet chuckled. “What are you so envious of? You’re not all that much bigger yourself, you know. I certainly wouldn’t have room to wear one of those and you too.”

“I know, it’s just...someone has a shiny new toy, and I don’t.”

“Have I shown you my bike bod’s shell mode?” Julius asked. “They’re gonna be all the fuckin’ rage, soon.”

“You’ve got *shell mode*? I think I’m gonna turn green. Bad enough the big guy gets to have it and I don’t...and one of the doggies back in Uplift...”

Lilibet chuckled. “I *would* like to see that. It shouldn’t be too hard to retrofit that into Guin, Donizetti that she is. I need to talk to *Signor D.* about that next time we’re in Nextus.”

“It’s pretty fuckin’ not bad,” Julius said with a touch of smugness.

“So what are your plans for the day?” Lilibet asked. “I was thinking Gloria, Guin, and I could show you around some.”

Socah nodded. “That’s kind of you to offer, but we know you’re busy with local politics.”

“Oh, this is one of those rare cases where the personal and the political align. Not only would having us around help to head off any further incidents against you three, but it’ll also remind people of our strong opposition to Valkyrie policies.”

Joe shook his head. “The life of a political football. All right, we’ll help you make a touchdown or two. If nothing else, we’ll have something more to talk about next time we see your folks.”

“Ah, my folks.” Lilibet smiled ruefully. “I’m becoming such a stranger back there, what with Alpha Camp on the one hand and here on the other.”

“Have you been to visit the IDE museum?” Socah asked. “It’s not far from here.”

Lilibet cocked her head. “There’s an IDE museum near here? I haven’t lived in the neighborhood very long, and most of my work here’s been downtown.”

“We’ll have to show it to you. I met with the curators last night. I think you’d find them interesting.”

“I’ll look forward to it!” Lilibet grinned. “I’m not as crazy about those old monsters as some, but given that I work with someone that size myself, I do have an interest. Oh! That reminds me, I should be sure to take you by the training grounds where Bertha’s working up her new unit. We’ve restored two more original CSAs, and Fenris is in town helping with the training, too. The first new ones should be coming off the line next month.”

Joe nodded. “That *does* sound like fun. We’ll have to bring the car along so we can meet with them on an even footing.”

“One thing we’re happy about is Bertha’s decided not to segregate the new CSA division,” Guinevere put in. “Made the decision all by herself, too—no input from us or Fennie.”

“At the moment, it’s more from pragmatism than anything else,” Lilibet said. “They just don’t have enough CSAs yet for training them separately to be feasible. But Bertha’s not opposed to carrying the integration forward even when they have more units.” She chuckled. “Heh. We’re going to have to find a different word for that. It could be confusing.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting them myself, from what I’ve heard about Fenris,” Socah said. “It will be interesting to meet RIDEs who could go toe-to-toe with my old IDEs.”

Joe chuckled. “Maybe you should introduce them to that museum. Give those duelists a real challenge.”

“You know...what with Earth apt to invade one of these years, it might not be a bad idea, at that. Get them some practice going up against ‘the enemy.’”

“Like *Top Gun*,” Joe said. “You know, in the real life Top Gun program they’d use similar planes to the Soviet Union as ‘adversary’ aircraft for the pilots to practice against.”

Socah chuckled. “I’ll take your word for that.”

Soon enough breakfast was over, and servants came to collect the dishes. Lilibet shook her head as she watched them go. “I swear I’ll never get used to this.”

Joe raised an eyebrow. “Why? Didn’t your parents have a serving staff?”

“Well, yeah, but...those people worked for *Mom and Dad*. Having people working for *me*...that’s weird.”

“Not because it’s Sturmhaven and they’re all male?” Socah paused. “And attractive?”

“That’s not *my* fault!” Lilibet insisted. “Annalinda hired them; I inherited them. And I couldn’t just fire them because they’re *too handsome!* That wouldn’t be fair.”

Joe chuckled. “First world problems, Sturmhaven style.”

Socah glanced at Gloria. “And how often *do* you talk about her as if she isn’t here?”

Lilibet sighed. “Often enough. I suppose it’s a bad habit to be in, but if you’d met her the way I did...” She mimicked a Sturmhaven accent. “I’m going to stripe you like a tiger! I...haven’t really had the urge to interact much with her since then. But that makes it too easy to forget she’s around, I suppose. Especially since *she* doesn’t speak up much on her own.”

“When you get to be my age, you start to realize holding grudges can get in the way of things. If you really want to rehabilitate her, you can start by talking to her. Isn’t that right, Annalinda?”

“Don’t go doing me any favors,” Annalinda said. “I’m just fine with being forgotten about.”

“Which is all the more reason why I shouldn’t.” Lilibet shook her head. “Sorry, Annalinda. It’s not your fault how you were raised. I’ll try to do better.” The Valkyrie didn’t reply.

“Anyway, let’s get the fuck right out of here,” Julius proposed. “We’ll go get the car.”

A few minutes of driving brought them to the outskirts of Sturmhaven, and to a checkpoint staffed by Sturmhaven military police. “Uh...are we sure this is such a good idea, bringing *me* here? Accused war criminal, *et cetera*?”

Lilibet smiled. “Don’t worry about it. Bertha’s the commandant of this particular base—one of the conditions we negotiated for her return to head up their CSA program. I’ve already cleared it with her, and she’d actually like to meet you. Plus, she’ll take great pleasure in thumbing her nose at the Valks’ latest episode of rank stupidity.” She nodded to the Sturmhaven she-wolves in military-police armbands. “Well?”

The wolf Fusers exchanged dubious glances, then the leader shrugged. “Go ahead.”

They pulled into a vast open area, enclosed on all sides by forty-meter tall walls. “This is their training area,” Lilibet explained. “They practice all forms of close combat here—martial arts, melee combat, target practice...” They rounded a corner to come upon...an immense ping-pong table, around which stood four six-meter-tall twin-tailed white wolf Fusers. Two male wolves were on one side, and two females on the other. Three light RIDEs—two wolves and a jaguar—hovered nearby on lifters at a sufficient height to observe the play. “Oh, and R&R, too. Hey, you bunch!”

“Welcome, Lilibet and friends!” Bertha said, not taking her eyes off the table as she returned a serve back over the table at Fenris. He returned it in turn, then her partner, then his partner, and so on. “Pardon me just a moment...*there!* I believe that’s game point?”

