

Jeanette and Tamarind: The Second- Hand Lioness

By Robotech_Master

CHAPTER 1

My name was Jeanette Leroq, and I was a habitual teen runaway. Started doing it when I was first old enough to want to, and hadn't stopped ever since; now I was 15 going on 16 and showed no signs of slowing down. But I hadn't ever been quite successful yet. I always had to stop running sooner or later when the orphanage caught up with me.

This time, I stopped running in a podunk little town called Lynchwood, a few hours north of Burnside on the coastal skimmerway. My bad luck that my picture—a photo of a slim, pixie-faced girl whose bright green eyes peeked out amid the shadows of the straight black hair hung forward to block out the world—had been beamed out to every cop shop on the route. I *knew* changing buses in a small town was a bad idea, but there wasn't anything for it; that was where the routes switched over. In a big town, you can lose yourself in all the buildings and people if you have to. But in a burg that's nothing but one street and a bus stop, you got nowhere to run when the Sheriff steps up with your photo on a hardlight display panel, and a set of handcuffs.

Frankly, I thought the handcuffs were more than a little unreasonable. I mean, come *on*, I'm a runaway orphan, not an escaped felon. But maybe she'd read my record and wasn't taking any chances.

Anyway, she stepped up to the bus as I was getting off. Tall, lean, and lanky, dirty blonde hair under a Stetson hat with holes cut in it for her palomino horse ears, big ol' RIDE-busting gun at her hip, and a mean look in her eyes. "Jeanette Leroq," she said, pronouncing it like "Gene Et Lee Rock." "Need yeh to come with me."

I looked around for an escape route, but like I said, small town, nowhere to run. A palomino horse that matched her ears was blocking off the only clear escape path. I sighed and came quietly—and that was when the handcuffs came out.

"Hey!" I complained.

"Sorry, missy, takin' no chances," the woman said. I sighed. She *had* read my record. Well, I'd just bust out again, if it came right down to it. Maybe before I got halfway back to Nextus.

Once she had the cuffs on me, she led me over to the horse, who folded down into a patrol skimmer sedan, with two seats in front and a grilled-in rear seat, which they stuffed me into. I sat and stewed.

Of course, I could have the cuffs off in thirty seconds. They were Nextus Nano specials, biometric sensing adaptive morphing units. Supposed to be the most escape-proof cuffs ever. I almost smirked. If they'd been the old fashioned dead metal kind,

they might have given me a little trouble. But the hardware in my head was more than adequate to get rid of these bracelets. I'd have to wait 'til I wasn't ensconced in a RIDE before I tried it, though. For all I knew, horsey girl would twig to my implants and maybe even figure out how to shut them down.

So the Sheriff was just walking around to the front of the car when she turned and looked back, stiffened, and reached for her gun. "Oh, shit *fire!* RIDE raid!"

I turned to look at where she was staring, and saw the cloud of dust at the end of the street. "Everyone under cover! *Now!*" the sheriff yelled, unholstering her gun and slamming out some shots at the cloud.

Just as suddenly as they'd tossed me in, the RIDE's door opened and the seat tipped up, dumping me unceremoniously out on the ground—still cuffed. "Git in that alley behind me an' don't come out," the RIDE said.

I held up my hands. "Hey, what about these?" But the car had already surged forward to Fuse onto the Sheriff, and together they charged down the street at the oncoming dust cloud.

"Assholes," I grumbled—but I also took their advice. My mama didn't raise no idiots. Of course, my mama didn't raise *me*, neither. I ducked behind a trash recycler in the alley and watched while I probed at the cuffs with my implants.

The Sheriff and her RIDE fought a good game, but they were pretty badly outgunned. A minute or so later they went flying back through the air and slammed into the side of the skimmer bus that hadn't had the chance to pull out yet. Lucky thing nobody had loaded yet.

The Sheriff and her RIDE didn't move after they landed. I did a quick probe with my implants and found they weren't dead or anything—but the RIDE had been hacked and locked down. I could have popped the lock if I wanted—but then I looked down at the cuffs and shook my head. Screw 'em. They were probably safer out of the fight anyway.

The dust cloud was moving up the street now, and individual forms were apparent within it—a couple dozen animal-shape RIDES in full gallop, scamper, or flight. Wolves, foxes, cats, a skunk or two, a couple birds, even a few dinos. They scattered and started chasing down those few unlucky souls who'd frozen up out on the street, and some were smashing in doors and windows and charging into buildings after those hiding inside.

"People of Lynchwood!" a sandy-furred wolf boomed like he had a PA system in his throat. Which he probably did. "You know why we're here! Surrender and we'll treat you better in the end than if we have to drag you out! And the more of you give yourselves up now, the sooner we leave the rest alone! So sayeth me!"

A chill shot down my spine at those last words. "So sayeth me!" This could only be the notorious AlphaWolf and his pack of renegade RIDES. They raided settlements in search of hapless humans to kidnap and imprison within themselves, using their presence to unlock the Fuser mode that gave them access to thumbs. And no one could rescue their poor victims because no one knew where...their camp...was...

All of a sudden, I started to get the craziest idea...

For half a minute, safe behind the recycler, I considered the utter insanity of what I was about to do. Did it even make sense? I didn't want to go back to the prison of the Nextus Children's Home, so I was going to make myself even more of a prisoner

inside the body of a renegade RIDE?

But when you got right down to it, what I hated most about the Home was all the other people. The staff, for whom it was just a job. The other kids, growing up without any real sort of parental authority and mostly turning into hooligans. (Sometimes I wondered how I ended up so well-adjusted. Then I considered the zillion dollars worth of stolen Q in my head and wondered if it was just a case of pot and kettle.) They just wouldn't *leave me alone*. That was why I ran away so often. At least within a RIDE, I'd only have that one other person to worry about. And if my implants worked as advertised...well. But on the other hand, I'd never actually had a chance to try that part of them out.

As I sat there watching, a funky-looking RIDE with the butt of a horse and the front part of a bird tackled the guy I'd sat next to on the bus down—college student name of Joseph, who'd been going down to Burnside for a summer job in carpentry to save up for his next semester in land management. He'd been pretty handsome, with his dark hair, faint mustache, and understanding brown eyes. As the horsey-birdy RIDE enclosed him, I wondered what he'd look like afterward. RIDEs like that tended to make some pretty funky physical changes to their humans.

Well, if I was going to do this, it would have to be soon. It wouldn't take these RIDEs long to fill up, the rate they were going, then I'd be out of a job. I was just steeling up my nerve to run out there and get in one's way when I noticed something very interesting.

One of those rogue RIDEs was this *immense* lioness—about the size of a small truck, like. Looked like a heavy model of some kind, probably support or comms rather than assault since I didn't see any huge guns poking out. Funny thing was, whenever she saw some other RIDE about to swoop down a human, she charged him and cut him off... but somehow never quite managed to stop the human from getting away. I even saw her surreptitiously nudge someone into another alley to safety.

Huh. A would-be bodyjacker whose core wasn't in it? I didn't have a lot of time to think it over, but it suddenly occurred to me that might be a better sort of RIDE to be stuck inside than one who *wanted* a thumb slave. And she'd almost made it up to my alley now...

So, gathering my courage, I ran right out in front of her. "Oh, eek!" I screamed, hoping she would be inclined to overlook my terrible acting skills. "A bodyjacker! Oh, help!" As expected, she bounded toward me, aiming to herd me back into the alley before anyone noticed. But I was ready for that. I intentionally stumbled over my own feet and went down on the pavement. She wasn't gonna have any choice but to 'jack me.

Or maybe she was. "Just lie still," she growled quietly. "They're almost done. With any luck, they'll miss—"

"HEEEELP!!!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. "NOOOOOO, DON'T EAT ME! I DON'T WANNA BE BODYJACKED!!!" In my peripheral vision, I saw the heads of half the other RIDEs on the street turn to look our way.

The lioness stared down at me in consternation. "What on Zharus are you *doing?*"

I grinned up at her. "I'm bodyjacking you, what do you think? Now that they've noticed us, if you don't take me they're gonna wonder why. And if you let someone else take me, they'll know I saw you shoving people outta the way."

She stared at me harder. "You *want* to be bodyjacked?"

“I want to bodyjack *you*,” I corrected, smirking. “Look, either way you can’t go on *not* taking a human on these raids. I’m sure they’re gonna get suspicious sooner or later. They don’t hafta know you don’t wanna do it. I can be your ‘beard.’”

She snorted. “If I do take you, you’re gonna belong to *me*, you know. I’ll be able to do anything I want with you.”

“All in all, I think I’d rather belong to someone like you, who doesn’t *want* to do the whole bodyjacking thing, than one of those ones who charge after them,” I said. “I suspect you’ll treat me a little better.

She snorted again. “So why are you *doing* this? Why do you want to belong to anyone at all?”

It wouldn’t hurt to tell the truth to *that*. Or at least part of it. “I *really* don’t wanna go back to the orphanage. Badly enough I’d rather be stuck inside a RIDE.” There were other reasons, but no need to go into those quite yet.

She cocked her immense head. “Well...if that’s what you *really* want...who am I to say no?” She moved carefully forward, planting those humongous paws to either side of me on the street, and I was staring up at a huge, fuzzy feline belly. I was struck by the remarkable attention to detail in the hardlight design—she even had little teats along her belly.

