

Merging Traffic IV: Interchange Ahead

By Robotech_Master

With JonBuck

September 20, 158 AL
Jump minus 30 minutes
The Great Western

Chet Mackenzie lay back in his acceleration couch on the flight deck of the Maxima shuttle, peering up into the unobstructed view of the dome of stars that surrounded him. Of course, it was actually a very high-resolution hardlight display—large viewports, even of transparent aluminum, would be a structural weakness in a ship meant for combat. Still, it looked real, and was a lot better view than he'd had from the *DiCaprio*.

He and Nils could have been in the *King of Hearts* with the others, waiting for the jump transition on the bridge, but it just didn't feel right to Chet. The place to be when you jumped was on board your shuttle. After doing it that way for years, it was just too ingrained of a habit to break.

Chet was alone right now—Nils was plugged into one of the maintenance access ports in the back of the ship, running some last-minute diagnostics—and that was fine with him. He preferred to be alone with his thoughts at the moment.

Everything was at once so normal and so strange. He was sitting in a shuttle awaiting jump—that wasn't so unusual. The stars were just about the same as they'd always been, even though he could see a lot more of them now. But this luxury sports ship was so far beyond the wallowing workhorse *DiCaprio* that it wasn't even in the same league. Their destination was not Wednesday or Earth, but a war-torn wildcat colony in the middle of nowhere. And instead of an impersonal cruise line, his boss was...his boss was...

Wow, his boss. He sighed, thinking about her. "Swirly girl." She was a lot less of a cipher to him now. He knew her, and he liked her. And he thought she liked him, too. Half a dozen times over the last few months, he'd been on the verge of asking her out to dinner, and then maybe more. But...how could he even face that, when the memories of what they had done were still so fresh? What would she even think of him if he asked? And she hadn't exactly asked him, either...so maybe she didn't feel that way about him? It was all so awkward.

A soft chime sounded, indicating the shuttle's ventral hatch was opening. Chet tilted his head back and glanced, upside down, back through the open bridge hatch to see Rochelle slowly rising out of the floor. She was using the docking tube's hardlight elevator platform, which pilots derisively called the "push pop." (Not that this prevented them from using it themselves instead of the ladder rungs on the side when they didn't think anyone was looking, of course.)

Rochelle was wearing a light blue dress that set off her fluffy white snow leopard tags, and had her grey and white hair draped over one arm and held close to her chest to avoid getting caught on anything. As she stepped off the elevator, she released it and tossed her head, and it swirled back into place behind her. "Oh, there you are."

Chet reached down with his left hand to the couch controls, raising the back up to a sitting position. "Hey, boss."

"Oh, you don't have to get up on my account." Rochelle smiled at him as she slid into the seat next to his, pulling her hair forward over her shoulder so she wouldn't sit on it. She turned the chair to face him. "Thought I might find you here."

Chet shrugged. "It just felt like the right place to be. I can almost pretend

everything's normal, and I'm getting ready for another milk run back to Earth on the *Goose*." He chuckled. "Of course, that illusion will fade pretty quickly once I *don't* go into cryo. Going to be a new experience actually staying awake all the way through a jump."

"You could sleep if you wanted to, you know. The Maxima does have cryo capsules built in."

"Eh, there'll be too much to do on the trip as it is." Chet grinned. "Can't have people thinking I'm some kind of lazy bum."

"I thought that was what cruise shuttle pilots *were*."

"Well, yeah, but I can't have people *thinking* it." Chet shrugged. "So what brings you out here? I'd think you'd be wanting to watch the countdown from the bridge with all the other, uh..."

"Stuffed shirts?" Rochelle grinned. "There are enough of those around that they don't need me taking up more space. And I figured I'd get a better view from here. Uh... if you don't mind, that is."

"Why should I mind? It's your ship."

"It's *our* ship. Yours, mine, and the cats'. You earned that much the day we first flight-tested it."

Chet shrugged. "Just doing my job."

Rochelle's grin faded into a smile. "I kind of hope this is more than just a *job* to you."

Chet blinked. "Uh...what do you mean?"

"See? There you go, closing up..." Rochelle shook her head. "What I mean is, I'd like to talk about *us*. You plus me. In the relationship sort of way."

"Relationship? But...we don't *have* a relationship."

"Exactly." Rochelle smiled. "What we have, or *had*, was lots and lots of crazy monkey sex, without even knowing each other. And that's kind of...gotten in the way of things since then."

Chet felt his face heat up. "Er...yeah." He wondered if he could make some excuse to leave the flight deck.

Rochelle raised a hand. "No, wait, please, hear me out this once. If this doesn't work out...well, I won't bring it up again."

Chet shrugged. "All right. Not sure what you're trying to say, but...well, say it."

"The thing is, I'd kind of like to *try* having a relationship. And Uncia and I think you would, too. Your body language suggests you *do* like me, but...you keep holding yourself back." She chuckled. "Not that I'm any better. Uncia tells me I do the exact same thing. We're each just too worried about what the other might think for anything to happen naturally. So I figured this might be a good time to bring it out in the open. Break the ice."

Chet snorted. "Now, right at the start of an important, possibly dangerous mission to a secret colony world where there's a civil war on."

Rochelle laughed. "I didn't say it was a *perfect* time. Anyway...I guess the problem is we're both too embarrassed about what happened to want to risk...I dunno, opening ourselves up and being rejected. So we don't. And, as Uncia keeps telling me, that's just *dumb*."

In spite of himself, Chet grinned. "So what's the solution?"

"Well, I *could* just vamp you into my bed." Rochelle winked. "Seriously, if I really

turned on the charm, I don't think you could resist me."

Chet swallowed. "I...think you might be right, there. So...why haven't you?" Despite himself, he found he almost wished she would.

"Because I don't just want you in my bed. I want you in my *life*. Or at least the chance to find out whether we'd fit *into* each other's lives." Rochelle waved a hand expansively. "And I just know if I seduced you, it would be like the nanites all over again. You'd never be able to know whether you really wanted me or I just *made* you want me. And we don't need any more of *that* particular poison between us."

"I...think you're right, there." Chet gave that a moment's thought. He had to admit, he *did* find her attractive. And by now he was pretty sure it wasn't *just* because of the nanite imprinting. She was gorgeous, to be sure, but who wasn't these days? The more important thing was her beauty was more than skin deep. She was smart, and clever, and friendly, and generally an all-around nice person. Now that he thought about it, Chet realized he kind of *did* want a relationship with her. He just wasn't sure how to begin it. "So what do we do?"

"Well...what *I'm* going to do is this." Rochelle leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes. "I'm going to come meet you, privately, in the place where *you* feel most comfortable, with all my nanites shut down just so there can be no doubt this is just me and not any kind of artificial influence. I'm serious."

Chet eyed her skeptically. "All your nanites?"

"Well, okay, I kept the ones that keep my hair from tangling up or getting caught on things." Rochelle lifted a lock of hair free from the rest and dropped it. It merged seamlessly back into place. "There's being serious, and then there's just being *silly*."

Chet snorted. "All right, then what?"

Rochelle grinned at him. "Then *you* seduce *me*."

Chet blinked. "Wait, what?"

"If it's something *I* do, you'll never know for sure if *you* wanted it. But I don't have that problem. I know the only influence you could possibly have over me is your big strong manliness." She winked. "I can always seduce you back next time, once you're more sure of yourself. We can take turns!"

Chet paused. It wasn't often this happened, but he really was at a loss for words. "Uh..."

"I mean it, Chet," Rochelle said more quietly. "You know I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be. I'm putting myself in your hands. I trust you."

"...huh." Chet said. He paused a moment longer, then activated his comm implant. *:Hey, buddy, I'm going to go private here for a bit. Page me if there's an emergency?:*

Nils sent back a "smirking kitty" emoticon. *:Sure thing. Enjoy yourselves.:*

:Planning on it.: Chet dropped his left hand to the seat controls again.

"So, anyway, if you—*yeek!*" Rochelle let out a little squeal of surprise as both acceleration couches abruptly reclined flat, and slid together to make one large queen-bed-sized space.

Chet gently rolled over on top of her, and grinned down at her. "You're really something else, you know that?"

Rochelle smiled back. "So are you."

"Then let's see what we are together." Chet lowered his face to hers for the kiss.

Jump minus zero

Chet raised his head and blinked. “Hey, babe, did the galaxy just move for you, too?”

September 23, 158 AL – Trip Day 3

“Hey, Shelley?”

“Yeah, Un-hon?”

“You know how much I’ve changed since we first met, right? Grown more, uh, *restraint* and stuff?”

Rochelle tilted her interface specs up and glanced over at Uncia, who was sitting on her haunches in her Minima shell next to the temporary workstation Rochelle had set up in the back of the *Maxima*. “What’s this leading up to?”

“Well, if I were still the me I were when we first met, I’d probably have just put nano-implants in you without asking, but instead I’m just gonna ask. Can we maybe try the body swap now? *Please?* You’d said you wanted to think about it first, and it’s been months now, and lots of other people have done it so we know it’s safe, and I really wanna try, and—”

“Whoa, hold on.” Rochelle raised a hand. “Is this really a good time to bring that up?” It was true, she’d been considering it ever since she first met Tamarind and Jeanette, but it didn’t seem appropriate for an expedition into a war zone.

“What better time could there be? We’re stuck in jump with nothing better to do. Nobody really needs us for anything; we’re at loose ends for the next few weeks. Toward the end of the trip maybe there’ll be a bunch more meetings and crap, but right now we can do whatever.” Uncia sneezed. “You’re just noodling around on programming projects. You could do that just as easy if you were me. Maybe easier, with fast-time and all. Just sayin’.”

“Huh.” Rochelle took off the specs and set them aside. “You could have a point there.” *It’s true, I am just kind of piddling around. Is this something more useful I could be doing?*

“Of course I have a point! And it’s not even just the one on top of my head.” Uncia paused to scratch behind an ear. “If you don’t come up with a solid reason *to* do it, you’ll keep on putting it off.”