“As you say,” Fenris rumbled. “Well played.” The table, paddles, and ball disappeared as they all turned to face the newcomers. Joe and Socah climbed out of the car, and Julius converted to his immense Walker form to peer at the wolves curiously.

“Fuckin’ ping-pong?” Julius wondered. “Really?”

“It’s a great hand-eye coordination exercise,” Paul put in from inside Fenris. “Both for the RIDE and their partner. Helps blow the dust off after so much time out of combat.”

Socah raised an eyebrow. “Using hardlight gear?”

“It’s the only way we could get the physics right at this size,” Paul explained. “Otherwise, you have to deal with the question of a lot more air resistance, varying elasticity, and so forth.”

“Not to mention, this way we do not *ignite* the ping-pong ball from friction when we return a serve,” Bertha’s pilot, Major Diana Fuerst, added. “That *did* happen, when we first tried it with a real set.”

“Right, so, introductions all around,” Lilibet said. “I hope I remember everyone. Colonel Bertha, chief of the wolf CSA program, and her Fuse partner, Lieutenant Colonel Diana Fuerst. Their tailgunner, Lieutenant Colonel Hedy and her partner, Captain Carlotta Kinski. And there are Fenris and Paul Anders, no rank since they’re here as civilian consultants. Me and Guin, you know.

“And here we have our new recoverees and their program partners. As new inductees into the program, they’re all lieutenants. The other big she-wolf is Natasha, her partner Vicki Rutledge—another one of the original pilots. Their tailgunner is Selena, the jaguar, and her partner is Natalia Sousa. Finally, the other big guy is Gunther, partner Lewis North—he actually crossrode to get the pilot slot, I hear—tailgunner Wulfgang, partner Sasha Francks.” Lilibet nodded, satisfied, then went on.

“And as for you guys, here we have ‘Crazy’ Joe Steader, his partner Julius, and

Colonel Socah Gates, retired.”

“Pleased to meet you all,” Fenris said. “That’s an interesting shell you have, Julius. A Donizetti, or I miss my guess.”

“I haven’t had much chance to really play with the Big Jag yet,” Julius said. He shifted it from Walker form to shell mode. “Not as tall as you all, but hey.”

“You’re a lot taller than *I* am!” Selena said. “I feel soooo inadequate right now...”

“You’re really all quite remarkable,” Joe said, shading his eyes to stare up at the wolves. “I read about you, but I didn’t imagine I’d ever get the chance to see any of you up close, the cold war being what it was—and then the line was decommissioned, which I was sad to hear. I’m glad you’re coming back.”

“Is goot to *be* back!” the one called Gunther said. “And to be included amongst mine female counterparts is indeed an honor!” Out of his field of vision, Fenris rolled his eyes a little. “At last we are whole!”

:*We’re working on that*,: Lilibet sent privately.

“Fewer exclamations if you please, Gunther,” Bertha said.

Fenris considered Julius thoughtfully. “How would you feel about a little wargame? We have been working on team coordination, but it’s hard to find worthy opponents in this size class. And an old soldier in a Donizetti shell would be about as worthy as they come.”

“I’m about as big as one of those ancient N-1s in shell mode,” Julius said. “Plus you’ve got that extra pair of partners on me. Huh. Still, I’d like to put this ‘zetti frame through some paces.”

“Hey, count me in, too,” Joe said. “After the mech combat Socah got to do last night at the museum, I want to get in a little field exercise myself. I’m just a little concerned, though, that four on one might not be a fair fight.”

“Meh. It’ll be okay,” Julius said. “We can fuckin’ go easy on ‘em.”

Natasha barked a laugh. “Oh, it will be fun making you eat those words!”

Julius smirked. “Or trying to, anyway.”

“Oh, goody,” Guinevere said. “Ready, Lil?”

Lilibet grinned. “Sounds like fun. Let’s ready up!”

“I’ll just find a good vantage point to observe,” Socah said.

“There’s an observation tower just over there with a good view,” Bertha suggested.

“Great! Then give us starting positions and let’s fuckin’ get it on!” Julius reached down and put out a hand for Joe to step on, then lifted him up to his shoulder and slid his head forward to expose his neck hatch. Joe climbed down into the pilot’s position and strapped himself in.

The wolf CSA RIDEs’ partners climbed aboard, and the RIDEs moved to operate ends of the arena as hardlight projection systems activated to create a simulated jungle environment. “Mmm, feels like home,” Julius said.

“Don’t get too cocky now,” Joe warned. “There’s still sixteen of them to the two of us. And if two heads are better than one, sixteen have to be a *lot* better than two.”

“Meh, four’s all we’ve got to worry about. And I’m not too fuckin’ bothered about those odds.”

“For the honor of Sturmhaven!” Bertha called out over the comm. “Begin!”

“By the power of Greyskull!” Julius sent back. “Comin’ ta get’ chas!”

As they moved forward, Joe checked the displays. “You know, our sensors should

be giving better returns than this. Even in a real jungle.”

“I think they’ve got some kinda stealth mode. Or else it’s something to do with the exercise. Wouldn’t be as much fun if you could tell where everyone was right off.”

“What kind of weapons do we have here?”

“Pretty standard Donizetti self defense loadout, but for the sim I’ve a pair of fuckin’ huge shoulder-mount beam cannons, too—nearly as good as the ones those CSAs have. Think we’ll four-paw it from here...” Julius dropped down to Walker mode. “Nice and sneaky-like.”

“Good plan. Present a lower profile for targeting.” Joe paused. “Are you humming ‘Run Through the Jungle’?”

The jaguar moved through the foliage, its patterning blending in with the sun-dappled undergrowth. “Now lessee...think Bertha was ‘round this way. As their leader, take her out first...”

“Natasha was a little further back, Fenris was in the opposite corner...” Joe said. “But...”

“Oh, no. Don’t fuckin’ say it. I can *feel* you fuckin’ wanna say it. Don’t you even...”

Joe put on a mock German accent, mimicking an astronaut from a long ago TV episode. “I vunder vhere Gunther vent?”

Julius sent an eyeroll emoticon across their link. “Arrrrrgh, you hadda go and say it.”

Joe chuckled. “You know me too well, buddy.”

“Yeah, to my fuckin’ chagrin.” He chuckled. “Lessee if we can work our way ‘round without getting spotted...”