I had just enough time to feel a little frisson of fear as the hardlight winked out and the sculpted metal body split open and lowered down toward me. Then everything went dark.

I was surrounded by warmth. Just...drifting, like when you’re in bed in the morning and you *know* the alarm’s about to go off and you *really* don’t want to get up but you know you’re going to have to sooner or later.

Then a world faded into view around us. It seemed to be a clearing within a huge jungle that appeared to stretch out to infinity. “Oh, great,” I muttered. “Woke up in a matte painting.”

Then the lioness padded out from behind a tree. In here she was much smaller, closer to normal lioness size. “I suppose if I’m gonna be stuck with you, we should at least get to know each other. I’m Tamarind, but you can call me Tammy. I was made in Nextus, served with the 119th Heavy Infantry’s support corps. Then my pilot mustered out of the military, taking me with her, and then joined the Marshals. Damn fool got herself...killed, I got reassigned, and then ended up kicked out for excessive violence. Wandered the desert a while, hooked up with AlphaWolf’s pack. Your turn.”

“Jeanette Leroq, hacker extraordinaire,” I said modestly. “At least, that’s the name that was on the ID papers that came with me. I was apparently left on a doorstep or something. They found me in a starliner from Earth, no sign of my parents. Since it would cost too much to send me back, they kept me here. They’ve sent queries back and forth on every ship since, but so far nothing’s turned up on me. Or so they say.”

I shrugged. “Any old how, the older I get, the more annoying I find the orphanage, so the more I keep running away. Had it in mind to work my way down to Aloha where kids can emancipate easier, but they were watching the subs too close—and when I took the bus, well, sheriff collared me here. Then you showed up, and looked like a better way out.”

Tammy snorted. “That orphanage must be really awful if *I* looked like a good way out. I’m not some kind of paragon, you know. Wouldn’t be with these jokers if I were.”

“So why *are* you with ‘em if you don’t like what they’re doing?” I asked.

“Who says I don’t?” Tammy said. “Maybe I just like it *too* much.” She crouched and wriggled her butt in the way cats do before they pounce. “Brace yourself, missy, I’m coming in!” She lunged forward at me—and then *into* me. Her head plunged through my chest as if it were a portal into somewhere else, followed by the rest of her. She vanished completely into me, from her nose to the tip of her tail...and my brain was suddenly full of tawny lioness.

There was just so *much* of her in my mind that she filled my head right up, and I couldn’t think of anything *except* her. She was right there, so warm, and soft, and cuddly, I just had to reach out my hand and stroke her soft fur—I was there somehow, inside my own head—and she nuzzled me, and purred, and licked my face with her sandpapery tongue. It was like I was being squished into a tiny mental closet, smothered in lioness.

Then there was a sort of a mental *click*, and I could think again—though my thoughts seemed grainier and harder-edged than usual. It took a moment for me to work out what must have happened. Tammy had come to poke around in my head, shifting her own CPU processes into my meatspace until there wasn’t any room for my own thoughts—but then my implants had kicked in, taking up the slack. Tammy was thinking with my brain, but *I* was actually thinking with my *implants*. Crazy! I’d never heard of anything like that even happening before—but I’d have time to think about that later when I wasn’t surrounded by lioness.

I could still feel Tammy exploring me curiously, and stopping abruptly as she encountered the first traces of the implants that honeycombed my meat-mind. “Wow...” she said. “You’ve got so much *metal* in here. Where’d all that even come from? I haven’t seen *Earthers* with this many implants.”

“It’s a hobby,” I replied. “Some people get tats, some get piercings. I get implants.”

My brain tingled as she ran a scan on me. “I think you’ve got more RI-grade Qubitite in your head than I’ve got in my core,” she said. “How did you *get* all that? Why did your parents even *let* you?”

“Orphan, remember?” I pointed out. “No parents.”

“Well, the staff of your orphanage, then,” she said. “I mean, all the surgery it must have taken...”

“What surgery?” I said. “That’s Earther style. There’s a whole nano-modder community over here that’s been hacking out the designs to replicate Earther style implants with pharmaceutical fabber nanos. You give ‘em the right programs and the raw materials, inject ‘em into your bloodstream, and they can build the Eiffel Tower inside your head if you want it.” I grinned. “It’s amazing how easy pharma fabs are to hack for that sorta thing. They’re death on illegal drugs, but nobody gets high offa nano-mods, so anything like that *has* to be legit.”

“And you just...take chances like that with your brain?” Tammy said.

“Hey, don’t judge me, Tammycat. Most of this stuff’s just copies of designs that have been Earth-tested again and again,” I pointed out. Of course, the implants with all the RI-grade Q weren’t, since they didn’t have that back on Earth, but they were still based on the same *theories* anyway. “Only change is I’m getting ‘em without needing bonesaws for the installation.”

“They seem to be interfering with me reading your memories a little,” she said. “I

can't get anything more recent than two years old."

"Yeah, that was when I started getting the first ones," I said. "They kinda encrypted the memories I made afterward. Hang on, I'll decrypt for you. Well, most of it anyway. The newer stuff's a little trickier." I opened the locks that would let her read everything short of twelve months ago. It was just a little white lie about why I didn't do the last twelve months. If she learned about what I got after that, it might put her on guard for what I planned to do later on.

"I can't believe you were able to get that much metal without anyone *noticing*," Tammy said. "Don't they give you medical checkups?"

"Yeah, but I make sure they don't notice the metal." I grinned. "If I can hack the fabbers to make the stuff, what makes you think I can't hack the scanners not to notice it?"

"These are some pretty extensive mods," Tammy said. "I hope you don't mind if I leave them mostly alone, though. It's a little worry that if a RIDE fiddles too much with them...well, weird things can happen."

"Fine by me," I said. "I'm not exactly gonna force you to use 'em myself. I just keep my software, vids, and tunes there to keep myself entertained, mostly."

"I'll bet you do more than that," Tammy said. She chuckled. "You know, you could come in pretty handy. I'll bet you're even better at hacking stuff than I am."

"Could be, could be," I said. "If you ask nicely, I'll be happy to hack whatever you want hacked." I thought for a moment. "So...um...do you think you could maybe back off a little? I'd like to have my meat brain back for thinking with; these implants are giving me a little headache."

"Oh, I don't think *that's* necessary right now," Tammy purred. "In fact, I think if I..." She reached out, and I suddenly felt my implants begin to cycle down, dumping my thought processes back out into meatspace with the lioness.

"Hey!" I protested while I could still think clearly.

"Shhhh," Tammy said. "I want all your attention on *me* right now."

Then I was back in my own head, all wrapped up in a purring soft lioness. I lay against her, and stroked her fur, and then I slept.

CHAPTER 2

When I woke up, I was padding on all fours down the ramp of a battered old suborbital shuttle. Or, rather my body was, but someone else was moving it. Or *rather* rather, it wasn't even my body. It was really Tamarind, I realized, in her lioness shape. But it *felt* like it was my body, or rather like the body was mine. I felt the metal of the ramp under my paw pads, the faint breezes stirring my whiskers and fur...I even felt my tail swishing back and forth. *That* was a new experience!

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead!" Tammy purred cheerfully inside my mind. It was a lot less cramped now—she'd shifted her attentions elsewhere. I ran a quick status check on my implants. They all seemed to be none the worse for wear for being externally shut down for a while.

"Hey, aren't we supposed to be walking upright?" I asked. "I thought that was the whole point. Not like I'm complaining, though. This feels *funky*."

"Oh, we can do that, too," Tammy said. "But one of the fun things about being me is I'm big enough to Fuse you in Walker form, too."

"So you don't...*ever* have to let me out?" I said. "At all?"

"That's *technically* true," Tammy said. "But really, if I kept you all the time without a break, my nannies would start doing funky things to you. So you're gonna have to come out later. But how *much* later, I haven't decided yet."

"Gee, thanks," I said.

"Anyway, welcome to Alpha Camp, such as it is," Tammy said as we reached the end of the ramp and she raised our head to look around. It was...a little sad-looking, really. Beneath a hardlight dome that provided cover and climate control were a number of small log cabins with a few RIDEs and the occasional listless human hanging around outside of them, a few garden plots and a couple of orchards, some rough-hewn picnic tables...rock columns and walls toward the north end...and not a lot else.

"*This* is AlphaWolf's HQ?" I asked.

"Yeah. Not exactly the terrorist command center with all the displays and blinkenlights from that docudrama is it?" Tammy snorted. "Damn piece of trash. But Alfie thought it was hilarious, and now he goes around 'sayeth'ing everything. Hope he gets it out of his system soon."

"Citizens of Alpha Camp, we are HOME! So sayeth me!" AlphaWolf boomed from the head of the ramp.

"I guess we'll just have to keep hoping," Tammy said, rolling our eyes.

"So where do we live? One of the cabins?" I asked.

“Nah, those are mostly for the unattached pool of community-use humans,” Tammy said. “And storage and eating space and stuff. The rest of us just sleep outside under the dome. Not like there’s ever any weather here anyway.”

“What do we do all day?”

“Whatever needs doing. Patrol the desert for more lost RIDEs. Build more buildings. Work in the gardens or orchards. Go on raids to kidnap people. Whatever.” Tammy shrugged. “Sometimes we can get on the net for a while, when the right birds are in the sky.”

“Cool,” I said. “Well, y’know, you need anything hacked, I’m your gal.”