“I guess that’s true.” Rochelle smiled ruefully. *She really does know me too well.* “I just kind of have this thing about poking bits of metal into my brain. If nothing else, I won’t be able to make fun of Rhi so much for it if I give in.” Uncia sighed, but Rochelle raised a hand again. “Now hold up there, I didn’t say I *wouldn’t* do it. It’s just...kind of hard to get over a prejudice I’ve had all my life.”

“You adapted from being a guy to being a gal in like *five minutes*, but you can’t handle a little metal in your brain? There’s at least a kilo of Fuser nanites circulating through your body right now, you know.”

“I didn’t say it had to make *sense*, just that it’s how I feel.” Rochelle considered. “I suppose I kind of have always wondered what it would feel like to *be* a RIDE. I just never thought it would be possible to find out before. Now that it is...it kind of makes me wonder a little just how much of that curiosity was real.” If someone *had* offered her the chance to get turned into a RIDE, would she have taken it?

Uncia sniffed. “Well, *all* my curiosity about what it’s like to be human is real!”

Rochelle smirked. “That’s not exactly a selling point, you know. I remember what happened *last* time you were curious about being human. It ended with me throwing up into a toilet because you thought you couldn’t get drunk on ‘just tea.’” *Just Long Island iced tea.*

Uncia rolled her eyes. “You really *are* never going to let me forget that.”

“Sorry, Un-hon, but you never get a second chance to make a first impression.”

Uncia sighed. “I’m just wasting my breath, aren’t I? Which I don’t actually have, since I don’t *breathe* or anything...” She got to her feet and turned to go.

“Wait.” Rochelle thought about it for a long moment. She really did have a point. They’d always been so busy with other things lately, there just hadn’t been any time to think about something like this, or to take the time to try it out. But what if now there was? Could she afford to pass up this chance, distaste for implants or not? Both Rhianna and Chet had implants, and they seemed to get along with them just fine—to say nothing of all the other people who’d swapped, including Jeanette herself and Barbaretta the Scout. “I tell you what. Give me a day to think it over. I’ll give you a final answer tomorrow.”

Uncia glanced back at her. For a moment, Rochelle thought she was going to argue further. But instead, she just nodded. “Okay. Fair enough. I’ll bug you again in thirty hours.” She padded off, hopped down the hatchway to the *Great Western’s* inter-ship corridors, and was gone.

“Well, there’s a thing.”

Rochelle glanced up at the new voice, seeing Chet leaning against the bulkhead. He’d been hanging out in the flight deck, as usual. It was the part of the ship where he felt the most at home. “You heard?”

“It’s a small ship, babe. Voices carry. So you’re really thinking of trying that head-swap thing?”

“Still kind of on the fence about it, but why not? Enough people have done it by now it’s been proven pretty much safe.”

“Oh, I’m not arguing against it. It’d be interesting to see how it goes for you. Though it’s kinda funny; we just both got over ourselves enough to get together, and now you’re thinking on swapping out bodies.”

“Maybe you and Nils might want to try it, too? If we both do it at the same time, I guess that won’t be an issue.” Rochelle grinned. “Wouldn’t that be something?” *I wonder what it would be like to hunt together in Nature Range...and do other things...*

Chet chuckled. “Hey, that might be moving a little fast for Nils and me. Neither one of us is exactly from this culture. But what the hey, I’ll bring it up with him and see what he says.”

Chet leaned in to kiss her on the cheek, then retreated to the flight deck again. Rochelle blushed a little, chuckled, and picked her interface specs back up. *Heh. Might not be needing these for much longer, if I do get those implants.* She shook her head and got back to work.

September 24, 158 AL – Trip Day 4

“Squeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee—” A snow leopard the size of a large dog bounded down the *Great Western’s* access corridor, caroling her excitement all the way.

Pedestrians stepped out of the way, shaking their head in bemusement as she doppler-shifted past them. It did help not to have to breathe.

Uncia slowed as she approached the access lift to the *Maxima*. This was it! Today was the day! Rochelle had agreed to the procedure, so they were going to build out the implant network in her head and then swap bodies. She was *finally* going to get to find out what it felt like to be squishy!

“—eeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!” Uncia continued as she popped up into the *Maxima*’s cabin.

Rochelle smirked. “Excited, are we?”

“You know it!” Uncia’s tail lashed back and forth. “I can’t wait! Finally I’ll get to see what peeing is like when you’re actually doing it yourself!”

“You get excited about the weirdest things. I’m kind of looking forward to not *having* to pee anymore for a while.”

“Are you kidding? Peeing is easy. Just takes you a couple minutes, then you’re done. You know how long I have to sit still in one place to get a full charge?”

“You’re going to have to eat, too, you know.”

“Yeah, but when you’re wearing me I do that anyway. At least this way I’ll get some real good out of it.”

Rochelle chuckled. “You’re sure you want to give up that strong, solid metal and hardlight body for squishy, leaky flesh?”

Uncia rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. I’m not some kind of clichéd robot invader who wants to wipe out humanity ‘cuz ‘they’re made out of meat.’ I’ve read through lots of your meat-memories so I’ve already got a pretty good idea what it’s like, and it doesn’t scare me at all. But there’s a big difference between reading memories and experiencing it for myself.”

“Okay, okay...” Rochelle held up her hands. “Fine.”

Uncia cocked her head. “It can’t be that you’re *stalling*, can it?”

Rochelle smiled. “Okay, you got me. But can you blame me? All my life, I’ve stayed away from cyber, except for my trusty thumb drive. Now you’re talking about putting it all through my head. Yeah, I know, lots of people do it and they’re all okay. It’s just me.”

Uncia’s ears drooped. “So...you changed your mind?”

“No—of course not! I said we would, and we will. It’s just...a matter of psyching myself up, I guess.”

“I’ve already got everything I need on board.” Uncia padded over to her full-sized shell, dropped her hardlight, and merged back into it. “The secondary core’s been double-checked and ready, I’ve got the very latest implant recipes from Jeanette, and I’ve already got the instinct bundle packaged and ready.”

“So, you’re just waiting on me, then, is what you’re saying.”

“Well, not in so many *words*...”

Rochelle took a deep breath. “All right, fine. Let’s light this candle.”

“That’s the spirit!” Uncia padded over and Fused onto Rochelle. “I’ve spent weeks studying this in fast-time, and I’ve run tons of sims. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Who says I’m worried?”

“Uh...well, you do? I mean, I’m monitoring your vitals, and I can see you’re kinda in fight or flight...seriously, we don’t *have* to do this now.”

“No. No, we do. Because it won’t get any easier—or any harder—if I wait, but if I

put it off now, I'll find more reasons to put it off later." Rochelle nodded. "Do it." She paused. The silence stretched out. "Uh...do it?"

"I did, ten seconds ago." Uncia chuckled. "The nanites are doing their thing. You'll be all set up within a few minutes."

Rochelle blinked. "But...I don't *feel* anything..."

"You don't have pain nerves inside your head. You do in blood vessels and stuff, which is why you get headaches, but not in the grey matter where the nanites are putting stuff. You won't feel a thing, honest. Well, unless you psyche yourself into having a headache, but again, blood vessels."

"Oh. Uh...so how will I know when it's done?"

"I'll tell you, silly!" Uncia giggled. "For what it's worth, it's moving right along without a hitch. I can show you pictures if you want, but I figured maybe you didn't want."

"Yeah, I think peering at real-time images of my own brain would be a little too weird for me at this point."

"Fair enough. Just give it a little bit, then it'll be ready."

"All right. This had *better* be worth all the hassle."

Uncia giggled again. "Oh, it will be! For one of us, anyway..."

On the flight deck, Chet chuckled, watching through the doorway to the rear compartment. "Well, they seem to be enjoying themselves."

On the other side of the door, Nils was also watching. He sneezed. "Yeah, they do. I'm still not sure how I feel about the whole thing, myself."

"I can't say I blame you." Chet shook his head. "It's a new idea for me, and I didn't just spend the last thirty years sleeping through everything that led up to it."

"You said it." Nils rolled his eyes. "I can't say I ever even really *fantasized* about what it would be like to be human. Now people are going around swapping bodies like there's no tomorrow."

"You given any thought to the two of us trying it?" Chet grinned. "Not going to force you into doing anything you don't want to, but I'll admit I'm more than a little curious, and I'd be surprised if you weren't too."

Nils snorted. "Can't say I've seriously considered it."

"Well, you might want to." Chet nodded toward the next room. "Given how well you and Uncia have been getting along, and the fact that *she's* pretty eager to swap. Seems to me she's going to want to do just about everything she can with that new human body, including all that fun kind of stuff with her boyfriend."

"I get the picture." Nils rolled his eyes again. "I suppose I'll end up trying it sooner or later. At least it's not such a big deal for me—you're the one who'll need new bits in his brain."

"And I've got plenty of bits in my brain already, so it's not like it's really *that* much of a big deal." Chet chuckled. "Feel kind of sorry for Shelley, though. It is kind of a big change for her."

"We all go through changes. She'll get by."

"All right, you're done installing!"

"Really?" Rochelle blinked. "I don't feel any different."

"Well, you're still Fused up, duh. Let's separate, and I'll send the activation

signal. Then you can play with your new toys for a while, while they learn to be you.”

Uncia de-Fused, and Rochelle stood there for a moment, blinking in the light. “Things don’t look any diff—whoa!” The display panels she’d used on her interface specs flickered to life before her eyes—without any specs in evidence. They all seemed brighter and sharper than she was used to—a side effect of being projected directly into her brain, she supposed. “I’ve got a user interface!”

“You generally do, with implants! How you like it?”

“It seems...familiar.” Rochelle tried some of her standard eye-flick motions. “Gestures seem to work.”

“That’s force of habit. You’ll be able to change them with a thought now, instead of having to move your eyes. But you’ll get used to that.”

“Well, no more worrying about forgetting my glasses, I guess.” She pulled up status displays and accessed shipboard storage. “So how long will it take to be ready?”

“Depends. Sometimes it’s a couple hours, but usually it’s more like a few minutes. They’ve got to scan and copy everything.”

“I guess it’ll beep to let me know when it’s done or something?”

“Something.”

“Brrr.” Rochelle shivered. “I know this has worked for lots of people already, including good friends like Jeanette, but still, it feels kinda weird. How do I know I’m still going to be ‘me’ when I’m thinking digitally?”