“You know, I’m not really sure this is going to work out as well as hoped,” Joe said. “Donizetti or not, there’s still four of them, with four tailgunners.”

Julius sent a shrug emoticon. “Meh. You want the truth, thing is I’ve kinda caught the fucking diplomacy in my old age. I sorta figured from the outset they’re gonna win. But this way, *they* get to say they kicked butt on the dirty Nextus interloper, and *I* get to say yeah, but it took four of ya to do it. So it’s what they call a win-win.”

Joe chuckled. “Really.”

“Yeah. Also, I wanna see how many I can take down ‘fore they get me. I’m hoping for at least two.”

Joe shook his head. “You just keep surprising me.”

“Well, good! Means I’ve got fuckin’ *hidden depths* kinda thing.”

“I mean, I’d have thought you’d have held a grudge over the thirty-five years thing, if anything...”

“Maybe I did for a while...but it’s like you said. They were just doing their jobs, we were just doing ours. War sucks.” Julius sent an emoticon of a headshake. “Not too long after I woke back up, I did some thinking an’ figured out...this’s the kinda second fucking chance most people don’t get. What’s the good of wasting it by bein’ pissed off at people over shit that went down decades ago? I don’t got room for that crap in this new life. I’m gonna enjoy every second of it, and not stay stuck in the past.” He paused. “Well, ‘cept for maybe Fritz. He’s a special fuckin’ case, that one, an’ I’ll keep *that* grudge for a while. Now shush, we’re getting close...”

Joe grinned. *Me, shush? You’re the one doing most of the talking...* But under the circumstances, it seemed wiser to keep that to himself.

Julius poked his muzzle through the undergrowth. The information from his

sensor package came up on the displays in the cockpit. Heat traces showed a very large RIDE had been here just a moment ago—

Abruptly, Julius sprang, just as twin energy beams pierced the position where he had been just a moment before. Releasing clouds of minimissiles from his shoulders, he continued to lunge forward, circling around and bringing cannons to bear. Dodging more blasts, he centered his crosshairs on the huge wolf-shaped silhouette and fired. Sensors registered a direct hit, just as the minimissiles homed in and explosions blossomed all over it. Julius kept running.

“Problem with these guys is they’re fucking *big*, but not so much *fast*. They’re not really meant for solo combat—they’re s’posta be command and control for a lot of smaller types who do most of the actual fighting.” Julius dodged again as another cannon blast pitted the ground nearby. “I wish I had a fucking grappling hook launcher, I’d do the whole Luke Skywalker AT-AT *Captain America: Civil War* thing. Oh well, that only works in the movies anyway.”

More silhouettes lit up on Julius’s sensors. “I’ve got positions on ‘em now... throwing up ECM, engaging random-walk dodging pattern—” Another pair of white-hot energy beams passed over his shoulder. “Whew, fuckin’ close! Some singed fur, there...” He centered one of the silhouettes in his crosshairs, and Joe felt the mech shift around him as Julius went from Walker to Fuser form on the fly, using the momentum from the charge to carry him forward into the next giant wolf. His shoulder slammed into it right at the waist, then he slashed with the monomolecular sword blade in his right hand as he moved past.

“*That’s* where Gunther vent!” Joe quipped.

“I don’t have the attention to spare to fuckin’ smack you right now, so just *consider* yourself fuckin’ smacked.” Julius dropped back to Walker form and kept charging.

And suddenly, the simulation stopped. The jungle vanished and all the hardlight weapons blinked out leaving four wolves and a jaguar standing in an empty field. “What is this?” Bertha demanded.

“I almost had him!” Gunther exclaimed.

Julius snorted. “In your dreams!”

A huge eagle owl circled above the training ground. “By my authority as a Valkyrie MP, this exercise is over!” Olivia broadcast.

“Dafuq?” Julius said, looking up. “She’s *really* off her nut, Joe. Even *I’m* pissed off now.”

Lilibet sniffed. “She’d better enjoy that authority while she still has it, is all I can say.”

“You are overreaching your authority!” Bertha growled. “*I* am in command of this base and everything that happens on it.”

“So you can display our newest secret weapon to our enemies?”

“Oh, gimme a fuckin’ *break*,” Julius sneered. “The specs of the WLF-CSA line have been common knowledge for years, and the way the new link-up system performs in battle is a matter of public record thanks to the fuckin’ Alpha Camp dust-up. This ain’t no thing, ‘cept for you wanting to fucking *make* it one. Lady, what *is* your problem?”

The avian RIDE landed and changed to Fuser mode. Unlike their first encounter on the roof of Joe’s penthouse, Naomi had a full suite of hardlight feathers. She looked

very impressive, even menacing, materializing full Valkyrie regalia, pointing her spear straight at Julius. “*He* should be taken to a prison cell, and the rest of *you* should be court martialed and scrapped!”

Julius stared at her, then burst into laughter. “Wow, lady, you sure you’re a bird? ‘Cause you’re like a dog who won’t let go of the ball.”

“I have contacted Col. Baines at CSA Division Command,” Bertha said. “She’ll push this up as high up the chain as possible. Absolutely intolerable!”

“I see kindergarten let out early again.” Socah Gates strolled up, in her own full military regalia. “Really, are you planning to follow us around all day out of concern we might possibly get to enjoy ourselves in your polity? This is really infantile behavior—not at all what the vaunted reputation of the Sturmhaven military would lead me to expect.”

“Conduct unbecoming an elected official, to start,” Lilibet said from Fenris’s turret. “You’re starting to rack up *real* ethical charges here. You’re just stacking the deck against yourself *and* the Valks with each stunt like this you pull.”

“I *will* have satisfaction, one way or another!” Olivia said.

“Satisfaction, huh?” Joe said. “Well, if you’re challenging me to a duel, *I* get to choose the weapons. Just you versus me—no Julius or Naomi involved.”

The Valkyrie snorted. “You? Duel *me*? Seriously?”

“It should be good for a laugh, if nothing else,” Naomi put in.

“Meet us at the IDE museum downtown at...oh, let’s say 1900 hours,” Joe said. “I’ll have to talk to the owners to make sure it’s okay with them, but if it is...we can have our duel there, in their laser tag arena. If I win, you leave us the hell alone.”

Olivia smirked. “Oh, really? Well, then, *when* I win, *you* will submit to Sturmhaven justice!”

Joe nodded. “It’s a deal. Now get the hell out of here.”

“And don’t let the fuckin’ screen door hit you where you sit on the way out!”