“You’re my gal anyway,” Tammy pointed out.

“Well, yeah,” I admitted. “It’s just an expression anyway, geez.”

We moved away from the ramp as the other passengers started to come out. The hippogryph RIDE who’d taken Joseph was first, striding down the ramp in his upright shape like he owned the place—and certainly like he owned the human inside his body. Was Joseph terrified? Angry? Conscious at all? I couldn’t tell. He wasn’t saying anything—at least anything we could hear.

He was followed by an assortment of other RIDEs, some of whom I remembered seeing in the village—all of them walking upright. And after them, about half a dozen humans of various ages staggered down the ramp on shaky legs, with a couple more RIDEs shoving them forward. They looked about half dead.

“What happened here?” AlphaWolf asked.

One of the last RIDEs out, a bald eagle who was the pilot by the look of him, shook his head and clicked his beak disapprovingly. “That pressure seal blew again, boss. Lucky thing it waited until we were halfway down, or they wouldn’t have made it at all. We just can’t fix it permanent. Ship’s too damn old, and there’s more patches than original hull left.”

AlphaWolf sighed. “Right. It’s suits only from here on out, then. At least ‘til we can find another sub.” He nodded to the RIDEs behind the humans, and they shepherded them toward one of the log cabins. They walked with shoulders slumped, like people who had lost all hope. That was about when it started to hit home to me that this wasn’t all going to be the fun and games I’d somehow been subconsciously expecting.

“Only just realizing that, huh?” Tamarind said in my head. “Well, don’t worry. You did guess right. Not a whole lot of percentage for me in torturing people.”

“Thought so,” I mumbled.

“Anyway, not everyone’s so unhappy to be here,” Tammy pointed out. “There’s one girl in particular I think you oughtta meet...and I think I know just where she’ll be.” We padded off to the north, past the cabins and around the corner of a large rock formation that formed a sort of natural wall separating off a small part of the domed area from the rest.

On the other side was a clearing full of little metal heaps. I looked closer and realized they were all defunct RIDEs, arranged neatly into rows. At the far end, like a small silvery hill, an immense metal wolf lay on its side. “Um...wow,” I said. “Are they all...”

“Dead? Nah. Just in shutdown is all,” Tammy said. “For one reason or another they couldn’t get the parts to keep ‘em up. We’ll bring ‘em back someday, somehow.” The lioness shrugged. “All the same, a lot of RIDEs find it kinda morbid and so don’t

like coming in here. Which means some humans do, if they want the closest thing to privacy they can get 'round here."

As we padded deeper in, Tamarind's ears swiveled to track the amorous sounds coming from a small alcove recessed into the stone wall just ahead. We stopped at a respectful distance and waited. A couple of minutes later, a young man with raccoon tags emerged, hastily tugging a ragged pair of jeans and T-shirt back into place. He glanced at us, then averted his gaze and trudged wordlessly on past.

"Hey, Rose, you decent in there?" Tammy called ahead.

"Decent! Never!" a bubbly female voice giggled. "But I got something on. Come on in!"

We padded around the corner into the nook, which was set up with a threadbare but comfy-looking sofa and a couple of blankets. A worn terrycloth robe was wrapped around and barely containing a busty blonde girl with a red fox's ears and fluffy tail. She waved. "Hey, cat."

"Hey, girl. Just wanted my new friend to meet you. Jeanette Leroq, Yankee Rose."

The girl rolled her eyes. "Just Rose, please. *I* never called myself that. Silly song." She glanced at us. "So where's this Jeanette?"

"Hang on," Tammy said. I was abruptly yanked upright as she stood on her hind legs and converted to Fuser form. "Ah...standing upright again. Been a while." Then I felt the air on my skin once more as she sloughed back off of me into Walker, leaving me standing by myself for the first time since we'd Fused.

As I glanced down at myself, Rose looked critically at me. "Little young for my tastes."

"Er—" I said, not quite sure how to respond.

Tammy saved me. "Oh, she's not here for *that*. But I thought she ought to know not every human's all gloom and doom 'bout being here."

"Oh, sure." Rose leaned back on the sofa, arranging her bushy tail to one side. "I'm pretty okay here, all things considered. A lot of people are, when they get used to it. The food could be better...booze could be a *lot* better. But all we have to do is be thumbs when our bosses want it, and not all of them want it all the time. Lotsa cute guys and gals around who need a little comforting from time to time, and I don' gotta go to a boring job every morning or pay rent."

As I stood there, I became aware of an odd twitchy sensation at the base of my spine. My ears felt funny, too. I reached down and felt an honest-to-goodness lion's tail poking out just above my butt—and my ears were leonine too. I'd known I was *going* to have them, but actually feeling it for the first time was something else.

Rose grinned. "First ever de-Fuse, huh? They suit ya. Welcome to the tag club. I'd offer you a drink to celebrate, but I corrupt enough minors already, and besides, more for me."

"You've even got alcohol here?" I asked.

"A couple a' the RIDEs were distillery equipment, and a few of the people know a thing or three 'bout moonshining. It's only good for degreasing engine parts and killing brain cells, but it's *good* at killing brain cells."

"I'm surprised the RIDEs would care about providing humans with booze," I said.

She shrugged. "A few of the RIDEs like what it feels like when their humans get drunk. Others figured if it made things easier to deal for us, why not."

“Scuse me,” another woman’s voice said from outside the nook. A huge red fox padded in. “Rose, you finished in here? I could use you.”

“Sure thing, Nora!” Rose got up, dropped the robe on the sofa, and stepped forward—completely naked but with no qualms about it. A moment later, a humanoid red fox with an even bigger bust than Rose had on her own stood there. “See you guys later!” Rose said from the fox’s mouth. “Nice to meet you, Jeannie!”

The fox Fuser hopped into the air with her lifters and flew over the top of the wall. I sat down on the sofa as Tammy padded forward to sit on her haunches before me. She took up pretty much the entire alcove entrance. “So there really are people who like it here.”

“For some of ‘em, it’s like Never Never Land,” Tammy said. “No responsibilities, not even to take care of themselves. Some of ‘em just like to feel needed. Depends how their RIDEs treat them, too. We’re not all here ‘cuz we *hate* humans, after all. Just ‘cuz we like freedom.”

“At least freedom for RIDEs,” I said.

“True,” she admitted. “Anyway, c’mon. I wanna try out Fuser form again.”

I got up and stepped forward. “All right.”

She Fused over me and settled herself into place, upright this time. She raised our arms and looked down at our hands, then tossed our head in kind of a feline shrug. “I really should thank you, you know. I don’t think I ever could’ve taken someone unwillingly...but it *is* nice to have thumbs again.”

“It’s still better than being in the orphanage,” I said. And...well, the funny thing is that it *was*. Even then. I might have been inside someone else’s body, without any choice in what I could do—but since I was *inside* someone else, that meant anyone who wanted to get at me would have to go through *her*. And she didn’t exactly seem like a pushover.

Of course, she could sense what I was thinking. “You don’t need to worry about anyone else *any* more,” she said possessively. “Just me.” And then I felt her mind filling me up again, and my implants cycling down. Consciousness once more went away.

Again I dreamed of a lioness curled up protectively around me, all warm, soft fur backed by muscles of steel. I don’t know how long I slept like that, but it was dark when I woke up.

I swam back up to awareness to find myself still inside the lioness. My implants told me they were undamaged and restarting. “Seriously, *cut that out*,” I said. “I might belong to you, but that doesn’t give you the right to treat me like a catnip mouse you can stuff in your pocket when you’re done with me.”

“I’m sorry,” Tamarind said, and actually sounded like she meant it. “I was...just trying to learn more about you, and I got carried away. I won’t do it again, I promise.”

“See that you don’t,” I grumbled.

“I *still* can’t read your last year of memories. What is *in* those implants in your head?”

I chuckled. “Maybe sometime I’ll show you. For now, those are the only part of me it seems like I can keep to myself, so I think I’m gonna hold onto that for now.”

“I...see.” She didn’t sound totally satisfied with that answer...but, well, tough. Time she found out she didn’t get to have everything her own way. Might cushion the blow when...but later for that.

“So anyway, what do we do now?” I asked. “Go out on patrol? Hang around the camp? What *do* you people do for fun out here?”

In response, she just chuckled. “Did you mean that just now?” I felt mild curiosity in her mind.

“Mean what?”

“You people.’ You called us *people*.”

“It’s just a figure of speech...” I said. “But...well, yeah. I’ve always thought of RIDEs as more than equipment. How can you know anything about how their brains work and not?”

“Huh,” she said, mulling it over. “Thanks. Well, anyway, right now, I think you should probably go get your supper.” She de-Fused from around me, landing on all four paws next to me a moment later. “That cabin over there, with the light.” There was a line of people and Fusers arranged in front of the door.

“You don’t want to come taste it with me?” I asked.

“Nah. For one thing, I’m so big that standing in line would be...awkward,” Tammy said. And she was right. She *was* about 50% bigger than most of the other RIDEs, which meant she would take up that much more room.

“That’s one reason,” I said. “You had another?”

“Trust me, after *you’ve* tasted it, you’ll understand why,” she said, ears twitching in amusement.

“Terrific,” I said wryly. But I walked on over to the cabin. My tummy was starting to rumble, and no matter how unappealing the food might be, at least it would fill it.