“I dunno, you could ask some of the people who’ve done it already?” Uncia snorted. “It’s got safeguards and stuff, designed to maintain continuity of thought process from the analog to the digital and back, you’ll see.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I’m just...maundering, is all.”

“Well, don’t! That’s *my* job!” Uncia giggled again. “Seriously, you *know* I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you, right?”

“Apart from getting me blind stinking drunk?”

“Would you *please* let that go? It was an accident, and I’ve grown a *lot* since then.”

“Right...sorry. You’re right, I really should. You *are* a lot better now. It’s not fair for me to keep harping on it. I’ll try not to mention it again. I’m just...nervous, I guess.”

“That’s okay. It’s understandable you’d be nervous.” Uncia sat on her haunches and peered thoughtfully at Rochelle. “Diagnostics say it’s going okay, though. Oooh, it’ll be so *neat* when you’re a RI like me!”

“Uh...yay? I guess.” Rochelle flicked through her nano-controls, making sure everything still worked properly. After all, when her nanites had infected Chet...*ugh*, *let’s just not think about that*. But so far, everything still worked fine. Nanite emission controls had no glitches, and her hair behavior and body language sliders worked just fine.

“Ooh! Looks like it’s complete! They’ve completely mapped your neurology and duplicated your memories digitally.”

Rochelle blinked. “That fast?”

“Well, it is nanotech. Ready to ‘think different?’”

“Uh, sure. How do I do it?”

One of the control overlays popped up in Rochelle’s field of vision. “Just flip that switch there.”

Rochelle swallowed. “That’s it, huh? Simple as that?”

“Well, the first time the change happened to Jeanette it was an accident, but then she figured out how to code it in manually. So yeah, simple as that.”

“I just flip this switch and I’ll be thinking with a Q brain instead of a squishy one.”

“That’s the plan.” Uncia peered at her expectantly.

Rochelle swallowed again, then reached out and flipped it. There was...not exactly a flicker, but more sort of an *un*-flicker. And then her thought processes felt subtly different. Clearer, sort of, but they had another flavor to them. *Whoa. Altered state of consciousness.*

As she was feeling her way around the differences, a pop-up appeared in her field of view—a request for a VR connection from Uncia. Rochelle’s eyes flicked to the “Accept” option, and there she was on Uncia’s favorite snowy mountain vista, with Uncia next to her.

“Hi! Welcome to the Q side!”

“Uh, glad to be here, I guess?” Rochelle looked around. It all seemed familiar, but it felt *sharper* now. “I guess...this is what being an RI is like?”

“Pretty much!” Uncia giggled. “But I’ve still got some stuff to pass over—the RIDE instinct package you’re gonna need for running my bod.”

Rochelle nodded. “Yeah, I know how it’s supposed to work. It’s just that I’ve never actually done it *personally* is all.”

“Well, we’re gonna get it all taken care of for you.” Uncia’s tail swished. “I can’t believe we’re really about to trade and stuff!”

“Yeah...exciting.” Rochelle crossed her arms and glanced at Uncia. “So...the package?”

“Right!” Uncia tilted her head back, and a big snowball appeared on the tip of her nose. Then she jerked it forward, throwing the snowball at Rochelle. It hit her on the forehead, and seemed to melt into her. Suddenly, Rochelle felt a flood of new sensations as new instincts sank in, becoming part of her subconscious. She closed her eyes—and then, when she opened them a moment later, noticed she was now a snow leopard herself.

Rochelle peered back at herself. “Oh, cute.” Her tail twitched. “I hope this is reversible?”

“Oh, sure. But you might as well try it out first. Wanna hunt with me?”

“Have we got time for that?”

“We’re in fast-time now. We’ve got all the time we need. C’mon!” Uncia turned and started to pad away.

“Uh...I dunno about this, Unnie. Tearing some critter’s throat out with my teeth seems kind of like a big first step. Even if it’s a fake virtual critter.”

“Awww...well, I guess we could table it for now. I just wanted to be sure the feline instincts were working properly is all.”

Rochelle rolled her eyes, ears flicking back. “I think a giant ball of yarn would be more my speed at this point.”

“Oh well, there’ll be time!” Uncia padded back. “So what’cha think, sister? Does being a big kitty cat suit you?”

Rochelle lifted a paw and considered it. “Well, I can’t say I haven’t simmed it a bit here and there...but I’ve never had the whole package like this. It’s weird, but this really feels...I dunno, *right*.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing if being human feels the same way for me. Of course, there’s not an instinct package for that—but since our Fuser form is based on being human, it’s not exactly a problem.”

“I still can’t believe I’m really going through with this. Oh, I *am* going through with it—it’s just hard to believe.” Rochelle curled around to sniff at her own tail. “It all feels so real.”

“Just wait’ll you see what it’s like out there.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Rochelle sneezed. “So...shall we?”

“Squeeeeeeee! I mean, yes!”

Back in the real world, Rochelle blinked down at herself, adjusting to being human again. *For the moment, anyway.* Then she turned to face Uncia as the leopard padded forward. “Now?”

“Let’s Fuse up and do it!” The snow leopard’s hardlight hide blinked out, and she split open and a moment later they stood there together as one. “So, it’s gonna work like this. You’ll transfer over to my blank secondary core. Once you’re over, I’ll transfer over to your implants. Then, boom, we’re done!”

“As simple as that, huh?”

“Pretty much! Just a couple of file transfers.”

“You sure you’re ready for this? I mean, going from being a RIDE to being a human, it’s gotta be kind of weird.”

Uncia snorted. “Weirder than going from being a human to being a RIDE?”

“Well...uh...”

“Oh, don’t tell me, it’s the whole ‘we organics are all squishy and complex, while you RIDES are simple machines’ thing, right?” Uncia sent an eyeroll emoticon. “You are so in for a surprise, I hope you know. You’ll be eating those words with mustard.”

“Hey, I never actually *said* those words, *you* did.”

“Yeah, but you were *thinking* them. Oh, all right, fair is fair and all. Yeah, I know it’s gonna be weird. Weirder than anything I could have simmed, no doubt. But it is gonna be just as weird for you, too. So we’ll be weird together!”

“Fair enough.” Rochelle took a deep breath. It was weird, but now that she was just about to give it up—for a while, anyway—it was like she could feel every nerve in her body. It felt like she was suddenly conscious of every square centimeter of skin, including her most intimate parts. *It’s like you can’t stop thinking about your butt right before you get a paddling, I guess.* “Okay, so how do we do this thing?”

“Just run the copy command like this...”

Rochelle did. There was a shift, and...something changed. It took her a few moments to put her finger on what it was. She was still standing there as she had been, but...the feeling was different. She was still conscious of herself and the other self with her, but...those selves had swapped places. It took a little time for her to be able to pick it out, but...she was the person on the *outside* now, and the secondary sensations came from the person on the inside. The...*other* person, who *wasn’t* her.

“Squeeeeeeee!” she heard her own voice say in Uncia’s inflection.

“Uh...wow.” Rochelle raised an arm and looked down at her hands. Of course, they didn’t look any different from how they had when she’d looked at them in Fuser form all those times before. But somehow it *felt* different now. “So we’re...traded now.”

“We are!”

“Yeesh...it’s *weird* hearing you talking in my voice. Isn’t there any way to change

that?

“Uh...not without surgery? Or nano-implant surgery, I guess. It’s a voice box. Flesh and blood. I talk in my own cadences, but the pitch is going to be yours. Sorry ‘bout that. Some swappers have vocoder implants, but I didn’t think we really needed to go that far to start out.”

“I already had you build a computer into my brain, I don’t think a vocoder would have been too much on top of that...but maybe later.”

“Anyway, it’s *my* brain now! Well...okay, actually it isn’t. I won’t be touching any of your squishy bits; I’ll just run out of the implants. But still.”

Rochelle rolled her eyes. “Okay, so now what?”

“Now...*boom!*”

Suddenly Rochelle felt her own body involuntarily splitting apart, sliding, and changing. *De-Fuse command*, she realized—but even as she realized it, it finished, and there she was, standing on all four paws, next to her human body with someone else’s mind in it.

Rochelle looked over at her. “So...here we are, I guess. Yay us.”

“Yes...” Uncia said slowly. “Yay us.”

Uncia opened her eyes on a new world. *Imagine that! Opening my eyes! Well, okay, I opened my eyes as a cat plenty of times, but those were hardlight lids, or metal optic shutters...not actual flesh and blood eyelids. Eyelids! I have eyelids!*

She looked around. Everything looked the wrong size—bigger than it was in her usual shell, but smaller than when she was in the Minima. Her own body was sitting, blinking, looking around itself—with Shelley in it, of course. Uncia did the usual in-a-new-body thing of raising her arms and looking at them, flexing her fingers and feeling how they moved. “This is real! This is really real! I mean, I’ve simmed it and all, but there’s such a difference in real life...”

“Yes, isn’t there?” Rochelle mused. “If I’m understanding this correctly, we’ve both got some training fetters on us for the moment. You so you don’t sprain something by accident, and me so I don’t accidentally hurt anyone else. We can disable them later once we’ve gotten the hang of things.”

“Yeah, that seems fair.” Uncia looked down at her body, still clad in Rochelle’s standard “Easy Fuse” jumpsuit. “We should go out somewhere. You know, for dinner or something.”

Rochelle peered at her, ears cocking forward. “‘Dinner,’ huh?”

Uncia rolled her eyes, feeling the muscles in her eye sockets twitch them back and forth. *Weird*. “Okay, maybe drinks too. Just one or two! Y’know, to see what they taste like.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Honest, I’m *not* going to get your body drunk again. Especially since I’m *living* in it now. I’ve learned my lesson about that, really!”

“I promised I’d let the matter drop, and I will. Or at least I’ll try to. It’s just...it is my body, you know? I kinda worry about it a little if I’m not in it.”

Uncia snorted. “Yeah? How you think I feel about what you’re doing with mine?”

“So maybe we should both just promise to be on our best behavior with each other’s stuff, then?”