“Very well. We shall see you soon.” The owl returned to Walker form and took off once more.

Socah watched her go, then turned to Joe and Julius, eyebrow raised. “Are you sure that was wise?”

Joe shrugged. “Is it possible to be both wise *and* crazy?”

“Sheesh.” Julius shook his head. “Joe, I hope your memories ain’t fooling you and you’re really as good as you think you are.”

“Hey, I had a great teacher.” Joe grinned. “Anyway, maybe if I give her a reason to think I’m more than just empty talk, she’ll back off.” He turned to face the wolves. “You folks are all welcome to come along and watch, if you want. I think there’d be room for you, in a building built to house giant robots.”

“We would not miss it!” Natasha said. “If our commandant agrees, of course.”

“I think it sounds like fun,” Bertha said. “Squad, prepare for a field trip this afternoon!”

After that, there didn’t seem to be a whole lot of point to resuming the interrupted exercise. Promising to meet the others at the museum later, Lilibet, Guinevere, Gloria, Joe, Julius, and Socah headed out. After a little discussion, Fenris and Paul decided to join them, too, so Lilli and Guin rode along in the tank turret.

They spent the rest of the morning touring various spots of interest. Lilibet

showed them the Zemstvo building, Valkyrie Circle, and the arena where she'd dueled Annalinda. Joe had a hearty chuckle at the "Roberta W. Heinlein" quote etched on the Valkyrie Circle monument. "Well, *someone* certainly missed the point..."

They also visited a couple of museums dedicated to the war, and all the soldiers who had fallen on both sides. Joe took in the exhibits, and shook his head. "So much stupidity on both sides of the war. I'm really not proud of the part my family had in it. But it's aggravating that some people are still clinging to old wounds."

Finally, as afternoon rolled around, they pulled up in front of the IDE museum. "I just commed Iria, and she said she'd meet us—ah, there she is." Socah climbed out of the car and nodded to the green-haired woman as she stepped out of the museum. "Iria, this is Joe Steader, and Julius. And there we have Lilibet Walton and Guinevere, Paul Anders and Fenris, and Gloria and Annalinda. Everyone, Iria Parzival, museum co-curator."

Iria smiled. "I'm pleased to meet you all. Please, come in! I'll open the mech doors for you all to fit." A few moments later, a section of wall moved aside, leaving enough room for the Jaguar and the CSA tank to pull in.

Joe got out, and Julius shifted to shell mode. Joe looked around and whistled. "Quite a collection you've got here. I'm definitely impressed. Is that an Eridanite Patrolmech? Mikel had a customized version when he lived there."

"I hope you're not going to choose that one," Socah said.

"Nah. I have another one in mind, but I want to let Olivia choose first. Uh...but we should probably ask Iria about it first thing."

"Ask me about what?"

"Uh...well, Socah told me about your mech arena, and...I was wondering if we might borrow it and a couple of your mechs this afternoon," Joe said. "I sort of challenged a Valkyrie MP to a grudge match."

"He did," Lilibet said. "I saw him. I could barely believe it myself."

Iria stared at him, then laughed. "If you were anyone else but Crazy Joe Steader I'd say no. But in return, I'd like to see this legendary mecha garage of yours. I have a thing for Gundams."

"Oh, sure. I hardly ever get the chance to show it off. You and your sister curators are all invited, next time I'm back in Nextus—though it may be a while, since we've got most of the Coastal Ring still ahead of us."

"We can wait. Now, I expect the one you challenged is that harpy who's been grieving you. If that's the case, as a War vet I imagine she does have a decent grounding in big iron. Given that RIDEs were very new and hadn't been used in warfare yet, IDE operation and battle strategy were taught to most officer candidates back then as the closest analogue. They may very well even have studied some of the actions Colonel Gates was in, given that the 56th was Earth's most-combat-decorated mech division by far."

"Well, that sets my mind at ease," Joe said. "Good."

Iria cocked her head. "Good?"

Joe nodded. "It would be a pretty hollow victory if she were a complete newbie."

"Uh-huh." Lilibet shot Gloria a meaningful look.

"It's an open question whether she's kept current with her skills, but odds are pretty good she has a thousand hours or so in simulators and at least a couple hundred hours in real IDEs from OCS days. The Sturmhaven Officer Candidate School had a few

dozen, mostly fabbed reproductions. Some of those are right here in our museum, in fact. That Block Four there, and that VSF-25, off the top of my head. She might well take one of those, if their owners agree. If she wants to choose the N-1, though, I won't say no."

"I think I have an idea what Joe's gonna pick," Julius said. "I think I'm jealous."

"Aw, you know I've only got eyes for you." Joe grinned. "But I guess I have a lot of passing flings."

"This is really impressive," Lilibet said. "And Socah mentioned that you're a fellow VINO?"

"I didn't use that term, but given the direction the party has taken these days, it seems like a valid one." Iria shrugged. "I suppose most of those who've felt as I do shifted over to the Gaians, but I like the shiny armor too much to give it up."

"We should talk, later." Lilibet grinned. "If the election shakes out the way I think it's going to, a more moderate Valkyrie faction might be just the ticket down the road."

"True enough, but first we should worry about that Brunhilde who'll be coming by a little later."

"This is intriguing," Fenris rumbled. "I hadn't been aware that this museum was here. I do believe it could be good training for us to match versus you in your arena, should you have no objection. It is hard to find other adversaries in our size class to train against."

"I don't know how fair a match that would be, but I would be up for the challenge, and I expect a number of the others would, too." Iria smiled. "Just fighting each other all the time does tend to get boring after a while."

"It might be closer than you think," Fenris said. "One of our drawbacks in combat is that we tend to be slower to move and react than our smaller brethren. But against IDEs, we might be more evenly matched."

"Hmm." Socah considered the other IDEs thoughtfully. "I'll confess I'm not fully aware how much you've practiced since I first gave you Block Five lessons back in the day, but if Olivia has had a decent amount of training, this could be an interesting fight, indeed."

"Oh, I got in a good deal of piloting practice during the '30s and '40s. After I mostly recovered from my first bout of drinking to forget. It was something more constructive to throw myself into, as well as a way to get some fighting in without partnering some other RIDE." Joe smiled thinly. "It proved useful enough in the end—I even managed to help take down a couple of Integrates in combat, well *before* DINsec made that easier. And then there was helping Clemmie and company lock down the Coffeehouse last year."