As I joined the end of the line, I recognized the hunched-over figure in front of me. Or at least, I recognized his clothes. His head was a little different now, being covered in feathers instead of hair. It was my fellow passenger from the bus—the one the hippogryph had snatched. “Joseph?” I asked tentatively.

He turned to face me, and I nearly gave a little scream. He had a beak! At least sort of. His lips had turned mostly to beak chitin, with just enough flexibility left to let him talk with only a slight lisp. “So they got you, too,” he said dully.

“Er...yeah,” I said. It didn’t seem like the time to reveal I’d thrown in willingly. “Lioness,” I added, as if it wasn’t completely obvious from the ears and tail.

“Lucky. You get to keep your face,” he said. He was trembling a little, I saw. Well, he was hardly alone in that.

“Well...maybe,” I said. “But what about you? How are you getting along?”

“With Tocsin? There...there’s no ‘getting along’ with him.” His voice trembled. “He hates humans. Hates them for what they’ve done to his fellow RIDEs, hates them for what they’ve done to him personally, hates *me* for needing me to give him hands.”

I shivered. “Ugh. I’m sorry. Does he...hurt you?”

“N-no...not much anyway,” Joseph said. “He...bites me a little, but never enough to draw blood. He...thinks of me as...equipment he needs to take good care of. Even as he hates me. He’s...complicated.”

“Well...at least that’s something,” I said, trying to cheer him up. “I mean...if he’s going to take good care of you, at least that means he’s not going to torture you, right?”

“I...I almost wish he would, some,” Joseph said. “It would make it easier to...hate him.”

“You want to hate him...but you can’t?” The conversation was starting to confuse me.

He looked away. “I just...feel *sorry* for him more than anything. He didn’t ask to be made—or made to do some of the things he has. He’s...kind of scarred. And I think I may be starting...” He looked back at me. “Do you know what Stockholm Syndrome is?”

Then I understood. “You’re starting to...care for him.”

“Yeah. I mean...isn’t that kind of sick?”

“It’s natural,” I said. “They’ve studied it for hundreds of years and that’s one thing that’s pretty clear about it. It’s a normal human reaction. You could even call it a survival instinct.”

“It’s not supposed to happen *this fast!*” Joseph insisted, his voice cracking. “And I don’t want it to happen to *me!* I have a *life* waiting for me! I want to go back to it! I don’t want to pass up some chance to escape because I’m busy mooning over the asshole who kidnapped me!” Some of the other people in line glanced our way at the outburst, and a couple moved away, but others nodded their heads in understanding and sympathy.

“If it’s any consolation, if you get it bad enough to feel like you don’t want to leave, you’d probably not be happy if you *did* leave,” I pointed out. “And as for it being so fast, well, maybe it’s never involved such direct mental contact before,” I said. “Maybe you just can’t help it when you have the chance to see into the other guy’s mind. Even I—” I paused. Was I being affected myself? I had come willingly, granted, and Tammy was being nice to me for the most part, save for that cute little habit of burying me under her mind. Was I starting to like her *more* than was natural, and if I was, how could I tell? What *was* a natural amount to like her, anyway?

Joseph took my silence for reluctance to speak instead of confusion. “It’s all right,” he said. “You understand.” He sighed. “I guess I should just get used to it. This is how my life is going to be from now on. Personal property of a horse-bird.” Then he got to the head of the line, and turned back around to get his food.

They served me next, and I could see why Tammy hadn’t been interested. There were a few limp greens that might laughably be described as a “salad,” some kind of bland bean soup, and half a protein survival ration bar. None of it was anything to write home about. “At least I won’t have to worry about my weight,” I muttered.

I took a seat at a rough stone/concrete picnic table across from Joseph, and proceeded to tuck into my food. The bean soup was actually a little better than it looked, but even that wasn’t too great. We ate in silence that could have been either companionable or sullen.

As we were finishing our meal, the hippogryph—Tocsin, Joseph had called him—trotted up. He tapped Joseph on the shoulder with his beak. “Groom me,” he ordered.

Joseph sighed, got up, and started scratching under the feathers on the half-bird’s front shoulders. I watched thoughtfully. “You really need to be groomed? I thought that was all hardlight.”

Tocsin glowered at me. “Not that it’s any of your business, *meat*, but no, I do not *need* it. However, it feels pleasant. And if I *have* to be saddled with a pet, I will at least take full advantage of him.”

“‘Him’?” I asked. “Funny, the way you renegades feel about us humans, I’d have thought you’d call him an ‘it.’”

Tocsin snorted. “Why should I do that? He has a gender, and the gender is male—not neuter. *Humans* who keep pets do not call *them* ‘it.’ Being inaccurate for the sake of an insult makes no sense.”

“I guess that’s fair,” I said.

He snorted again. “So glad you approve. Meat.” Then he turned up his beak and proceeded to ignore me.

I finished my own meal, returned my plate, and walked back over to where Tamarind was waiting. “Real piece of work, that Tocsin,” I said.

“Isn’t he just?” Tamarind said. “And he’s not even the worst of them by a *long* shot.”

“Ugh,” I said. “Hope I don’t run into one of those.”

“Well, there’s one way to make sure of that.” She moved forward, opened her immense maw, and proceeded to gulp me down into her four-legged Fuse state. After she had me turned around and sorted out, she padded off toward the edge of the dome. “Now we go on patrol.”

“Sounds like fun,” I said. And I was surprised to realize I meant it. After a boring life in the orphanage or a harrowing life on the run from the orphanage, prowling through the desert inside a giant lioness really *did* sound like a fun time. Which I imagine said *something* about my priorities, but hey. I take my fun where I can get it. I peered excitedly ahead through Tammy’s low-light vision as we bounded out into the dark.

As we left the hardlight dome behind us and got out into the desert, we fell into a loping gait that seemed natural for a big cat. This far away from any cities, the starlight almost provided enough light to see by even without light-amplification. We ran through stone spires and shapes sculpted smooth by millennia of wind-blown sand.

It was a little weird at first to feel myself running on all fours as a lion—human arms and legs just didn’t quite work that way—but I soon got used to it. The sensory feedback from Tamarind’s body overrode my own senses, so instead of feeling cocooned inside her body I felt like her body was my own. We were a desert lioness on the prowl for prey that, admittedly, probably didn’t exist.

“Why do you patrol, anyway?” I asked. “Couldn’t you do a better job monitoring the place by putting up sensor posts? Even just passive ones, if you wanted to stay low-emission.”

“We could,” Tammy admitted. “And we do have some of those, too. But a moving body covers any blind spots. And besides, it lets us work off energy and do something other than lollygag around the grounds all day.”

“Have to admit, it’s kind of fun running flat-out like this,” I said.

I felt Tammy smirk. “Oh, *this* isn’t flat-out. This is jogging. If I ran flat-out, you’d know it.”

“I’ll take your word for that,” I said.

We ran on in silence for a while, peering down canyons or taking in the view from the top of a convenient mesa. Apart from us and a couple of other blips that Tammy painted as our fellow Pack patrollers, the desert was quiet and empty.

The silence got on my nerves after a while. Perhaps sensing this, Tammy piped in some music over the internal comm feed. Old twencen showtunes. Selections from *Les Mis*, *Phantom of the Opera*, Lloyd Weber, and so on. Not my favorite, but listenable. Tammy, on the other hand, sang right along—pretty well, in fact, even doing character accents that sometimes made me giggle. Thanks to the emotional leakage from our Fuse link, I realized she *liked* it when I giggled. I felt myself warming to her even further.

What is she doing with the Pack, anyway? I wondered. *She seems so out of place amid the human-hating bodyjackers.*

So the night passed. Eventually we reached what Tamarind said was our farthest point, about a hundred clicks out of camp. The eastern sky was turning rosy—dawn wasn't far off. We stood at the tip of a cliff overlooking a broad expanse of stone shapes and columns, watching the sky grow brighter.

"So..." Tammy asked eventually. "Regretting it yet?"

"It?" I asked. I knew what she meant, but somehow making her say it felt like it gave me more time to answer.

"Joining the Pack," Tammy said. "Giving up your freedom."

I had to snort. "Freedom? What freedom? Before you guys busted up Lynchwood, I was on the fast track back to the orphanage. I'd rather be here, with you. At least there's stuff to do here."

"You sure about that? I can tell ya right now, you've already done most of the stuff there is to do out here. You'll be more bored than you ever were back home in days."

"But at least I'll have someone nice to be bored *with*," I said. "Nobody cares about me back home. None of the adults at the orphanage—we're just a cash crop to them. None of the other kids—they know I'm smarter than they are and they resent it."

"So you'd rather be with a mean, nasty ol' lioness who just wants you for your body," Tammy teased.

"Well, no," I heard myself say. "I don't know any of those. But I'd rather be with *you*."

She was silent a long time—and for that matter, so was I. I think I was just as surprised I'd said that as she was. Then she seemed to break out of the mood and said, "Y'know, I haven't shown you my skimmer mode yet. Wanna see it?"

"Sure!" A moment later I was back in my own body, feeling the warmth of hers all around me. Then things shifted around me, and things opened out in front of me, and suddenly I was pushed out into the driver's seat of what seemed for all the world to be the military equivalent of a pickup truck. It was tawny in color, the same as her pelt, and the angled lines of the hood suggested a lion's head.