“Yeah, I guess. So anyway, let’s get changed and get going!” Uncia glanced down

at her coveralls and imagined them changing to a dress. Predictably, nothing happened. It took her a moment to realize why. “Oh...crap. I’m...actually going to have to physically take these off and put some other clothes on, aren’t I?”

Rochelle snorted. “Yeah, real clothing is such a *pain*, isn’t it?”

Uncia rolled her eyes again. “Oh, put a sock in it. I’ll be in your quarters getting changed.”

“Be sure and fold those coveralls and put them away!”

“Yes, Mom.” Uncia flounced off up the corridor to the hatch to the small stateroom they’d installed in part of the cargo bay for the trip.

“You need any help getting your clothes changed? Sometimes it can be tricky the first time, especially the bra...”

“I’ve simmed this lots. I think I can handle it.”

“I still say I *could* have handled it.” Uncia stepped back out of the stateroom, now wearing a simple cotton dress and flat sandals. Her hair was in a braid that ran the length of her back.

Rochelle padded out after her. “Probably so, but the bar’s only open for a few more hours.”

Uncia rolled her eyes. Rochelle thought she was getting really good at that gesture. “Oh sure, be that way. Just wait’ll you have to...you know, swap out your batteries or something. I’ll bet you won’t get *that* right the first time either.”

“Probably so! Which is why I’m lucky I have a partner here to help me out with all that if I need it.”

“Hmph. Well, come on, then. You gonna be wearing the full-sized me, for this?” Uncia walked back to the hardlight cargo elevator in the middle of the floor.

Rochelle padded along after her. “I think it’s probably best I do that for the first little while, ‘til I’m used to mode-changes and such. I want to make sure I’ve got plenty of practice like that before I try mastering the Minima. Y’know, like you’re going with flats for now rather than trying heels.”

“Hey, I don’t think you’d be happy with me if I fell and broke your neck.” Uncia grinned. “Like you say, I want to try being you on ‘basic mode’ first, and not mess with all those weird body-language mods until I’ve got the hang of basic human.”

Rochelle glanced back over her shoulder toward the flight deck, where Chet and Nils were still sitting, watching them. “Don’t wait up for us, you two! We’ll be prowling for a while.”

Nils nodded. “Enjoy yourselves!”

Chet gave them a friendly wave. “See you when you get back!”

“Right!” Rochelle glanced back at herself again, as she’d already done half a dozen times since the switch. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t looked at Uncia’s body through Uncia’s eyes plenty of times, but that had always been while wearing her in Fuser mode. It was a whole different experience to see that body on four legs.

“So, you gonna hit the elevator or shall I?”

“Oh, uh, hang on. Still getting the hang of this interface.” Rochelle reached out and sent a command, and the elevator began lowering them out of sight.

As the pair sank from view and the hatch slid shut above them, Chet shook his head and glanced over at Nils. “Well, that was a thing, wasn’t it?”

Nils sneezed. “Yes. Yes, it was.” He gave Chet a long, thoughtful look.

Chet grinned at him. “Sizing me up to see if I’d be a good fit for a swap?”

“Well...I guess.” Nils gave his head a shake, ears flopping around. “I hadn’t really thought about it before. I mean, not *seriously*. But you know, you’re right. I don’t think this is just going to be a passing fling for them. And I just *know* it’ll only be a few hours ‘til the nagging starts. If even that much.”

“So what’re you thinking?”

“Well, while they were in there changing, I was just fast-timing through all the documentation and modules and blueprints Uncia shared across to me.” He gave the back of a paw a couple of licks. “I may just be a government-issue jarhead, but it all seemed pretty straightforward. So I guess if you’re willing to risk having your grey matter scrambled, I’m willing to chance the same for my true-blue-Q.” He sat up on his haunches. “So...you wanna?”

“Hey, I’ll try anything once. Let’s do it.” He grinned. “Maybe we can get to the bar before they leave and give them a surprise or two.”

Chet stood up. “I think that sounds like it might just about be my speed. Ready when you are, pard.”

“Then let’s get this party started.” Nils’s hardlight flickered out, and they Fused.

A little while later, Rochelle the snow leopard and Uncia the girl sat across from each other at a corner table in the small bar near the *Great Western’s* diplomatic sector. The place had become a sort of de facto gathering spot for many of the passengers, given that the diplomats took pride in making sure that the best of their respective worlds was on display and, in the case of the bar, available for quaffing. Of course, they saved the *really* good stuff for themselves, but even the second-rate stuff wasn’t bad.

At the moment, Rochelle and Uncia were keeping to themselves. None of their friends were around at the moment, and they didn’t really feel like facing them anyway. Uncia had a small Long Island ice tea in front of her, and was sipping it carefully. Rochelle tried to be good, but she couldn’t resist asking, “You do realize that it’s just *named* for tea, right? It’s actually got booze in it.”

Uncia rolled her eyes. “Oh, ha ha. I like the taste, okay? And it’s really not too bad.”

“Can you even get intoxicated given that you’re thinking with the Q implants, not my grey matter?”

“Well, I’m still using the organic hindbrain and endocrine system and such. If I didn’t have those running, your body would get all out of whack, so I am. Just not your thinky bits. It still works out the same, more or less. At least as far as the coordination goes. I’m just more lucid than I’d be if I were all squishy-brained is all. And I can even *simulate* being drunk there, if I want. Not that I *do* want.”

“Riiiiiiight. Well, as long as you know when to say when, we’re good, I think.”

Uncia turned her head, and her eyes widened. “Hey...is that Chet and Nils? The body language is all wrong—for *both* of them.”

Rochelle turned to look to the door, where the human and snow leopard had just walked in. “Well, huh. Looks like we started a fad.”

“Yeah. Wow, look at Nils...he’s kind of clumsy.” The man was leaning against the leopard as he half-stumbled forward, letting the cat RIDE take much of his weight.

“He probably didn’t sim this as much as you did. He’s getting used to it. Hey, you

two! Come on over here. Nils, can I get you anything?”

“Just a cream soda for me,” Nils said, with his inflections but Chet’s voice. “Not really into the whole booze thing.”

“Sure thing.” Rochelle tapped into the bar’s order system and sent it off. “You two okay? You must have come right down as soon as you swapped.”

Chet chuckled, leopard tail swishing. “Never really been one for a whole lot of practice. I like to learn by doing.”

Nils nodded. “I think we’ve got it under control.” He turned to look at Uncia. “So...howdy, stranger.”

“Hey!” Uncia giggled. “Nice to meet you in the flesh! At least this way we’re both about the same size.”

Nils grinned. “Maybe, but you still outclass me.”

“Oh, I dunno. A lot of that’s just bodysculpt. I’m sure we could class you up a little, too.”

Chet cleared his throat. “Well, if it’s all the same to you...”

Uncia pouted. “Awww, gotta be a stick in the mud...”

Rochelle peered over at Chet. “Are you okay in there? You know, you could have asked me to help you get set up. I’d have been glad to...”

“From everything we read, it seemed like something any RIDE could do, and Nils and I kind of wanted to work it out for ourselves. Learning new stuff is kind of fun.”

Uncia piped up. “Hey, we’re gonna order dinner! You want us to Fuse for eating it?”

“Nah, there’ll be time for that later. You should get to have your first human meal by yourselves.”

“Yay! I’mma have a rare steak! What you want, Nils?”

“Oh, whatever you’re having sounds fine with me. Food is food.”

Uncia giggled. “Well, maybe ‘food is food’ if the only food you ever eat is military rations. But hey, *steak dinner!*”

Rochelle got a private comm request from Chet. After a moment, she figured out how to open it. “What’s up?”

“Oh, just wanted to chat privately. Nice to see them so happy, don’t you think?”

Rochelle chuckled. “Yeah. It’s a new experience for them, after all. They don’t get a whole lot of those.”

“True enough. But it’s not exactly same-old same-old for you and me, either.”

“Yeah, you’ve got that right.” Rochelle looked down at herself. “I want to see what it’s like to put this body through its paces. And to hunt in Nature Range. Stuff like that. Stuff that I always watched Uncia do and wondered about.”

Chet sent a toothy grin emoticon. “Get right down to it, this is all pretty amazing. I want to see what it would be like to fly the *Maxima* by wire like this without a human on board. I’ll bet I could pull some incredible Gs. Of course, that’ll have to wait a few months.”

“Yeah. But anyway, can you believe it? We’re RIDEs. We’re really, truly RIDEs. We can do whatever RIDEs can.” She shot a sly glance at him. “And we can do it *how* the RIDEs can, too. So, you wanna?”

Chet winked. “Let’s get the kids in bed first, and then we’ll see.”

“So...uh...do you need any, uh, guidance?” Rochelle sat on her feline haunches in

the *Maxima's* main cargo bay, peering through the door at Uncia as she sat before the mirror in Rochelle's small bedroom.

"Nah, I think I'm good. I'm not exactly going out for the evening. I'm just gonna step across the hall! So I'm just gonna wear a simple dress, maybe do something nice with my hair..." She giggled. "A'course, given our nanites, even our 'simple' dresses aren't so simple, huh?"

Rochelle rolled her eyes. "That's...*not* what I meant."

"What? You seriously gonna offer to teach me about the birds and the bees?"

Uncia snorted. "C'mon. I've lived inside your head for ages now. And even if I hadn't, Fuser forms are built for sex to be 'familiar' to the human operators. So it'll be same-old same-old. Really, *I* should be offering to tutor *you* about what goes where."

"Uh..." Rochelle considered that for a moment. "Well...if you're sure. The contraceptive implant's still working normally, right?"

Uncia groaned. "Shelley, that's the fourth time you've asked me that. It's run continuously since you crossed without even a hiccup. You think it's suddenly going to go on the blink *now*?"

"I know, I know." Rochelle sighed. "Just nerves, I guess. It's...really really *weird* seeing someone else about to take your body and go...well, you know."

"How do you think *I* feel?" Uncia turned to look at her. "I mean, just because my body was built instead of grown doesn't mean I'm not still kind of attached to it. And it is a little weird knowing that you and Chet are going to be shaking the shuttle out there while Nils and I are in his room."

"We'd have to be a little heavier for the shuttle to actually *shake*..."