"You were involved in the fight against Fritz?" Iria said. "I never heard about that."

"Well, my days of self-promotion and bragging on myself are in the distant past. Mostly, at least." Joe shrugged. "It's one thing to make a big deal out of releasing a bunch of old TV shows, but it didn't feel right to brag on taking part in something that really concerned everybody. And a lot of other people did more about it than I did. Especially since early on I was kind of on Fritz's side, by accident."

Julius snorted. "I still find all that crap I slept through hard to believe, even after reading Joe's memories of it. It's like reading bad fanfic starring all your bestest friends,

and then learning it really fucking happened.”

Socah looked over Joe’s shoulder. “Well, don’t look now, but they’re here.”

Naomi’s Fuser shadow passed over the front glass as they descended to the front doors. Olivia stepped inside, dressed in more understated leather outfit instead of full armor, except for a slightly ridiculous winged headpiece.

Iria stepped forward. “Good afternoon. I’m Iria Parzival. As one Valkyrie to another, welcome to our museum.”

“Curious. I had no idea this was even here,” Olivia said, barely acknowledging Iria’s presence. “But then, the building is owned by a prominent Athena social justice warrior. I’m disappointed to see a sister Valkyrie involved.”

“Actually, nearly half of our co-curators are Valkyries, and only three are Athenas. But this is a museum, not a political debate club.”

“Hello!” Joe called cheerfully. “Glad you decided to show up. As you might have guessed, my weapon of choice is IDEs, in the simulated mech combat arena downstairs. I’ve been informed you probably know your way around the cockpit. So, those are the terms. No Julius, no Naomi. Just you and me, mano a...uh...womano. I’ll even let you pick first.”

“I can only offer the mechs or reproductions that I personally own, and I’ve beamed those to Naomi for your perusal,” Olivia said. “But if you have your heart set on one of the others, I can contact their owner and get permission. I’ve already let the other co-curators know what’s up, so I expect they’ll all be here before too long.”

The Brunhilde looked imperiously around at what she could see from the front lobby. “You have quite an impressive collection here, regardless.” She pointed at the Eridanite mechs. “Are those PM-25 Sonatas? I imagine they’re either replicas or all the celerite was stripped out before shipping.”

“They’re replicas with Q-based systems, of course,” Iria said. “Given the known compatibility issues between celerite and Q, it’s doubtful that an original model would even function on Zharus.” She smirked. “Which probably means we’re safe from invasion by the Eridani, no matter what else might happen.”

“Gotta watch out for those sneaky Eridani,” Joe said. “I should know, my brother’s one now.”

“I’d suggest choosing whichever model is most familiar to you from your OCS training,” Iria said. “If you haven’t put in much cockpit time since then, the familiarity will help. And if you want to spend a few minutes refreshing your memory before the duel, that can be arranged.”

Olivia sniffed. “I’m sure I have little to worry about regardless.”

Joe grinned. “Of course. After all, how much could a mere *dilettante* know about mech combat? Especially if he’s just a *man*.”

Julius sneezed. “Don’t provoke her, maybe? Oh, wait. If you’re wanting her to get mad so she makes a bunch of mistakes, hey, fuckin’ provoke away.”

Lilibet crossed her arms. “Personally, I think this notion of dueling is a barbaric custom which should have no place in a forward-thinking polity. But I’m sure it’s none of *my* business.”

“Terribly gauche,” Fenris agreed.

Naomi glared at Fenris. “If your opinion is required, we will ask for it. Speak only when spoken to.”

“A law that was repealed just after the War ended. I don’t think so,” Fenris said.

“Not that the law ever applied to such as us to begin with. Laws are for *people* to obey.”

“Besides, technically Fen and I are still ‘honorary females,’” Paul put in. “So we’ve got diplomatic immunity. And, optionally, falsies.”

“I believe I will choose the F-7,” Olivia said, gesturing at the unit.

“Block 5 for me, then! Great!” Joe said, rubbing his hands together.

“The IDE’s systems are compatible with your RIDE implants,” Iria said. “I still suggest you take an hour to refamiliarize yourselves with the systems. We’ll divide the arena off into separate areas for the two of you to stomp around in and get ready.”

“Very well.” Not sparing another glance for Joe and the others, Olivia headed for her chosen IDE. Naomi followed her as Iria pointed toward one of the mech elevators.

“Quite a chip on her shoulder, that one,” Socah said. “In terms of mech capabilities, the two models are pretty evenly matched; most of the improvements to the F-7 were in things like the power plant and hydraulics that won’t make much difference over a short-term fight.”

Joe nodded. “I seem to recall the Block Five was a little heavier armored, on the whole. Not many forces they came up against used that much themselves, so they saved a little weight on the F-7.”

“True enough, but it’s not going to make that much of a difference in this match.” Socah peered thoughtfully at the IDE. “What you’re going to need to try to do is take out as many of her weapons as you can while skirmishing. Sooner or later it’ll come down to a toe-to-toe slugging match, and the more of her weapons you can cripple by that point, while protecting your own, the better chance you’ll have in the end.”

Joe nodded. “Good point. But for now, what I need to do is get more practice in. I’ve had a lot of experience lately in the hovertank, which has some similarities, but it’s not quite the same thing.” He turned to Iria. “We all good to go?”

Iria nodded. “That elevator over there. Good luck!”

Joe settled into the cockpit and looked around at the old familiar controls. It was the work of just a minute or so to key in the ignition sequence and power up the servos. His first few steps toward the elevator were halting, but by the time he’d stepped through the door he was more sure of himself and remembered better what to do.

A couple of minutes later, he strode out into his half of the arena, bisected along the middle by a wall with Olivia on the other side. He wondered how she was doing in her F-7, but put that out of his mind as he concentrated on putting the Five through its paces. “Boy, this takes me back,” he murmured. “I remember when Mikey and I were back on Earth, hunting for buried treasure. Wonder what he’s up to these days...”

Minute by minute, he worked on maneuvering the IDE, and refamiliarizing himself with the weapon controls. By the time an hour had passed, he was starting to feel at home in the cockpit again. He switched on the mech’s comm and dialed into the frequency listed for the museum. “Hey, you lot. How much time left before we light this candle?”

“We’re just waiting for the last few of our curators to arrive,” Iria replied. “We’ll be ready to start in a few minutes. How’s it going with you?”

“It’s coming back to me. Just like riding a bicycle.”