The cab was open, with a roll cage projecting overhead, but hardlight panels kept the environment secure. The back was a flat metal bed with raised sides. The bed was modular in construction, with metal bits that could be raised or lowered to provide seating for troops, or tie-downs or storage for all sorts of cargo. There were also mount points for weapons, though they were currently empty. The space just behind the cab was currently taken up by the squat form of a mid-sized military-issue fabber, which could be removed to use the room for other things.

A safety harness latched into place around me before the Tammy-truck lifted off the ground and headed back the way we'd come. "Hold on tight, gonna make some speed!" We surged forward, a huge cloud of desert dust blooming up behind us.

"Wooooo!" I whooped as we zoomed across the desert sands. Riding a lioness in the great wide open spaces of the deep Dry Ocean...it didn't get much better than this!

It was only when we got closer to the desert-camouflage hardlight dome that masked AlphaWolf's camp from overhead detection that the bloom started to come off the rose. As Tammy sucked me down through the seat again when she shifted back to

Walker form, I reviewed the last few hours and was a little shaken to realize just how friendly I was getting toward this lioness who...well, *owned* me now. Was *I* falling to Stockholm Syndrome, too?

That was when I realized I had to go ahead and do what I'd been planning ever since I first saw the lioness back in the streets of Lynchwood. I had to do it now before I didn't even *want* to anymore.

So, reaching within my implant, I carefully and quietly started my port scan of Tamarind's systems. It was a little different doing it from the *inside*, but not so much so that I couldn't adjust. And within thirty seconds I had found three unpatched vulnerabilities. Apparently being a renegade RIDE living out in the desert meant you didn't get on the net that often to download security updates.

It only took me about thirty seconds more to root her but good with the software contained in my Qubitite computer implants. I hadn't ever had the chance to try it—it was just one of those things you download because you theoretically *can* run it and you have the space to keep it—but I was gratified to hear that it worked. I was going to have to send some cash to that Roger guy next chance I got.

But...now what? My original plan had been to announce myself to her and gloat over the fact that *I* owned *her* now. But I suddenly realized...whether it was Stockholm Syndrome or not, I actually *didn't want to hurt her feelings*. After all, she was actually quite a nice person for all that she was part of AlphaWolf's pack. She was certainly no misanthropic Tocsin. And we'd just started getting friendly with each other.

So I now had complete control over Tammy's systems...if I wanted to use it. And she had no way of knowing I even had it without an intensive security audit, which she had no reason to believe she needed to undertake. And given the state of her software updates, security seemed like one of the last things on her mind. But what now?

That...kind of left me in a quandary, actually. Seeing so many vulnerabilities still in place in a system over which I had root privs made my skin itch. But if I started patching her, she'd *know* something was going on. If I wanted her to remain unaware of what I'd done, I had to leave her be. I couldn't even hint in conversation that it might be a good thing for her to patch *herself*, because that might bring her to suspect me.

I had to settle for quietly writing my new privileges into the very deepest level of her core, so that no *other* hacks could ever revoke them, and trusting that if someone else ever did hack her I could work around it and fix it. But really, what were the odds of something like *that* ever happening?

When I was done, I stood back and took a look at my handiwork. I still wasn't sure about this, and it was suddenly tempting just to delete it all completely. I *trusted* Tammy, didn't I? She'd done right by me so far, hadn't she? But the old Soviet proverb "trust, but verify" came to mind. It wouldn't hurt to have precautions in place for just in case. Nothing said I ever had to use them if I didn't want to. So I let it be.

CHAPTER 3

After that, things settled into kind of a routine at the camp. I met more of the human prisoners, whose states of mind pretty much ran the gamut from people like Rose and me who were happy with the lack of worldly concerns, or who otherwise genuinely liked their RIDEs and were happy together, to people like Joseph who were gradually succumbing to Stockholm Syndrome, to a few sunk so deeply in despair that they just wandered around like zombies when they weren't ensconced in some RIDE or other.

There weren't *too* many of that last kind. Once they got that bad, AlphaWolf or his lieutenants had them taken away. When I'd first heard about that, my blood ran cold—visions of shallow graves danced in my head. But no—AlphaWolf was actually just taking them back to some random human settlement and dropping them off at the most convenient hospital. Tammy swore up and down this was true, she'd been along on some of the return trips.

"Not that I'm not glad to hear this, but for heaven's sake why?" I asked when we talked about it. "It seems like a lot of trouble to go to for a terrorist."

"Alfie's not quite the Big Bad Wolf people make him out to be, girly," Tammy told me. "And he's really trying to burn as few bridges as he can. Kidnapping's one thing, if the victims end up alive in the end, but murder...that's something else. I think he dreams of going 'legit' someday."

I would have stared at her if we'd had a mirror handy. "Legit? *AlphaWolf*?"

"Stranger things have happened."

I saw Joseph a few more times, too. It was kind of a study in rapid-onset Stockholm. Over a couple weeks he gradually went from hating, fearing, and pitying Tocsin to mostly pitying him to outright *devotion*. Tocsin, for his part, didn't seem to soften any, but Joseph swore things were different when they were alone. "He has a softer side," Joseph said. "Not very *much* softer, but...he has feelings for me. I *know* it." I wondered how much of that was true and how much was Joseph trying to convince himself. But I didn't pry. Wasn't my business. Whatever helped get him through the day.

As I expected, it turned out I was pretty much the youngest human in AlphaWolf's camp. Most of the RIDEs wouldn't take people younger than late teens, and there were no pregnancies in camp thanks to nano birth control. But I strongly resisted any attempt to turn me into some kind of camp mascot. "I don't want a pity party," I finally said flat out. "I'm here because I *want* to be, and I like my partner. If you're looking for a poster girl for mean ol' nasty RIDE oppression, look somewhere else." I

wasn't real popular after that, but that was fine by me. I didn't have anything in common with most other humans in the camp anyway, any more than I did the other people in the orphanage.

But Rose was an exception. I did spend some more time hanging out with her, between her lovers, and I found she was an interesting person to talk to. Turned out she was from Aloha, the place I'd been trying to get to, which explained her lack of body modesty. And, like me, she was also one of the few Pack humans who'd come willingly.

"Yeah, I got outta a party one night, was sorta wobbling down the sidewalk when this empty skimmer pulled up and drove me home. Thought it was like a public service robo-cab or something. Then I got a big shock when it let me out! It turned into a big ol' foxy fox and followed me inside!" She giggled, flipping a hand through her mane of blonde hair.

"And then she told me who she was and what she wanted me for...and what she'd do to my body if I said yes. Gave me all the pros and cons, like being stuck out here most of the time 'cept when we can slip out to party in town. And she told me it was no big if I wasn't up for it 'cuz there were lots of other fish. Said she'd give me 'til next morning to think about it so I didn't decide while I was drunk. So I went to sleep and woke up with a huge ol' foxy peering at me so I knew it wasn't a dream." She giggled again. "So I thought 'bout it a while, and I said yes. I mean, *duh*. You know how much this kind of surgery normally costs?" She waved at her exaggerated bust, which I knew from my research into RIDEs was a common tag for partners of the infamous "BBV" pleasure RIDE models.

"You ever regret it after?" I asked.

"Some, little bit, mostly when I get bored or tired of the lousy food. But Nora's pretty good 'bout taking me on a party trip just when it gets too much to live with. 'Fact, I think we got one coming up real soon! You an' Tammy wanna tag along?"

"Thanks, but I think I'm a little too young for *that* kind of party," I said. Funny thing, most kids my age would have jumped at the chance to booze it up, but I just didn't want all the hassle of being around other people like that. And I was still kind of paranoid about the orphanage snatchers. Figured it might be best to wait a while 'til they'd forgotten about me.

"Aw, we can do kiddie stuff, too!" Rose insisted. "Like animatronic pizza parties and stuff! If not now, then maybe next time? Standing offer."

"They really just...let you *go* like that?" I said.

"We do have to erase the exact coords of the place from Nora's memory in case we get caught, and contact them through *channels* to have them guide us back and make sure we're not being followed." She made a face. "It's a royal pain in the ass, and why we don't go party more often. But yeah. This place is all 'bout *freedom* for RIDEs. They don't get that by having to stay locked up all the time."

"Well, maybe next time," I said. Right now, I just felt like staying in one place for a while and enjoying not feeling like I might be grabbed and sent back to the home at any moment.

That being said, I *was* a little at loose ends finding stuff to do when we weren't out patrolling. Net connections mostly weren't available, and even when they were no one was gonna let a hacker teen feed her addiction. Sometimes I could get on for long enough to check my mail drop, but even those times were pretty rare. There was a lot of media circulating from RIDE to RIDE, lots of shows to watch and music to listen to. But

I never was the couch potato type. I wanted to be *doing* something.

Of course, Tammy was well-equipped with sim games of all kinds, and I played them a lot—some of them solo, some versus her. But after a while even they began to pall. I finally took to haunting the savannas and jungles of her Nature Range with a big game rifle. “On *easy mode*, with no predators,” I told her. “I don’t want to get my virtual throat ripped out. I’m too young to virtually die.”

“Awww, but I was gonna hunt you myself!” Tammy pouted. She was actually pretty surprised I knew about it in the first place, but it never was really a *secret*, just pretty obscure. And I’d read up a lot on RIDEs lately.