"You *know* what I mean." Uncia ran her hands through her hair, and the nanites drew it back into a braid. "Well, I guess I'm good. I'll see you two later. Don't do anything I wouldn't do, okay?"

Rochelle moved aside to let Uncia step through. "We'll be lucky if we manage even a few of the things you *do* do, but we'll see how it goes."

Uncia stepped to the door of Chet's space across the way, knocked, and grinned as Nils opened the door in slacks and a sweatshirt. Uncia stepped inside, the door closed, and they were hidden from view.

Chet padded forward to stand next to Rochelle. "Well, there they are. Are you feeling anywhere near as weirded out as I am, knowing that our bodies are off having a good time without us along?"

"It's just one of those things you have to get used to, I guess. At least we're not exactly the only ones having this problem. Maybe there's a support group already."

"Well, you're the one who's good at net searches. I'll just have to trust you to find it." Chet chuckled. "So, uh...how are we gonna do this? Maybe we should just skip straight to Nature Range?"

Rochelle cocked her ears forward. "Why, you having second thoughts?"

"Not *exactly*." Chet sat on his haunches and scratched diffidently behind an ear. "It's just...you know, I always used to laugh a little at Nils for how awkward the size differential between his and Uncia's shells made him feel. But now that we're in their bodies...seriously, you *are* rather, uh, impressive."

"Aww, that just means there's more of me to love!" Rochelle giggled. "Besides, Uncia assures me that she has absolutely *no* complaints on how well the two of them were able to, uh, 'interface.' So I'm guessing that it won't be a problem for you and me,

either.”

“Well, if you say so.” Chet chuckled. “I was just about to make some kind of joke about feeling inadequate...but given your nanites, I felt pretty inadequate for most of the time since we met. Come to think of it, since we’re both inorganic right now, this might be the first time either one of us can be absolutely sure we don’t have to worry about ‘pheromones’ at all.”

“So maybe we should enjoy it, huh? C’mon, let’s go over there to where we have more room...”

“Works for me.”

As Rochelle padded out into the more open space in the center of the cargo deck, she abruptly stopped in her tracks as something popped up in her augmented reality display. Chet halted, too. “What is it?”

Rochelle sputtered. “Why that little *minx*. She left me a *how-to doc*. With *diagrams*.” She snorted. “*The Panthera Sutra*, it’s titled.”

“That could be useful.”

“Well, maybe if we get stuck.” Rochelle paused. “Sorry, unfortunate imagery there. Poor choice of words. Anyway, I’m *not* reading this yet. I think we can figure this out on our own.”

“I guess I’m with you.” Chet cocked his head. “So how do we begin?”

Rochelle turned her snow leopard body around to face him. “Oh, I think...like *this!*” She sprang. Taken quite by surprise, Chet went down, squirming.

Not too much later, all was giggles and purrs.

“So, here we are. Just the two of us.” Nils looked down at his new human body—the one that was on loan from his partner. He’d read memories of Chet in this position many times, but this was the first time he’d actually looked down and seen it as himself in real time. “This is new.”

“Uh-huh!” Uncia stood by the door to the room. She had it open just a crack and was peering through. “Ooooh, they’re starting to go at it!” she whispered, stifling a giggle. “It’s kind of funny to watch...they don’t really know what they’re doing, but they’re very enthusiastic.” She beckoned to Nils. “C’mon, take a peek!”

Nils got up from the bed and moved over, putting his eye to the crack as Uncia moved aside. Uncia was right—Chet and Rochelle weren’t the most experienced operators of their new bodies, but what they lacked in expertise they made up in gusto. Nils watched for a moment, then closed the door. “Good enough. But let’s give ‘em some privacy now.”

“Awww...okay.” Uncia sat down on the edge of the bed, running a hand through the hair she’d had to move out of the way. “Man, it’s so weird, this hair being *real*, not a hologram or hardlight. It *feels* different. Hadn’t expected that.”

“Looks nice on you, though.”

“Thanks! Uh...do you like it? I know from Shelley’s memories, it really turned some of her boyfriends and girlfriends on. Not sure *why*, though. I mean, it’s very pretty and all, but it doesn’t really *do* anything.” Uncia shook her head. “I guess human turn-ons just don’t make sense. But then, what about them really *does*?”

Nils chuckled. “Y’know, when you wanted to do this, I wasn’t sure how it would look, us being in these bodies. Was I going to have a hard time thinking of you as *you*, and not Shelley?”

Uncia cocked her head. “Well, are you?”

“That’s the funny thing. No. Your body language is so different, I’d no more confuse you for her than I’d confuse her out there—” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “—for you. You’re definitely still you and not her.”

“I know, right? I feel the same way. I don’t even know if I could *pretend* to be her. I’m not that good an actress. I’m sure I don’t know how those body-swap body thieves get away with it. And you’re *definitely* not Chet.”

Nils shrugged. “Well, the body thieves had an easier time of it because nobody knew the body-swap was even possible, so they didn’t even suspect anything was up. Hell, I’m still not sure I believe it myself, and here I am.”

Uncia giggled. “Yes. Here we are.” She winked. “So, are you ready to try doing it ‘human style’?”

“Well, why not?” Nils grinned. “I’ve peeked at enough of Chet’s memories to think I have a good idea what goes where.”

“Oooh, really? Chet actually had girlfriends other than his hand?”

“Well, there’s *your* partner...”

“Ah, touché!” Uncia smiled. “Really, like I told them, it’s not all that different from bumping uglies in Fuser form.”

“Yeah. Uh...just so you know, Hendra/Antigua are on the ship, too. If I were to go get reacquainted with them, and they wanted to...uh, you wouldn’t get jealous or anything, would you?”

“Well, I’d probably *be* a little jealous, just ‘cuz that’s how human nature is. But would I be a bitch about it, you mean? Nah. We’re not married or anything, and she was your old partner. But I’d ask Chet if *he’s* okay with it, first, being as it’s his body and all. Not like you’re gonna catch anything from an Intie, but polite’s polite.”

“Oh, sure. Didn’t even think of that.” Nils shook his head. “This body-borrowing is going to take some getting used to.”

“So maybe we should start getting used to it.” Uncia beckoned Nils over to the bed. “C’mon over here and let’s get comfortable, hmm?”

It was around fifteen hours later by Rochelle’s internal chronometer that Uncia finally emerged from Nils’s quarters. Rochelle’s body’s nanites being what they were, her hair and clothes naturally looked immaculate, and the only sign of what she’d been doing was the lazy smile across her face. Rochelle glanced up from where she and Chet were cuddled together in Uncia and Nils’s RIDE bodies. “Good morning! Did you enjoy yourselves?”

“For the most part. You?”

Rochelle purred. “We managed to get by.”

“Get *by*, or get—”

“No innuendo, please, it’s too early.” Rochelle yawned. “It was...interesting. Thanks for the tutorial, by the way. We didn’t need it, at least not at first, but it’s given me some interesting ideas for next time.”

Uncia smirked. “That’s about what I figured.” She stretched, and ran her hands through her hair. Then she shook her head. “Ugh...this...”

“What?”

Uncia leaned to the left so she could bring her hair around in front of her, and then held out both arms to let it drape across them. It still reached most of the way to

the floor. “This *hair*. I mean...I understand why you like it. It’s very pretty, it makes you feel extra-girly, and it gives you something to do with your hands. But...for me, it’s just *too much*. I could see wearing it like this for special occasions, maybe, but for all the time...it’s kind of annoying.”

Rochelle cocked her head. “*You’re* the one who gave it to me, you know.”

“Not really—my rich-girl Fuser nanos’ pre-programmed crossrider templates are what gave it to you. And if I had any idea *I’d* eventually get stuck with it, I think I’d have kept the length a little more sensible.” Uncia rolled her eyes.

“But you wear it the same way a lot of the time in Fuser form. You don’t seem to have a problem with it then.”

“That’s because *that* hair is hardlight and I can get it out of the way if I want to. Half the time I just turn off the ‘hard’ part and leave it pure holographic, and you don’t even notice. But this...ugh. We kept ending up with one of us lying on top of it last night, which led to ouchies when I tried to move.”

Rochelle flicked her ears. “There’s a setting where you can have it move out of the way, you know.”

“Tried that. Having my hair *slithering* all over the place by itself was even *more* annoying than us lying on top of it. I finally just had to lie on my back and drop it all over the head of the bed. I’d *really* kinda like to cut it off.”

“Um.” Rochelle cocked her head. “You know, I *like* having that much hair. I tried cutting it off once, and it darned near drove me crazy. Took me days to grow it all back again, even with ‘sculpt nanites.’”

“I know, but I think I could actually set it up so you could have it back again in just a few minutes when we swap back. I’ve run simulations and it *should* work.”

“Um.” Rochelle considered that. “I think I’d like to know more about that later—but for now, I think it’s just a little early to be making that kind of big changes. Table it for a little bit?”

Uncia dropped the hair, and it fell back into place. She sighed. “All right, I guess—for *now*.”

“So what’re you gonna do today?”

“I was thinking that Nils and I might just...y’know, wander around the *Western*. Visit some people, check in with Hendra and Antigua, see what there is to see...”

Beside Rochelle, Chet yawned and blinked an eye open. “There’s *not* much to see. You saw it already, your first three days aboard.”

“Well, yeah, but we were RIDEs then. Now that we’re in human bods, we can see it with new eyes—literally!”

“I guess it’s something to do, at any rate.” Rochelle chuckled. “Chet and I were thinking of doing a little Nature Range.”

Uncia raised an eyebrow. “Oh, yeah? Gonna go into Rama and say hi to all the cyber-folks?”

Rochelle shook her head. “We might wait a bit before we go out in company. Probably use one of the secondary Q-frames they’ve set up for private sessions at first.”

Uncia nodded. “That makes sense. Good spot to start experimenting, too. It’ll be a completely safe environment—nobody there except the two of you, unless you invite someone in.”

“That’s the idea.”

Uncia stretched. “Well...guess we’ll see you guys later! We’ve got these new

bodies to try out and everything...”

“Comm us if you get into any trouble.”