“Very good!” Olivia said over the comm channel. “It’s no fun to best an unprepared opponent.”

“Funny, I was just saying the same thing, earlier.” Joe grinned. “See, we’ve got

something in common already. I just *know* we're going to be best friends."

Olivia snorted. "I will enjoy shutting that big mouth of yours."

"Hey, something else we've got in common!"

Iria cleared her throat. "If the combatants will maneuver their mechs to the marked-off starting positions, we will initialize the arena and begin the duel shortly. Terms are to surrender or ten-count over fallen adversary—*not* to the death or maiming. Verbal acknowledgment from both combatants that this is understood, please."

"I understand," Joe replied.

"As do I," Olivia said.

"Good. My fellow curators and I will act as judges in the event of unforeseen circumstances. Rest assured that we will render judgment without respect to any political bias. We're all IDE drivers here, and we can always agree on that even if we don't see eye to eye on everything else."

"A fine thing to be indeed," Joe said, walking the Block 5 onto the glowing yellow circle in one corner of the room. "Ready here!"

"Ready!"

"Very well. Initializing randomized terrain simulation and dropping the hardlight wall in ten...nine...eight..."

All around Joe, deciduous trees and conifers shimmered into being, blocking the view to the other side of the arena. At the same time, the wall bisecting the arena faded away.

"...two...one...*begin!* Good luck to you both, and may the best ground pounder win!"

Joe spent a few moments thinking. He hadn't had a lot of time to get to know his adversary, but from the few hours he'd spent chatting while their RIDEs hunted, he'd gotten the sense she was a very *direct* sort. (Well, actually he'd first gotten that sense when she had them hauled into Sturmhaven on trumped-up charges, but the conversation had reinforced it.) She wouldn't beat around the bush or try for finesse, Joe decided—she'd come charging in, both guns blazing.

He could use that.

All it needed was the right sort of terrain—solid bedrock that wouldn't show IDE footprints. And as it happened, there was a stretch of that right nearby, and a stand of pine trees that would do perfectly. Joe leveled one of the Block 5's arm cannons and blew a hole through the trees, as he would if he were in a hurry to get through them. Then he retreated behind a nearby stone column and waited.

Sure enough, thirty seconds later he heard the rhythmic clanking of a heavy IDE running flat-out. She wasn't making any attempt at stealth; she was just making for where she'd heard the shot go off. Joe stayed very still, hands and feet held wide of the controls to make sure he didn't bump something by accident. The directionals showed her approaching, approaching...passing him as she ran through the hole he'd blasted.

Joe grinned and gripped the controls as he heard the steps falter and slow. He moved out from behind the pillar and raised the arm cannons. There she was, perfectly framed amid the trees, just starting to turn around. Joe squeezed the triggers and pegged her IDE right in the small of the back with twin cannon blasts. They wouldn't be enough to finish her—F-7s had thick armor everywhere, including the rear—but she'd definitely have felt that little love tap.

As the F-7 staggered and reeled, Joe turned and ran, putting a few more clumps of trees between himself and her. He could probably have gotten a few more hits in, but only at the cost of letting her recover enough to tag him in return. And her mech *was* still just a hair tougher than his old Block 5. They were still too evenly-matched for him to want to risk it yet.

Joe's grin broadened as he heard Olivia sputter over the match comm, "Come back here, you...you coward!"

Joe pushed the 'talk' toggle. "Sticks and stones, 'Livy, sticks and stones." After a moment's consideration, he toggled the 5's silent running mode on, and moved off to one side, behind a stand of cedars that looked to offer decent cover. He gave himself thirty seconds to get into a good position, then shut it down and vented heat.

A few moments later, he heard the sound in the distance of her moving closer as she started to come after him. She was moving slowly, more cautious now since she hadn't quite seen where he'd gone. He could barely see her through the trees, and that only because she was moving, the patterns of light and dark changing. From her perspective, he would be just another patch of darkness in the darker forest because he *wasn't* moving.

Of course, he couldn't shoot her through the trees—not directly, anyway. But the Block 5 had those handy little indirect-fire missile packs on its back. Of course, firing would give away his position, so he'd better be ready to move as soon as he pulled the trigger.

Just a few more steps, and she'd be in the ideal position—a spot open to attack, but also at the exact opposite side of the forest from him. His finger tightened on the trigger...

Then the WHOOSH of jump jets warned him just in time to throw his IDE into a roll, as the F-7 dropped from the sky to land right where he'd been standing a moment before. *Death from above, eh?* Joe thought, as he came back to his feet. He fired a blast or two from his cannon, but was already turning to run again. It might be "cowardly," but it was also prudent. He simply wasn't ready to go nose to nose yet.

Fortunately, he had ample opportunity to run; his dodge out of the way had apparently caused Olivia to misjudge the landing and stumble, and once again he was moving by the time she could steady herself. The mesa on which they'd been fighting ended in a cliff ahead, and he jumped without hesitation, using his own jump jets to steady him as he landed twenty meters below. He turned in time to see Olivia's IDE show up at the cliff's edge, silhouetted against the sky, and it was just too good a target to pass up. He centered the reticle and mashed a thumb switch, loosing a dozen micro-missiles in her direction before he ran again. He didn't wait around to see if they found their target.

"You bastard!" Olivia growled. Blasts from her energy cannons slammed into the turf around him, shattering boulders and lighting trees on fire, but by and large not coming near him. *Must be tough to hit a moving target. Ain't that a pity?* As if in answer, the Block 5 shook as a blast hit him square in the back. The cockpit shook, and damage alarms blared. *Ow. Me and my big mouth.* Joe wobbled, but the big mech wasn't finished yet. He barely staggered but kept right on running.

Behind him, he thought he heard jump jets again, followed by a large thud of impact. So she was chasing him, was she?

Joe frowned, as a thought struck him. *I wonder if the sim will let me do this?* He

flipped open a keypad to his right and entered a quick series of commands. A moment later, several lines of code scrolled up on his display, highlighted in green, and Joe grinned. He tapped the button again, and half of the reloads for his missile packs tumbled out of the IDE's rear ejection slots. Joe kept running until he crossed over a small brook and was able to find more cover in the thicker forests down here.