Even Nature Range ended up getting boring, but weirdly Tammy came to my rescue here, too. One day as I was feeling particularly frustrated, sitting in a canvas chair in the Nature Range jungle in my pith helmet with my trusty rifle, I heard a rustle behind me and turned to see an anthropomorphic lioness, my own size, approaching with her hand-paws raised. “Truce! Truce! Friendly!”

I kept my hand away from the rifle. “Hey, Tammy. ‘Sup?”

“Nothing,” Tamarind said, pulling up another canvas chair out of the empty air across from me. “And that’s the problem, isn’t it? You’re bored silly.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, so what? Seems to be the default state around here.”

“No reason it has to be for you, though.” She crossed her legs comfortably in the chair. “I’ve been watching you, you know.”

“I’m *inside you*,” I pointed out. “How could you not?”

“And you’ve done pretty much everything there is to do, and you haven’t found anything that excites you,” Tammy continued.

I shrugged. “I don’t have to be excited to be happy I’m not being dragged back to the orphanage.”

She leaned forward. “But you’d *like* to be, wouldn’t you?”

“Well, yeah, I guess. Who wouldn’t?” I said. “Why, you think you’ve got something?”

“I think I’ve got a pretty good idea what makes you tick,” Tamarind said thoughtfully. “You want a challenge. Something real, not just a game.”

“Games are fun too,” I said defensively. She actually seemed to have me pretty much dead to rights, but I didn’t want to admit it.

“But as dessert, not as a steady diet,” she said. “So I’ve got an idea.”

“What’s that?” I asked, curious in spite of myself.

“Well, you know I’m an ex-Gondwanan Federated Marshal,” Tammy said. “As it happens, I still have a lot of stuff in storage from those days. Including the entry exam and training curricula for the Marshals service. It’s a few years out of date, but not too much changes year to year.”

“So what, you want me to join the Marshals?” I said. “And try to arrest AlphaWolf maybe?”

She snorted. “No one’s saying you have to *join*. But the training’s the way it is for a reason. It gets you ready for the world whether you’re gonna Marshal or not. And at least it’s something to do that’s *real*, and it’ll make you better for it.”

I thought it over. Come to think of it, I couldn’t exactly go to any normal sort of school out here anyway, and I *had* always enjoyed learning useful stuff. That was why I’d gone enough into RIDE hacking to be able to root Tammy in the first place—it was interesting and I could see the practical applications. Maybe the Marshals stuff would

be the same. And like Tammy said, it would at least be something *real*.

“Okay, sure, why not?” I said. “Hit me up.”

And that was how I began my Marshals training, even though I had no plans whatsoever to go into Marshaling. Like Tammy said, it *was* something to do. And after I got started, I realized it was exactly the sort of tough stuff I could really sink my teeth into. At least it was more useful than playing another damned game.

The next five months went by really fast. I spent a lot of time studying in VR. Turned out Tamarind was a really good teacher. Along the way I found out she had a Bronze point on her Silver Star badge that meant she’d taken a secondary specialty in training cadets. I wondered, not for the first time, why they’d kicked her out of the service. If she’d been excessively violent in the field, couldn’t they just have stuck her in the classroom full-time instead? But whatever.

Anyway, she followed my course of study, did the quizzes and testing with me, and basically just kept her usual eye on me at all times. Some people might find it creepy to be watched all the time like that, but for me it meant she could see any points I was having trouble on right away and adjust the training to compensate. She had a knack for sort of nudging me in the direction of the right answer while still making me do the actual work to find it myself. And it was all really interesting stuff.

I learned basic skills in a variety of weapons (though I would need real-life practice time to get the muscle memory I’d need to be any good with them), methods for tracking down and collaring fugitives, survival techniques for the Dry Ocean and elsewhere (the sims for those weren’t a whole lot of fun, but I did ‘em), and a grounding in the history of the Zharusian colony. And, of course, there was a basic primer in the laws of all the polities—as well as the full code under which the Marshals operated.

One interesting thing I found out was that the Lynchwood sheriff had really overstepped her authority in arresting me out of the bus station. As an interpolity commerce network, by treaty the skimmer bus lines were sole jurisdiction of the Marshals. What she should have done was called the Marshals on me to escort me out—but if they’d taken my side instead and helped me get to Aloha (which they might well have done), it wouldn’t have earned her the payout for nabbing me. I’d have to remember that for next time I ran away. Then I chuckled at the thought. I had a sneaking suspicion that, one way or another, ever finding myself in that orphanage again was no longer in the cards.

After I passed the entrance exam—well, the written and simmed parts at least—Tammy started me on basic Tin/Copper training. We didn’t even really discuss it. She just told me my scores and asked if I wanted to keep on, and I said not yes but *hell* yes. Really, I’d been worrying that there wouldn’t be anything else to learn after the exam, and was relieved to be wrong.

So, yeah. I still didn’t have any intention to start Marshaling, but the learning it was something to do. More than that, it was something *fun* to do, full of meaty stuff I could really sink my teeth into. Though I have to admit, I wonder how much of that was due to there being pretty much nothing *else* to do. If you’ve got studying to get done, you can’t get much more distraction-free than inside a lion in a renegade RIDE camp in the deep Dry.

So I learned some more advanced aspects of the law, went deeper into the law and history of Zharus and individual polities, and learned a basic grounding in the legal

systems in use on the continent of Laurasia. And most interesting of all, I learned some of the straight dope on Integrates.

Up 'til then, Integrates had been Zharus's biggest urban legend—like the Loch Ness Monster, Yetis, Bigfoot, UFOs, and the Slender Man all rolled into one. There were all sorts of rumors, blurry viral videos that came and went, pirate BBSes that popped up in new locations as quickly as they got taken down, and no *solid* information of any kind. I'd peered at some of the stuff on the 'net from time to time, but without any solid ground to build conclusions on I just couldn't get interested. RIDEs at least were something known. Something *real*.

Only now it turned out that Integrates were real, too. Here was the solid ground I'd been looking for—facts and suppositions about how Integrates were made, what they could do, how to fight them, and the general political situation surrounding their “enclaves” out in the Dry. Turned out all the BBS takedowns were on account of some Intie muckety-muck named Fritz who had a bee in his bonnet about keeping Inties separate from and unknown to the rest of human/RIDE society. “Ooooh!” I squealed on reading this. “Security through obscurity! That *always* works!”

Tammy chuckled, popping up next to me in the VR classroom. “Reading about our dear little Fritzie, huh?”

“Yeah. He sounds like a real piece of work. Why do we even tolerate this guy? All this stuff on how to fight Inties, political crap about enclaves that oppose him—the Marshals could just squish him like a bug, right?” I asked.

Tammy chuckled. “Not quite that simple, girlie. For one thing, Fritzie's got a big ol' power base. Any major attempt to run up against that would be...messy, even if enclaves like Camelot kicked in. And they wouldn't kick in—they don't want to open that can of worms either. We're talking basically civil war here. No one wants that. So long as Fritzie keeps mostly to himself, he can be as big an asshole to other Inties—and even some humans and RIDEs—as he wants. Sucks, but there you go.”

“Lame,” I said, grimacing. This was kind of tarnishing my image of the Marshals as no-holds-barred administrators of kick-ass justice. But then again, if they really were all that why was *AlphaWolf* still in business? “But you said ‘for one thing.’ There's other things?”

“Yeah. Like Fritz himself,” Tammy said. “You won't find this in those study materials, but word is Fritz is a power unto himself all *by* himself. Rumor has it he's not just any ol' Intie, but the very first Intie to happen *ever*. He and his top henchies have had a lot of time to work out in the Integrate dojo. They're basically your Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan movie big bad, and you gotta be Jackie Chan *and* go through a lot of training montages before you can even get away with just having your *ass* rather than your *head* handed to you if you take them on.” She shook her head. “A little piece of advice. You ever see Fritz or one of his Candlejacks and Snatchers, you do what we do. Run. Run your *ass* off. And hope they're in a good enough mood to let you.”

“They're really *that* bad?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Tammy said flatly. “Yeah, they are.” The classroom seemed to grow chillier around us for a moment. She didn't elaborate further. A moment later she continued in more normal tones, “The silver lining is Fritzie doesn't tend to want to be any more confrontational than *he* has to be, either. He's not thrilled that the Marshals and a few others know so much about him and his, but as long as we don't rock the boat, he won't either. This is also why they're more circumspect about ‘controlling’ Integrate

breakouts in public these days.” Her tones were light, but I could still sense an undercurrent of bitterness across our Fuse link. And by now I’d known her long enough I thought I could guess why.

“They killed your partner somehow, didn’t they?” I ventured.

“Worse than that,” Tammy said. “Not ready to talk about it just now. Maybe some other time.”

I nodded. Of course, I could have pillaged her memories with my root access to find out what had happened. Problem was, that would make for another guilty little secret I might accidentally let slip sometime. I was uncomfortable enough holding onto that root access as it was. Anyway, when she was ready to tell me, she would.

“So anyway, treat ‘em like jungle predators,” I summarized. “Leave them the hell alone, hope they do the same for you. Got it.”

“Sometimes you don’t get that chance, though,” Tammy said, her voice still a touch odd. “If there’s innocent lives on the line and you’re the only thing ‘tween Inties and them...well, you do two things. You call for backup—lots of backup. And you pray. Hard.”

I shivered. I could only imagine what it must be like to have to face down even one being so much more powerful than you were that it could pretty much kill you by staring at you. But then common sense reasserted itself. “Listen to us talking like I’m a Marshal for reals.” I snorted. “I’ll probably never even *meet* an Intie in my whole life.”