“Funny, that’s what I was just about to tell *you* to do!” Uncia giggled. “Well, c’mon, Nils, we gotta get a move on! Let’s leave the kennel to the kitty-cats!”

“I’m coming.” Nils stepped out the door from Chet’s quarters, wearing a pair of Chet’s jeans and one of his T-shirts. “Hey, you two. Take it easy.”

“Of course they’ll take it easy, they’re cats now!”

“Well, I dunno. Since when did *you* ever take it easy?”

“Hey, good point!” Uncia and Nils stepped onto the elevator. “See ya later, you guys!” She waved, and she and Nils sank out of sight.

Rochelle peered after them. “Well, there go our bodies...”

“Don’t worry, it’s not as if they can get very far, being as that we’re in deep space and all.”

“They don’t *have* to go very far to get into trouble. That’s what I’m afraid of.” Rochelle rolled her eyes. “But I guess Uncia’s a big girl and can take care of herself.”

“Just as long as they take care of *our* ‘selves’ while they’re at it.” Chet yawned. “Mmm...you know, I *could* get used to this.”

“Uh-huh. So...want to try out this ‘Nature Range’ thing? Maybe we should get a little hunting in.”

“Sure, why not. If we’re going to see how the other half lives, let’s go all the way.”

Rochelle curled up in the hollow at the back of their nice warm cave. It had been an enjoyable week of hunting—or at least a *subjective* week. Only about fifteen hours had passed outside at the fast-time rate they were using, mindful that Uncia and Nils might not want to spend that much time in human guise, but they’d packed it full of hunting, exploring, and...other things. Lots and *lots* of other things.

They’d decided to use one of the public-access Nature Range servers. They could have simulated it in their own computers, but that would have constrained them to a smaller area, and the processing power required would have slowed them down a little. This way, they could run at any time-expansion rate they wanted and wouldn’t be able to sneak peeks at parts of it they hadn’t been yet.

Across the cave from her, Chet yawned. “Well, that was a fun week. Can’t say I expected it to be quite like...it has been. What do you say, want to head back to the real world now?”

“Guess we ought to. Don’t want Un-hon and Nils to get to worrying about us.” Rochelle stretched, then reached out to bring up the log-out interface. But to her surprise, when she tapped the button, she got a warning pop-up. “What the...?”

“What’s wrong?” Nils asked.

“I can’t log out. It says...” She stared, eyes widening. The box said that logging out at this point could result in critical personality damage to a nascent subprocess. Of course, her RI-hacking technical knowledge immediately translated that...but the translation kept bouncing off.

“It says...?” Nils repeated patiently.

“It says...I’m *pregnant*.”

“Right, so, are we ready?”

“If you’re sure about this.” Nils glanced across at Uncia, as they stood in Rochelle

and Chet's human bodies within an airlock. They were wearing harnesses that included a small power source, hardlight emitters, and lifter motors—not unlike one of the rigs space-divers used, only specialized to space maneuvering rather than re-entry. They also included emergency air tanks, but they weren't expected to be necessary for this.

"Sure I'm sure!" Uncia grinned at him. "Shelley and Chet are getting to explore the virtual world, so it's only fair we get to explore the real one. And this cargo pod is about the only place on the ship we can explore without running into people. Maybe it's not a snow-covered mountain forest, but at least there's plenty of room to look around."

"It's not like we're going to find anything *interesting* here, you know. It's just where they keep all the supplies and provisions for the trip."

"Yeah, but at least we can read the codes on the crates and see what kinds of things we have. Maybe they packed something nobody told us about. Gourmet food? Extra RIDE parts? Who knows what we'll find in here?" Uncia grinned. "It should even still be pressurized, but we've got these oxy tanks and hardlight rigs for just in case."

Nils glanced at the display next to the lock's inner door. "It *says* it's still pressurized. No gravity, though. Everything's bolted down."

"Makes sense. They don't expect people to be in there, so why would they waste energy on gravity? But that just means it's even better!" Uncia giggled. "We can *fly!*"

"All right, well, if you're sure."

Uncia checked the tight coil of braid that secured her hair against flying around. "I'm sure, and I'm ready. Let's push off!" She slapped the access button by the airlock, and the hatch door slid open.

Beyond was darkness for a moment, then the automatic lighting came on. Within was a huge open cargo bay, with crates and shelves secured to walls, floor, and ceiling. An open space in the middle led all the way to another lock at the opposite wall, a hundred meters away.

"So, c'mon, let's see what we can see!" Uncia fired her lifters and drifted out into open space in the middle of the cargo bay.

Rochelle covered her face with her paws and groaned. "Uncia is *never* going to let me hear the last of this."

Chet blinked. "But...how could that even happen? I thought it *couldn't* happen unless the server was set up that way."

"That's why Uncia's never going to let me hear the last of it. *I didn't check the environment variables* when I launched the session." Rochelle sighed. "Whoever used this server last must have wanted a kid, so they set up the server to grant them one—and for some reason it never got reset before we started." She shook her head. "I'm just glad they apparently only wanted *one* kid, and not a whole litter."

Chet paused, cocking his head, ears flicking forward. "So...what are we going to do?"

Rochelle blinked at him. "We'? *You're* not the one who's pregnant here..."

"Maybe not, but I'm the one who made it happen." He gave his head a quick shake. "And I'm the one who didn't ask you ahead of time if it was all right. Maybe if I had done that, you'd have thought to check the variables. I just *assumed* it was safe. And I'm not going to be like all the guys who did that before RIDEs were even invented. So whatever plans you're gonna make, include me in."

Rochelle blinked again. "Oh. Well." She cocked her head. "Well, there really

aren't many choices. Anything that would harm the baby isn't an option. I could just... put the subprocess into storage for some other time. Sort of...freeze the egg, as it were. But...that feels like cheating. If I did that, I might never get up the nerve to go back and finish the job."

"So what's left?"

"Well...that kid Jeanette Leroq was able to raise Tamarind from childhood in just a couple hours of real-life fast-time. If she could do it, alone, I can't see why I couldn't too, especially with your help." She sighed. "I just wish I could reach Uncia. I've tried to comm her, but she and Nils are off-grid right now—exploring the ship without distractions, they said. I don't want to go into deep fast-time without letting them know first. They deserve a chance to be involved if they want to."

"So maybe let's drop back to 1:1 time scale for a while until they show up again? At least that way it won't be such a long time."

"Sounds like a plan. I guess if we have to we could have you go out there and find them."

Chet shook his head. "I'd rather not leave you. If you're pregnant, *we're* pregnant."

"You know, I *knew* there was something I liked about you. C'mere, you..."

Chet blinked. "Is it safe to do that now that you're...you know?"

"Well, it's not as if I can get pregnant *again*..."

The first compartment was easy enough to traverse, being fundamentally open space. In fact, it was actually kind of *boring*. Uncia hoped there would be something more interesting on the other side of the next bulkhead.

As it turned out, there was. "Well now, *this* is more like it." The next compartment was a maze of poorly stacked and organized cargo containers. It looked like there was only one route through it—a twisty path that wove amid the clutter. "Geez, how on Zharus did it ever get packed like this?"

Nils frowned. "It didn't. Or at least, it shouldn't have. I'm just a ground-pounder, but I've learned a whole lot about ships and shuttles since partnering up with Chet, kind of by osmosis. There's no way any cargo master worth his paycheck let this pod get loaded this way."

Uncia turned her head to look at him. "So what're you saying, something's screwy here?"

"Yeah. And...I'm not getting a connection to the ship's data or comm net. I think maybe we ought to go back...tell someone about this."

Uncia snorted. "Tell them what, that we were poking around where we weren't supposed to and saw something wrong? Besides, they probably already know. We've been underway for weeks now."

"Not necessarily. This section contains stuff earmarked for after we get to Totalia. Nobody's had any reason to come here to fetch anything out yet."

"Well, I still say we haven't seen enough to give us a reason for us to go back. And besides, threading through that maze looks like fun!" With that, Uncia pushed off and goosed her lifter pack.

Nils sighed, and launched himself after her. "I just hope we don't end up regretting this..."

Winding their way through the narrow maze was fun, for some definition of

“fun.” They did hit a couple of dead ends and have to backtrack, but they eventually managed to find their way through. Eventually, they reached the lock at the other end. “Okay, are we ready to go back now?” Nils asked. “Someone went to a lot of trouble to mess this cargo pod up that badly.”

“Right, so now we can see just what they were trying to hide!”

Uncia started to reach up to the access panel, but Nils put out a hand to stop her. “Hold on. You're not just risking your own body here, you're risking someone else's. Don't you think Shelley and Chet might have something to say about this?”

Uncia paused. “Yeah...I guess you're right.” She sighed. “Maybe we can get them and all four come back here.”

“At least that might be a little safer.” Nils shook his head. “C'mon, let's head back.” He took her arm, and they turned away from the door. But just as they were starting to push off, they froze at an unmistakable KER-CHUNK sound from behind them. Slowly, in unison, they both turned to stare at the bulkhead door, which was starting to slide open from the other side.

The hatch slid aside before they could move, and the open doorway was filled to overflowing by an immense eagle owl Integrate. “Well, now,” the owl remarked. “*WHOOOOO* might you be?”

Rhianna stood on one of the observation decks within the Ark, looking out over the hab modules where all the living animals they were bringing were ensconced. The modules were arranged in the form of a series of interlocking hexagonal platforms, each with its own hardlight containment field to keep its inhabitants separated from the others. Some of the larger habs were made up of multiple hexagons configured as one area.

It was all very impressive—and also one of the only areas with actual vegetation in the ship, parts of it had been opened up as a sort of de facto “park” for people to come and relax—as long as the traffic didn't cause any actual damage to its inhabitants. Noah, the EI in charge, was keeping a careful eye on that.

“Y'know, someone's made up a mod a' this place for Nature Range?” Kaylee remarked, resting her paws on the railing and peering over it. “So you can go on a rampage an' take down some buffalo an' stuff.” She sneezed. “It's all very silly.”

“As long as they confine their predation to the *virtual* kind, I have no objections,” Noah declared.

Rhianna nodded. “People are going to have more than enough boredom to work off by the time this cruise is over. If this inspires some other ways to do it, well, it is a multi-purpose space, after all.”