He heard the F-7's footfalls growing louder as it ran after him. "When I catch you, Joe Steader—" *Sounds like she's really mad, now. So much the better—she won't be looking where she's going so much.* Joe grinned. *Wait for it...waaaaaaait for it...*

A moment later, the forest stillness was shattered by a series of explosions. "What—you—how did—the Block 5 can't deploy land mines! You *cheated!*"

Joe maneuvered the Block 5 back out into the open. Olivia's F-7 was reeling, displaying scorch marks all the way up to its waist. The armor was blown clear off the legs in a few spots, and exposed cables sparked and fizzed. Joe leveled his cannons and started firing, as he moved the mech into a run. Olivia raised her guns and fired back, and Joe felt the mech shake as it took several good hits, but he wasn't going to let that stop him now. Blast after blast slammed home, and then they were in grappling range. Joe didn't slow down, setting the Block 5's shoulder and slamming right into Olivia, throwing her backward on already unsteady feet.

But the F-7 rallied, firing its thruster pack to keep its feet. Olivia slammed a punch of her own into Joe's armor suit. There was nothing wrong with the F-7's hydraulics, Joe had to admit. But he still had the advantage. He hooked one of her damaged legs with his own and yanked, following up with a close-range beam cannon shot to the chest as she fell backward. "Enough! It's over!"

"Never!" Olivia growled. The F-7's shoulder missile packs opened.

"Oh, come on. You'd blow us both up if you fired those for real."

"I WON'T LET YOU WIN!"

And then the Block 5's sensors registered an unusual power build-up in the F-7's reactor. Joe blinked. "What...seriously?" He was almost too surprised to react, but the old training took over and before he knew it he was firing the Block 5's jump jets at maximum overload. The Block 5 streaked skyward, just ahead of an expanding fireball centered where the fallen IDE had once been. *I really hope that was just a simulation, too...*

And then the forested mesa shimmered and faded away, replaced by the broad expanse of the mech arena, and an undamaged F-7 flat on its back.

"We call this match..." Iria announced, "...for 'Crazy' Joe Steader." She paused. "Who, apparently, has nothing on the other combatant when it comes to 'crazy.'"

"I'll have you know that I did *not* cheat. The M-37 missiles used the same proximity detonation circuit as M-46 landmines," Joe said. "It was a common practice among IDE jocks back in the day to flip them over into the sensor mode the landmines used, then eject them unfired. In that mode, they basically *were* field-expedient landmines." He grinned. "Learned that trick from a *certain someone* I know who used to shove the big iron around for her day job. And I'm gratified whoever programmed the sims was a big enough mech *otaku* to know about it, too. But I'm guessing they never bothered to teach that in school when they really just wanted to get you ready to use the smaller iron."

"He's right, you know," Iria said. Olivia just glared and growled.

“I, for one, can’t believe you seriously engaged the *self-destruct*,” Socah said. “Really? That’s just dumb, not to mention *amateurish*. A living pilot is one who can escape to fight again. But I guess you didn’t have to worry about that in a simulation.”

“I would have done it for real,” Olivia growled. “To be defeated by...”

Joe raised an eyebrow. “A man?”

“An *idiot!*” Olivia’s eyes shot daggers at Joe. “A rich civilian idiot who cares about nothing but his own pleasures!”

Joe sighed and shook his head. “I think you’ve been reading too much of your own propaganda. Seriously, lady, what is your problem? I’ve been trying to be as nice about all this as I can. I’ve told you, I don’t have any hard feelings, and neither does Julius. Nor, for that matter, does Naomi. Why can’t *you* get over it?”

Julius snorted. “Wasn’t there someone what said it’s hard to get someone to understand something if the way they make a living depends on them not? No big fucking surprise there. Just politics.”

Naomi the owl spoke up. “It pains me to say it, but they do have a point. As much as I have presented a loyal front in public, you know I have told you for years that you should get over it, as I did long ago.” Olivia glared at her.

“She might as well get over it now,” a quiet voice said, and all heads turned to look at the dark wolf standing just behind Lilibet. “She’s just lost a big fight against an ‘incompetent,’ so the Valkyrie party is going to drop her like a hot potato,” Annalinda continued. “Just like they did me.”

Olivia stared at her. “But that’s...you were...it’s not the same thing!”

“Oh, *isn’t* it? Wasn’t it *you* who promised me your full support when I challenged Lilibet Walton? Then I never heard from you again.” She shook her head. “And here they are, still willing to be nice to you. Just like they’ve been to me. More shovels full of flaming coals, I guess.”

“She’s got a point,” Lilibet put in. “It’s all over but the fat lady, now. The only thing left is that ridiculous arrest warrant, and it’s not gotten any *more* likely that thing’ll stick once the court gets a good look. All you’ve managed to do is make the Valks look even sillier than they already did.”

“Take it from someone who’s done a lot of living in the past,” Joe said. “It doesn’t get you anywhere in the end. Except occasionally drunk.”

“Occasionally?” Julius deadpanned. “Three fuckin’ livers, bro.”

“I’ve had a lot of occasions.”

“I’m still proud to consider myself a Valkyrie,” Iria said. “But I’ve had a really hard time with cognitive dissonance lately, as it seems like recent Valkyrie politics has consisted of a lot of chest-beating posturing as to who can be the biggest man-hater. And *your* performance has just been the most recent example.” She shot Olivia a meaningful glance. “It’s enough to make me wish for the old days of ‘Democrat’ and ‘Republican.’ At least those old Americans didn’t have so much of their *cultural* identity bound up in their party affiliation.”

“Usually,” Julius said. “But then the whole deal happened with Donald fucking Trump winning in 2016.”

“Anyway, I’d change parties in a heartbeat if I didn’t still have so much ‘Valkyrie pride.’”

“Can we talk, later on?” Lilibet asked. “I want to find out what there is to being a Valkyrie *besides* being a man-hater. I hadn’t realized there actually *was* anything.”

“I’d be happy to.”

“Enough!” Olivia snapped. “Very well, I lost. *Fairly*.” She sighed. “That will teach me to underestimate my adversary, I suppose.”

“Admitting it’s a good start,” Lillibet said.

“What happened back in the war...being defeated by a pampered billionaire and his pet...it was one of the defining moments of my life.”

“But for me, it was Tuesday,” Joe said. “Seriously, I didn’t much think about it afterward.”

“Of course *you* didn’t,” Olivia growled. “You *won*. I...had plenty of time to think about it afterward.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” Joe said. “Not sorry we beat you—we kinda had to, lives were at stake, not least of which our own—but sorry it hit you so hard. Again, *we*—Jules and I—don’t carry any hard feelings. All that stuff was mainly the fault of the politicians, and neither one of us ever had much to do with them. Or much nice to say about them, for that matter.”