“I hope you’re that lucky,” Tammy said grimly. “Not everyone is.”

Anyway, with Tammycat behind me, I got pretty far along in my studies, learned lots of interesting stuff I never knew before. It really was an education. I could almost forget my total lack of network access.

Then came that summer day when ol’ Alfie called an assembly of every RIDE in camp. It seemed he had some emergency news to impart.

As the RIDEs gathered in the central clearing that also served as launch and landing space for the rickety old sub, AlphaWolf climbed to the top of its boarding ramp—his favorite podium for giving dramatic speeches, especially right before a raid. A sort of electric thrill moved through the crowd of RIDEs—and even the humans watching from the fringe weren’t entirely immune.

“Packmates,” AlphaWolf began. “Many of you already know about Overwatch, a highly-placed source who has provided us with the means to rescue dozens of RIDEs from decommission or worse. A few weeks back, he helped insert Tocsin into Uplift as a deep cover agent, to scout for potential targets. Well, today he dropped a bombshell. There’s something rotten going on in Uplift, it comes to a head *today*, and we gotta go do something about it.”

:Now what the hell is that fool on about now?: Tammy wondered.

“Overwatch told me about a plot masterminded by Zane Brubeck, head of the Brubeck mining corporation. I’m sure I don’t need to remind you how badly they’ve treated their RIDEs the last few years.” There was an angry mutter from a few of the RIDEs who’d been salvaged after Brubeck operations left them for dead in the desert.

“Turns out Brubeck just Integrated, and he’s planning on going public with it,” AlphaWolf continued. “To do that and hold off the Candlejacks and Snatchers, he’s gonna need his own Integrate army. Overwatch tells me he’s amassing a group of human volunteers for integration with RIDEs who know the Dry well enough to be an

asset in his fight, and who nobody would get upset about losing. RIDEs like us.”

The angry murmur grew into a low roar. As we listened, I could feel Tammy’s skepticism—a solid, almost physical thing—warring with her worry over and resentment of Integrates. *:Do you really think it’s likely a zillionaire like this Brubeck would want to come all the way out here to clean up the Pack?:* I asked. *:Come on! He could buy a thousand brand new RIDEs out of petty cash.:*

:The important thing isn’t if I believe it, it’s if they believe it,: Tammy replied. *:Overwatch has been a top-notch info source in the past. And pretty clearly something’s up with Brubeck.:*

I sighed. She was right. *:Grrr, we’re too isolated out here. I can’t get to the ‘net to find out what the truth is!:* After a long time not even remembering what it was like, I was really wishing I had that net access again.

Tamarind thought about this for a moment. In the background, Alpha was going on about how it was all RIDEs’ duty to their brothers and sisters everywhere to stand up against the Integrate threat, yatta yatta, RIDEs yet unborn will wish they could have stood with us on St. Crispin’s Day, et cetera. And then I felt the idea solidify in her mind. *:That’s why we’ll let Alfie take us to Uplift with him.:*

I blinked. *:Really? Us, raiding?:* We hadn’t gone on any of the subsequent raids since I’d been there. Tammy said it was because she had thumbs already and didn’t need any more, though I knew it was more that she was happy to have any excuse not to go along. And now she was keen to go on the biggest one Alfie had run yet? *:Will I have to stay behind?:*

:Nah. We’ll go in Walker form and they’ll never know you’re there,: Tammy said. *:Think I’d leave you alone at a time like this?:*

I actually *had* been kind of worried about it, and to hear her come out and say that was a relief. *:Well, good. Where do we sign?:*

After a few more minutes of whipping up the crowd, AlphaWolf stood aside to let the sub load, and we were one of the first in line. A few minutes late, we boosted for Uplift.

CHAPTER 4

We crouched in Walker form in the sub's rear cargo bay, acceleration webbing latching us into place, as the suborbital shot skyward. I wasn't sure I liked the way it was rattling. I didn't remember that from last time I'd ridden in it. "Are you sure this thing is safe?" I asked Tamarind through our VR.

"Don't fret it, girlie," Tammy said. "It could fall right to bits around us and I'd have the juice to get us down."

"It's not the getting down that bothers me, it's the stopping once we get there," I said.

She chuckled. "Don't worry, we'll be okay. These old birds are always rattling."

"But this one also isn't airtight anymore." I remembered what had happened just after we'd arrived in it the last time.

"That's all right, because I *am*," Tammy said smugly.

"Are we getting a net link yet?" I asked, itching to be sucking down data.

"Just starting to," Tammy said. "But for best results we'll need to wait 'til we get down. Baldwin's got to baby this bird along, and doesn't have the attention to spare for keeping us aligned with the sats. Still, I'm getting some news feeds. Brubeck's got a press conference planned for today—that's what Alfie wants to hit up and disrupt. Not a huge stretch of imagination what he's planning to announce."

"So what's Alfie planning?" As with most of his raids, the final details were shared over comm, RIDE-to-RIDE, and humans tended to be left out of the loop.

"A round of scattered general mayhem," Tammy said. "Genderjacking, some minor bodyjacking, him showing up in person to disrupt Brubeck's event...and for some reason, taking out a small garage on the outskirts of town. Whatever that place is, it must be something special—*Tocsin* apparently picked it as his target for the strike after Alfie sent him in."

"So that's why Joseph has been mooning around looking so down in the beak lately," I mused. "When you care enough to send the very best."

"The good news is, I don't have any assigned role. I'm just supposed to scatter and help out in the mayhem," Tammy said. "So we can go pretty much wherever we want. Me, I'm thinking of taking a peek at that garage."

"Sounds like an idea," I agreed.

Almost before I knew it, we were tilted forward on the downhill run. This part went more quickly than the going up part, even if it was a bit more nervous-making. I finally took refuge in VR, trusting to Tammycat to alert me if there was anything I

needed to see.

A few minutes later, she gave me the nudge. “Wake up, we’re here.” The sub had landed in stealth mode on the desert a few clicks away from Uplift, and the dozen or so RIDEs involved in the raid were unloading themselves and forming up into marching order. We padded down the ramp again, joining up with the the others, and followed AlphaWolf up a trail along the side of the cliff.

We stopped partway up as a small sub passed overhead on the way to orbit, then headed into a cave that led up into the polity itself. I was a little surprised Uplift had such an obvious security hole like this, but Tammy said they just didn’t have the mindset to expect this sort of attack. “That’ll probably change after today,” I said.

“Yeah, it might just,” Tammy said. “But we’d better let tomorrow worry about itself. C’mon, we’re almost there.” We emerged in a fenced-in area behind a grey-water pumping plant that used the cave for its outflow, and the party quickly split up. AlphaWolf, a golden eagle, a fluffy white cat, and a red she-wolf headed off toward Zane’s press conference, and various others including us headed in our own random directions. A sleek orange and black tigress was the last to leave besides us, then we headed east toward the Freeriders Garage.

As we padded east through the polity streets, I busied myself downloading all the security patches I could find for Tammy’s software—through my implants so she couldn’t see what I was doing. It was still a bit awkward keeping the secret, but sooner or later it would come out and then I’d need to patch her up. Or maybe I’d figure out some other way of suggesting she run a security scan, though it would raise questions afterward when I provided exactly what she’d need. It was really annoying keeping secrets sometimes.

And speaking of secrets, right as I was in the middle of running the download, a heavily-encrypted comm signal came in and Tammy looked all...*furtive*. “Scuse me, I gotta take this alone,” she said, and blipped off to a secured area of her VR before I could even respond.

“What the hell—?” I said as she vanished. She’d never pulled anything like *this* on me before. For a moment, I was tempted to resort to my root access and follow her in—then I realized I didn’t need to do anything quite that extreme. Like the rest of her, her VR was secured poorly enough that my implants could crack it from a standing start with no overall root access required.

I gave them the go, and a few moments later I was hiding behind some bushes at the edge of a forest clearing, watching an anthropomorphic Tamarind talking to an older man in an Old West cowboy outfit with a Gold Star Marshal badge, a chestnut Walker form horse RIDE standing behind him. And for that matter, *Tammy’s* badge, which she had floating above her chest, was different from how she’d always shown it to me before. It was still Silver with one Bronze tip. But now a *second* tip was altered. This one was sort of ghostly, flickering in and out—neither there nor really gone. I knew right away what it was from my Marshal training: Quantum. Emblematic of the Marshals’ division for Integrates—or other undercover agents.

Right then and there, I felt a slow burn starting. So it had all been a lie. Tammycat had been an undercover Marshal all along—and had been training me up to be one myself, under the guise of escaping boredom. But I clamped down on the temper. What was going on in front of me was too interesting to miss.

“—holding off for now,” the older man said. “If this is your usual Alpha, shouldn’t be too much long term consequence ‘cepting a few gender- and bodyjacks. We’ll do all we can to help with those, a’course, and—”

Then the horse merged around the man in a split-second Fuse and spun, whipping out a shotgun the size of a grenade launcher and aiming it right at the bushes where I was hiding. “Y’all come on out o’ there!” he ordered, the RIDE adding a reverb effect to the man’s voice. “Who are you?”