Kaylee cocked her head. “All right, that's odd. Gettin' a comm from Rochelle—over the RIDE band, from virtual. Can't say I ever expected to see her usin' *those* channels. Looks like she wants to talk to you, too.”

Rhianna walked over to her. “Okay, let's take it, then.” She held out her arms for Kaylee to Fuse over her, then a moment later they were in the VR mock-up of her Freeriders Garage office that Rhianna used as a default for incoming comm traffic. The comm screen on her desk lit up with Rochelle's face. “Uh...hey.”

“What's up?”

“Uh...it's going to take some explaining.” Rochelle's snow leopard ears twitched and her eyes shifted back and forth. She looked distinctly nervous, or perhaps

embarrassed. “Can we go full virtual?”

Rhianna raised an eyebrow. “Sure, why not?”

A moment later they were standing in a forest clearing—Rhianna and Kaylee in one half, and two snow leopards in the other. After a moment, Rhianna switched her own avatar over to a lynx similar to Kaylee. *Might as well not be the only non-cat here.* “So, how’s the RIDE life treating you two so far?”

“Pretty well, actually. You might even want to try it yourself at some point,” Rochelle said. “There’s just the one thing...”

Kaylee’s ears cocked forward. “The *one* thing?”

The other snow leopard—Chet—sighed. “You might as well tell them.”

“I’m getting there! I...it’s just *embarrassing* is all.” Rochelle rolled her eyes.

“What is it?” Rhianna asked.

“It’s just...well...I forgot to check the environment variables on the server we were using for Nature Range, and, well, one thing led to another, and...and...”

“She’s just a *little* bit pregnant,” Chet said. “Just a little bit.”

“A little bit,” Rhianna said flatly. “A little bit *pregnant*.”

Kaylee stared before composing herself. “You ain’t havin’ a whole litter, are ya? I got some experience with that.”

“As I understand it, you have the *first* experience with that,” Rochelle said.

“Which is *good*, as we’ll probably need some advice along the way. The bright side is, it was just set for the one cub. But...that’s going to be plenty for our first time.”

“Congratulations?” Rhianna said.

“Uh, yeah, thanks.” Rochelle rolled her eyes again. “On the bright side, we can make time fast in here. It’ll be a long trip for us, but we’ll have a fully-grown-ish kid when we get there. And they did pack a bunch of spare shells, right? If not, I guess we can fab one.”

“You sure you want to spend like ten years in fast-time?” Kaylee asked.

“Well, we talked about that,” Chet said. “It’s not like we’re going to age any on the outside...and a war zone’s no place to try to raise a kid. So we get that part out of the way while we can.”

“We’ve still got time to make up our mind, though.” Uncia shook her head. “The one thing is, we’d kind of like to talk it over with Uncia and Nils, too, and we can’t seem to raise them. They went off exploring somewhere, and they’ve been off-net for a few hours.”

“At least we know they can’t have left the ship,” Rhianna said. “But how can they be off-net?”

“If they were in one of the cargo areas, they might be out of transceiver range,” Chet suggested. “I think that’s where they were heading. About the only place they could explore and not run into anybody.”

“So you want us to go find ‘em and haul ‘em back into comm range?”

“If you’d be so kind.” Rochelle smiled faintly. “It’s a little nerve-wracking being out of touch *right* when this happens. And I’m basically stuck in here ‘til the pregnancy runs its course.”

“Really, there shouldn’t be any reason to be out of touch on a ship this size anyway,” Rhianna mused. “So if they are, it might stand investigating just to make sure it gets fixed.” She glanced to Kaylee. “If you’re up for it, pard?”

Kaylee nuzzled her partner’s cheek. “Sounds like fun to me, pard.”

Rhianna nodded. “Right! Then, we’ll get kitted out for exploration and proceed from their last known coords.”

“Ya think we should let anyone else know ‘bout this? Like Zane or someone?” Kaylee asked.

“Probably no need to worry them over this. Doesn’t seem like a life-threatening emergency.” Rhianna shrugged. “But we can take some comm relays along and keep an open channel, so if anything does happen the rest of you will know about it.”

Rochelle nodded. “Thank you.”

“Hey, what are friends for?” Rhianna chuckled. “I think we’d best get back to the shuttle and gear up.”

“We’re already halfway back now,” Kaylee said. “I’ve been navigating us while we’ve been gabbing.”

Rhianna laughed. “Always on top of things. Right. Shelley, Chet—we’ll comm you again when we’re heading out.”

Chet nodded. “We’ll be waiting.”

Uncia and Nils stood in a fairly small section of the cargo storage container beyond the locked door. The space was fairly crowded, as they were surrounded by four Integrates. *:Don’t let on you’re a RI inside,:* Uncia sent via a quick DINsec-encrypted comm blip to Nils. *:Or they might ask for root.:*

The Integrates in question were an owl, a wyvern, a kangaroo, and an otter—named Fred, Lolly, Cassidy, and Hake, respectively, according to the otter. Uncia gave her and Nils’s names as Rochelle and Chet, which seemed to be the safest move.

Hake was apparently in charge—certainly, he was the one who was getting in Uncia and Nils’s faces and asking questions. “What’s going on? Why did we jump? Which colony is this ship jumping to?”

“Er...” Uncia said.

“What makes you think we’re jumping to a colony?” Nils asked.

Hake snorted. “Well, where else would we be going?”

“How did you even get on this ship *without* knowing where it was going?” Uncia put in.

“I’ll ask the questions here!” Hake said.

The owl cut in. “If you have to know, we just noticed a lot of materiel was being shipped out here, and we assumed it was going to one of the stations out at the system rim. We didn’t want nothing to do with that crazy-ass Appa and his crowd, so we thought somewhere out-system might be a good place to hang out for a while, or at least a jumping-off point to get to one of the Enclaves out that way.”

“So we hitched a lift,” Cassidy said. Hardlight boxing gloves flickered on and off his fists, but he wasn’t in a threatening posture—it just seemed to be a nervous habit. “Thought we could slip out when we got to where we were going.”

“Then we jumped,” Lolly added.

“Which doesn’t make any *sense*.” Hake shook his head. “I know *I* never heard anything about the export restrictions being dropped. Would’ve liked if they had. Still have some relatives on Ibn Rushd I’d like to visit. But it didn’t seem to be in the cards.” The otter waved a handpaw. “So spill it already. *What’s going on?*”

Uncia and Nils exchanged glances. “Well...it’s kind of a long story,” Uncia said. “But what it boils down to is, there’s a new colony out there nobody ever heard about,

called Totalia, and we're going to stop a civil war there before Earth finds out about it."

Hake stared at her. "You're shitting me."

"It's the truth, I'm afraid," Nils said. "Just tap the ship's data network, you'll see."

Hake shook his head. "Even if we could get to it from here, it's probably got both DINsec and Watchdog out the wazzoo, so all we'd do is let people know we're here. Which is why we're asking you."

Uncia shook her head. "Well, I'm afraid you're kinda up a creek, and all the paddles belong to someone else. As far as we know, once we get there we're not planning to leave any time soon. So you're kinda stuck."

"Oh, that's bloody *fabulous*," Cassidy snarled, turning and punching the wall with a hardlight boxing glove. "So *now* what, O Fearless Leader?"

"I'm *thinking*."

"Look, guys—the people in charge here are all decent folks," Nils said. "They won't hold it against you that you stowed away, especially if we put in a good word for you. Just come on out with us, let us explain the situation, and we'll see what we can do."

Fred shook his head. "I don't know if that's an option. We don't exactly have the, ah, tidiest pasts. Another reason we were wanting to hide outsystem for a while."

"You don't exactly have a lot of other ones," Uncia said. "You're on the same spaceship as the people who invented DINsec and the guy who clobbered Fritz. And Crazy Joe Steader, for that matter. You won't get very far trying to mutiny."

"And, uh, they won't exactly be happy if you hurt us, either," Nils put in, casting a sidelong glance at the a-little-too-outspoken Uncia.

Cassidy facepalmed with both boxing gloves. "Crazy Joe? Wasn't he the guy with that—"

"Yes," Lolly said. "He was."

Hake groaned. "We'll *discuss* it." He held out a hand. "Hand over those lifter vests, please. We'll keep you in here for now."

Uncia and Nils traded glances again, but there wasn't a whole lot they could do when faced with four Integrates. They unbuckled the vests and handed them over.

"Okay, but please don't do anything any of us will regret."

The Integrates took the vests, then retreated up the long passageway to the other cargo pod. Once they were gone, Nils and Uncia looked at each other again. "Well," Nils said. "What now?"

"Well, here we are. This is the last place their comm transponders reported in." Rhianna and Kaylee stood, Fused, in front of the airlock to the main cargo pod.

"Makes sense. If they wanted to explore somewhere they wouldn't run into other people, this's about the only place on the whole ship fer it."

"So it's time for us to do a little exploring, too. We'll probably just find they lost track of time is all. They really should have put comm relays in there."

"That's the thing, though. Why *wouldn't* they have put comm relays in there?" Kaylee wondered. "They have to know they'd be sendin' stevedores in to fetch stuff along the way, and they'd need to be able to call in if somethin' went wrong."

"Hmm. You want to go back, fetch some reinforcements?"

"We're here now, might as well check it out. We'll keep a channel open to Shelley and Chet as we go. I'll get 'em on the line now. Hey, you two receivin' us?"

“We’re getting you loud and clear,” Rochelle reported.

“Okay, good.” Rhianna reached to the airlock controls. “We’ll keep dropping comm relays as we go.” The door cycled open and they stepped through, into the zero-gravity cargo bay.

“Everything seems all right so far,” Kaylee noted. “Nobody’s in this compartment. We’re headin’ down to the next one.”

When the lock on that one cycled open, Rhianna frowned. “All right, now that’s *definitely* not supposed to be that way.”

“You mean the way someone’s shifted the cargo all around so it’s like a maze in there?” Chet said. “I’m not a cargo tech, but as a pilot I’ve learned enough about it to know that’s nowhere near proper procedure.”

“That would be what I mean, yes.” Rhianna frowned. “Are we carrying one of those stealth discs Dr. Patil gave us?”