“You shouldn’t oughtta let that stuff eat you up,” Julius said. “But it’s kinda too fuckin’ late to rub it in now, I guess.”

“Can we please just try to get past this?” Joe asked. “I realize we’ll probably never be friends, but we both have better things to do than go on living thirty years in the past. The war’s long past dead and gone. I don’t want anything but the best for Sturmhaven now. Hell, I’d even give you back that gun we took from you, if it’d make a difference to you.”

For a moment Olivia appeared to seriously consider that offer. “No. You earned that weapon from us.”

“I’ll say they did. I still get phantom aches in my chest plating when I think about that pounding,” Naomi added. The owl tilted her head and smirked at Julius. “That *fuckin’* pounding!”

Julius smirked back. “Hey, we’ve both got our specialties. I’m a pouncer...and you bird-types are built light so’s you can fly. Really, puttin’ one a’ you in any situation where a kitty can get to you’s a fuckin’ error in strategy, an’ that’s all on your brass from back then. But not their fault they didn’t fuckin’ know ‘bout me. I was all top secret and stuff.”

Olivia sighed. “I am...not good at letting go of things. As anyone who knows me can tell you.”

“She’s right,” Naomi said. “She still harbors a grudge against the next-year girl who used to snap her bra in grade school.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “*Naomi*...”

“What? It’s true,” Naomi deadpanned.

“This bird, I like,” Julius said.

“But I suppose...you are right.” Olivia sighed. “I had...fantasized about making you look foolish. But...I see now *I* was the foolish one. There is more to you than there appeared.” She shook her head. “I will withdraw that warrant myself. There will be no need for you to appear in court.”

Joe nodded. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

Olivia glared at him. “*Why* are you...being so *nice* about this? You’re not even *gloating*.”

Joe shrugged. “I just find it’s more fun to be nice to people. There’s no percentage

in intentionally pissing people off at you. You catch more flies with honey, and all that.”

Julius sneezed. “Not like I ever knew why you’d fuckin’ *want* to catch flies, but I’m just a RIDE, what do I know?”

Lilibet smiled wryly. “If you’re serious about quashing the warrant, then you’ve just shown more maturity than most of your party leadership. It’s a pity that they probably won’t see it that way.”

Olivia shrugged. “I lost to Joe Steader. Annalinda is right—once word of that gets out, my political career is effectively over regardless.” She sighed. “It probably would have been anyway, the way the polls are running.”

“Well, not necessarily. If you want to join my coalition aimed at *reforming* the Valkyrie party, I’m sure we could all benefit from your experience.” Lilibet grinned, glancing over at Iria. “That is, if it gets off the ground. I only just now decided to found it, and don’t actually have any other members yet.”

Iria chuckled. “Oh, I think you’ve got at least *one* member.”

“Two,” Annalinda said. “If I even count.”

Lilibet nodded. “We’ll talk it over later.” She glanced around at the others. “For now, though, maybe we should all go join the other curators and the rest for the post-duel party. Bertha and the others showed up just before you started, and I think they’ll all have a lot to talk about.”

“A number of news reporters have shown up, too,” Iria noted. “I *wonder* who leaked this to the media?”

Olivia sighed again. “Very well. I suppose I should go take my medicine.”

“We have no intention of gloating,” Joe Steader said. “As far as I’m concerned, you were a worthy opponent, and you got some good licks in, too. Why don’t we take the opportunity to show we’ve buried the hatchet? It’s an honorable way to conclude a long-term rivalry.”

“The rest of the Valkyries will not be too pleased...” Olivia said. “But, then, I doubt anything *could* please them less than my loss, so why not go for broke?”

“That’s the spirit,” Naomi said. “We *will* get through this.”

Julius smirked. “And we’ll all be fuckin’ stronger for it. So let’s go out there and get it over with!”

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Leaving Sturmhaven

“Well, I have to admit, that was certainly...*unexpected*,” Joe mused as the Jaguar skimmer car pulled onto the Sturmhaven exit ramp. “I don’t know as I’d want to come back—by myself, anyway—but on the whole, I guess I am glad we stopped by.”

Socah nodded. “At the least, we made some new friends.”

“Uh-huh. It’s good to make new friends. Even if they’re old enemies.”

“And you’re *gonna* be coming back,” Julius said. “You’re gonna fucking have to. You can’t co-curate an IDE museum by remote.”

“There is that.” Joe waved a hand. “But, really, we just said we were going to *talk* about that, once we finish the tour. No need for any snap decisions.”

“Yeah, but you’ll end up saying yes. I fuckin’ know you.”

Joe glanced to Socah. “What about you? You weren’t exactly eager to stop here at first.”

“I’ve done a lot of things in my life I didn’t really *want* to do, but ended up being beneficial anyway,” Socah said. “And the place wasn’t *entirely* what I expected. Even some of the Valkyries turned out to be decent people. That was a surprise.”

Joe grinned. “Sort of gives you hope for Cape Nord, too?”

“Now I’m not sure I would ever go *that far*...”

As they cleared the polity limits, the skimmer accelerated to barely subsonic speed. “At any rate, if you’re feeling naughty, our next stop will be Nautica.”

On their screen on the dashboard, Julius’s eyes rolled expressively. “Don’t make me fuckin’ bite you, Joe.”

“You’re a car right now, you can’t bite me.”

“For something that bad, I’ll fuckin’ *save it up*.”

Socah laughed. “Nautica sounds like fun. From the name, I’m guessing it’s on the coast?”

“Indeed it is. Sort of an east-coast equivalent to Aloha, but a lot less wild and crazy. Not much in the way of beaches, but a lot of aquatic tourism like fishing and scuba.”

“If we actually have time to *do* tourism, it’ll be a nice change of pace.” Socah chuckled. “It’ll be interesting to see if there’s somewhere you *don’t* draw a lynch mob.”

“I assure you, there are plenty of places where people are *happy* to see me.” Joe grinned. “I’m sure we’ll run into one sooner or later.”

“Well, by all means, let’s see if we can find one.”

The car and trailing motorcycle turned back onto the Coastal Skimmerway and turned south. Sturmhaven left well behind, they headed toward the next stop along the Coastal Rim.

TO BE CONTINUED...