“I never go without ‘em,” Kaylee replied. “There’s a couple in my left hip compartment.”

“Then I think it’d be a good idea that we rig for silent running from here on out,” Rhianna said, retrieving one of the discs from the left hip compartment and a pulse pistol from the right. “If we don’t check back in half an hour, let Zane know what’s going on in here.”

“What do you mean ‘what now’? Shouldn’t it be obvious? We try to escape!” Uncia said. “They might have took our lifter harnesses, but we can still kick off and push our way to the exit. Like so!” She pulled herself along a shelf of cargo crates, lined herself up with the long passage that led to the cargo lock, and pushed off with her legs, sending herself up the tube.

Then she noticed that as she got closer and closer, she slowed further and further down. There seemed to be a breeze blowing from up ahead—it looked like someone had stuck redirectors on some air vents to make them blow right down the tube—and when she reached for the wall to try to pull her way along that, her hand encountered a slick hardlight field a few centimeters away from it. After a few more seconds, she had slowed to a complete stop, just a couple of meters away from the airlock itself—then the breeze pushed her back down the passage. On the way back, she passed Nils on the way up. A couple of minutes later found them drifting back out into the cargo area again.

Nils frowned. “Well, shoot. Now what?”

Uncia considered. “Actually...I’ve got an idea.” She undid the bindings keeping her hair fastened in place and uncoiled the braids, commanding the nanites to extend her hair down her back to its full length. She positioned herself across from the passage again. “If this works, then jump after me.”

She kicked off again, but this time sent a special order to the nanites in her hair—directing them to fire their lifters continuously and push her forward. She streaked up the passage faster and faster. The nanites ran out of power and went out about three quarters of the way up, and she began to slow down, but she had ample momentum to carry her past the air vents—and the hardlight barriers had stopped there, too. “Okay, come ahead!”

As Nils positioned himself and pushed off again, Uncia braced her feet and one hand against three of the redirectors then leaned forward, pushing her hair forward to where it would catch the breeze. It streamed out to its full two-meter length—and Nils

slowed to a halt just barely within reach. He grabbed two fistfuls of hair, and Uncia grabbed the other end and pulled him in.

Nils smirked. “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your golden hair?”

Uncia pulled him past the redirectors and pulled her hair back out of the breeze. “Something like that.” She shook her head. “Wow. All that hair being useful for once. Man, Shelley’s never going to let me hear the end of *that*.”

“We’ve made it to the airlock, so now what do we do?”

“What else can we do? Try to make it to the other side without them noticing, hopefully. Or else hope we find something useful along the way.” Uncia twisted around to work the hatch controls. “Fingers crossed they didn’t leave a sentry.”

“If they wanted to talk amongst themselves, either they’re all *here* or they’re all somewhere else.”

“Cheerful thought.” The hatch slid open, revealing no Integrates in sight. “Okay, c’mon. And...here.” She pushed a file across over short-range comm. “This is the cargo manifest. I downloaded it before coming in here, thinking maybe we could look around and see what was what. But...well, scan the crate transponders as we pass. There’s got to be guns or comm packs or something useful in *one* of ‘em.” She pushed off from the side of the cargo container, her hair streaming out behind her. “Ugh...still need to recharge the nanos before I can control my hair again.”

“I think it looks nice, myself.” Nils waited a moment, then followed her into space. Without the lifter packs, their progress was slower, as they moved hand over hand along the walls, or pushed off to catch themselves on another surface. Along the way, they checked out every crate they could, while also keeping an eye and ear out for signs of their Integrate captors.

Uncia reached a corner and pushed on, her hair swinging around as she turned. The momentum nearly pulled her loose from her grip on the wall. “Eek! I’ve got to get this under control.” She held on a moment, running her hand through her hair, and it gradually drew back together into a braid, a little slowly. “Got some juice back, at least. And it’s recharging. Should be back to full in a few minutes. Good.”

They drifted slowly through the maze, retracing the steps they remembered. “Hold up—here.” Nils held up a hand. “This crate. The manifest says it contains long range comm gear. We should be able to punch through to the ship from here with it.” He considered the wooden crate thoughtfully. “But...how do we get in? You don’t have a prybar on you, do you?”

“I might have something better. Hang on a minute.” She drifted over to the crate, and put her hands on it. “It’s just a matter of getting these nanites to do what I want them to...” She closed her eyes, and a moment later, brown lines appeared in the wood around her fingers, then spread out to encompass a larger area of the wood. The wood burned through, and the segments popped out, floating into place around Uncia’s hands—and a moment later she was wearing articulated wooden gauntlets.

Nils blinked. “What was *that*?”

“The nanites’ custom-tailoring function. I just convinced them I wanted gloves made out of that wood, and here we are.” She flexed her hands, the wooden pieces moving around each other. “And now you’ve got a hole in the crate where the wood was.”

“That’s...pretty clever, actually.” He reached into the hole and rummaged around, then a moment later pulled out a hand-held radio unit. “Let’s see if this works.” He

turned it on and fiddled with the dials. “Hello, is anybody out there?”

A moment later, a response came back. “Nils, is that you?”

“Rhianna! Where are you?”

“Just entering the second cargo pod. The one that’s done up like a maze.”

“Uh...listen. There’s some Integrates in here. Stowaways. They—”

Cassidy the kangaroo appeared around the next corner, and launched himself in their direction. “That’s just about enough of *that*, mate.” He knocked the radio out of Nils’s hand with one boxing glove, and shoved him back against the wall of crates with the other. “And what are you two doing out?”

“Looking for you guys, actually!” Uncia said. “You left the air conditioning on. We were worried you might run up a bill.”

“Oh, ha ha bloody ha. All right, get on with you.” He shoved them ahead, toward the center of the cargo pod. A moment later they drifted out into a larger open area where the other three waited. “Found this lot with a comlink trying to radio out.”

“Yep, and we’ve got friends on the way,” Uncia said. “So listen, it’s like I said—just give yourselves up and we’ll put in a good word for you. This is all just a misunderstanding.”

“I’d listen to them,” Rhianna’s voice echoed from somewhere. “You don’t have anywhere you can go, and there’s no need for anyone to get hurt.”

“Speak for yourself.” Fred the owl raised his wings, light gathering between them.

“Fred!” Hake growled. “Cut that out! You’d punch right through the cargo pod and out we’d all go. In the middle of a jump.”

“Oh.” The owl lowered his wings, the light dissipating. “Right.”

Hake smacked him on the back of the head. “And who were you gonna shoot *at*, huh?” He shook his head. “I guess it’s time to admit we screwed up on this one, and do whatever we can to straighten things out. All right, fine: we surrender. Take us to your leader.”

“And that was that,” Uncia said. She and Nils were sitting in a mountainside clearing along with Rochelle and Chet on one side and Kaylee and Rhianna on the other, all wearing their feline avatars. “They left with ship security. I expect they’ll put them to work undoing all that mess they made in the cargo pod in the name of making it harder for people to get through to find them.”

“Weird.” Rochelle flicked an ear. “And you said they seemed to know Crazy Joe?”

“Yeah. Haven’t had the chance to ask him about it yet, though. I mean, we just got back from there. Might stop by and bring it up later, though.” Uncia peered at her. “So what was it you wanted to tell me?”

“Well, uh...” After several moments of hesitation, and casting bewildered looks at everyone else in the clearing in the hopes that someone would throw her a lifeline, Rochelle sighed. “I realize you’re *never* going to let me hear the end of this. But...I didn’t check the environment variables on the Nature Range server, and...I got pregnant.”

Uncia goggled at her. “Seriously? You...I mean...that...but that’s the first thing you *always* check! I never said anything about that because I thought it would be like saying ‘always remember to tie your shoelaces’ or something.”

“Yeeees, I knooooow,” Rochelle groaned. “And after how *I* told *you* to use protection, too.”

“So what are you going to do?” Nils asked.

“Spend the next few virtual years raising a kid, it looks like,” Chet said. “At least we have the option of doing it in fast-time before we get there.”

“So, we figured we’d tell you about it and invite you to help...if you wanted,” Rochelle said.

“Uh...sure. Why wouldn’t we?” Uncia said. “Wouldn’t do for the kid to grow up without knowing their Aunt Uncia and Uncle Nils—or their Aunts Rhianna and Kaylee, for that matter. Well, if an Aunt can also be a Great-Great-Great-Great Grandma.”

“Ya still goin’ on about that? Cuz I’ll just poke you with mah cane,” Kaylee said.

“Looks like you’re not the only one with that idea, either,” Nils said. “I just did a quick search, and there are several fast-time VR creche communities, where RIDE families are getting together to raise kids the speedy way. Might want to check them out and see if any would suit you.”

Uncia nodded. “It’ll be easier to socialize them with other families around to share the load.”

“There’s a thought.” Rochelle exchanged glances with Chet, then looked back at Uncia. “You’re...taking this news rather well. I thought you’d be rolling and laughing.”

“I have learned *some* sense,” Uncia said. “I *might* be laughing on the inside, just a little, but this isn’t the kind of thing to go on about.” She giggled. “Besides, now I *finally* have a good comeback for next time you bring up me getting you drunk that one time.”

Rochelle rolled her eyes. “*That’s* the Uncia I know.”

“Seriously, it’s the sort of thing that could happen to anyone,” Nils put in. “We’ll be happy to help out however we can.”

“One thing I’m *definitely* gonna do, though, if your human bod’s going to be mine for the rest of the trip,” Uncia said. “I’ve been working on a special Fuse macro for our full-sized DE shell. I think I can use the Fuser nanites in conjunction with the take-up reel that keeps your hair in place when you Fuse to give myself a reversible haircut. Snip the hair off short and tag each end so the nanites can reconnect each one when we swap back. It might have been useful that one time, but I’m not gonna drag all that stuff around with me one moment longer than I have to!”

Rochelle nodded. “I certainly couldn’t object to anything you did at this point. Well, except for getting my *body* pregnant too.”

Uncia glanced over to Nils. “Heeeeeey, I just had an idea!”

“*No*,” the snow leopard said emphatically. Laughter filled the clearing.

THE END (for now)