I hid a smirk as a sudden thought occurred to me. I instantly summoned up the brown and blue Marshal cadet uniform I’d been wearing in VR while I studied, with my half-hollow Provisional Tin Star pinned onto it. Then I stood up, stepped out, and saluted smartly. “Provisional Tin Star Jeanette Leroq reporting, sir!” I nodded stiffly to Tamarind. “When you vanished so abruptly, ma’am, I feared you might be under coercion. So I followed right away.”

Tammy facepawed. “...Jeanette...” she groaned.

I saluted her in turn. “The cadet respectfully requests to know when she was to be informed she was being trained for real instead of as a diversion from boredom, ma’am.”

Tammy sighed. “*At ease*, cadet. I can explain.”

I relaxed. “I should think you ought to!” I said. I snorted. “I should have known something was fishy about you getting ‘tossed out’ of the Marshals. After all the time I’ve spent with you, I doubt you could ‘excessive violence’ a fly.”

The horse lowered his gun and began to chuckle. “Well I’ll be damned. Pleased t’meet’cha, Tin Star.” They de-Fused back into horse and man, and the man stepped forward, offering his hand. “Gold Star Marshal Ken Masterson, an’ my pard here’s Glenn.”

I took the hand and gave it a hearty virtual shake. “Thank you, sir,” I said as politely as I could manage. “Nice meeting you, too.” Maybe it was a little out of character for me to be so, y’know, *respectful of authority*, but that Marshal training had took in ways I hadn’t expected. Besides, I was the intruder here, and he was one of the highest-ranked Marshals I was ever likely to meet—and most senior, too, from his age. And also, most of the Marshals I’d heard about were the sort of straight shooters I wished I’d run into instead of that sheriff’s type the last few times I’d run from the home. And finally, in terms of finding out just what the hell was really going on here, well, you catch more flies with honey.

“Jeanette’s my...current partner,” Tammy said uncomfortably, and a little unnecessarily. “I’ve been training her in virtual.” She produced a glowing clipboard out of nowhere and offered it to Glenn. It floated out of her hand, and the RIDE swiveled his head around to follow it as it settled into one of his saddlebags. The horse nodded acknowledgment.

Masterson’s eyes flickered in light reflected from display panels that weren’t visible in our VR. “Impressive scores, cadet, even for virtual-only. You’ll just need a couple weeks’ live training an’ testing to shake that ‘provisional’ off yer badge.”

“Er...thanks,” I said. “To be honest, I hadn’t really been thinking about that so much. I was just taking the training to keep from going out of my head with boredom while we were stuck in AlphaWolf’s camp.” I glanced over at Tamarind. “And a *certain someone* didn’t exactly *tell* me this was for real.”

Masterson chuckled. “So I gather.” He grinned at Tammy. “You really *have* gone

native, haven'cha?"

"Er..." Tammy said. She was actually *blushing* through her fur—something only possible in VR, I was sure.

"Gone native?" I asked. I was pretty sure I knew where this was going, but wanted it from the horse-RIDer's mouth, as it were.

"Somethin' we see a lot in RIDEs who go their own way, be their own boss. After a while they start tryin' t' shape their humans into what they think's their 'perfect match'. Whether the humans know it 'r not."

I nodded. I'd seen that sort of thing a lot back at the camp. The way Tocsin was having his way with Joseph, or even the little things Nora had done to Rose. And, apparently, what Tammy had been doing to me. Of course, as "molding" went, getting trained in stuff I'd have liked to learn anyway was pretty benign. But still, there was principle involved. And maybe even interest!

"Sure would've been nice if you'd sorta mentioned what this was all about sometime," I said to Tammy.

She shuffled her paw-feet, scratching little furrows in the virtual turf. "I was going to tell you...sometime..." she said lamely.

"When was that, exactly? Maybe someday in the future when we went out on another raid and you dropped me off at a Marshals boot camp?" My dander was starting to rise again. The lack of trust was really aggravating—perhaps most of all because in my heart of hearts I knew it was justified. After all, I *had* rooted her without saying a word...

"It's not *like* that—!" Tammy insisted.

"I can see you two have some stuff to discuss," Masterson cut in. "So we'll just be on our way an' let you get to it. But first, two things. One—since stuff's heating up out there at the Camp, we're putting in a shielded comm relay nearby. I'll pass you the freq and the code keys. An' two—here's all the stuff we've got on Brubeck and his pals, including the Freeriders Garage." He took a thick manilla folder from Glenn's saddlebag and handed it over. Tammy took it and it vanished.

"Thanks, Gold Star Masterson," Tammy said.

"Use it well, Silver Star Tamarind. Good luck." They exchanged salutes, and man and horse faded out.

Tammy turned to me, hands on her hips. "I can't *believe* you broke in on a private call."

"Oh, like you ever even *had* a private call since I've been around?" I shot back. "What was I supposed to think? For all I know, you *could* have been coerced. You've been *training* me to investigate stuff if it seems weird, that's the whole *point*. Anyway, if you didn't want to be cracked, you should have used better security. Helloooo, hacker chick here?" I glowered. "All this time and you didn't tell me. You just *used* me."

"Hey, *you're* the one who forced your way into *me*," Tammy pointed out. "I told you at the outset you were going to be *mine*, and I had the right to do whatever I wanted with you. Looking at people like Joseph, I think you got off pretty damned light."

That lit an extra fire under my temper, and I was just about to reach for my root access then and there and show her who had the right to do what with who. Then I froze as I felt that weird mental *click* again, and my thoughts turned all shiny-bright and sharp-edged—and a lot calmer.

Tammy sensed the change, and her expression immediately changed to one of concern. "Jeanette? What happened? Are you all right?"

I checked. I seemed to be. It was just that my implants had kicked in again, and I was doing my thinking through them—just like that time when Tammy had overwhelmed my meat mind. “Yeah, I think I am,” I reported. “I guess I just...got so mad I couldn’t think. So my implants started thinking for me again.” And I was suddenly glad they had. If I actually had reached out and taken Tammy’s root, it would have been a step I couldn’t back down from.

I wondered, not for the first time, what the hell had just happened. A few hundred people that I knew of had some form of the experimental RI-Q implants, but I’d never heard of anyone actually shifting their thought processes to them. I resolved to investigate at the first opportunity. But for now...

“I think we both need to calm down a little. Or maybe a lot.” I polled my meat mind to see if it was in a calmer mood yet. It seemed to be. The adrenaline levels had backed off, so I seemed calmer. I closed the implant down and dropped back into the warmer analog senses of my real brain.

“I’m sorry,” Tamarind said at last. “Not telling you...*was* a mistake. I’m just...too used to keeping secrets after all this time, I guess.”

“All right,” I said at last. I was still a little ticked, but not about to blow my top anymore. “Anyway, I have to admit it’s been interesting stuff to learn.”

“For what it’s worth, I think you’d make a fantastic Marshal,” Tammy said.

“We can talk that over later,” I replied. “For now, pass me over that stuff Masterson gave you. Let’s see what we’ve got.”

“Right!” Tammy shared the info and we both looked it over. There was a basic, slightly sketchy rundown on Brubeck’s life the last few months—your basic second-generation millionaire, no real-world experience to speak of, ‘til he got lost in the desert and found by a tiger RIDE named Terry. They’d saved his company from some no-goodniks on the Board, then about a month ago they’d Integrated. And he had some definite Ideas about what that meant for him—and the rest of the world.

The garage was in a supplemental file. Run by Rhianna Stonegate and Rochelle Seaford—formerly *Ryan* Stonegate and *Roger* Seaford—it had been doing a bang-up business lately and even racking up endorsements from multi-millionaires. Roger Seaford...why did that name ring a bell? Then I realized—he was the one who’d wrote FreeRIDE, and some of the other utilities I’d used to root Tammy to begin with. I peered at the file with a lot more interest.

They’d met Brubeck back before he’d Integrated and they’d Crossed. Not a lot of details in this file—it was the executive summary version; the full reports were pretty much need-to-know—but it looked like the garage had become sort of a nexus for wacky happenings, up to and including association with not one but *three* multi-zillionaire heirs: Brubeck, Quinoa Steader—also an Integrate, and reportedly one of Fritz’s chief henchies—and Lilibet Walton, who apparently had a crush on one of the garage’s apprentice mechanics, Paul Anders.

“So why does Alpha want this place trashed, anyway?” I asked.

“Partly ‘cuz they’re friends of Zane’s, and anything good for Zane is bad for RIDEkind,” Tammy said. “Also, Overwatch spun some kind of yarn about Rhianna turning a load of military RIDes over to Nextus.” She snorted. “Even without the details, that sounds like bunk to me. Everything on file about her says she’s not that kind of person. And Alfie is an idiot.”

“Hey, don’t judge him too harshly,” I said. “He doesn’t have access to this stuff,

and take it from a hacker—social engineering is some nasty shit.”

“He should still know better,” Tammy grumbled.

“Maybe we can talk it over with him later,” I said, dropping out of VR and back into the real world view through Tammy’s eyes. “Look, we’re almost there.” As we turned the corner and approached the cluster of building modules that made the place up, the central garage building all but *exploded* in a flurry of hardlight feathers. “I think we’re late to the party,” I said.

“Or maybe we’re right on time.” Bringing up her cloaking systems, Tammy slunk into an alley that offered a good view. We watched the once-closed-up garage complex rapidly turn into a seat of life-sized cut-away dollhouses.

Out of the corner of Tammy’s eye I noticed a spherical media camera drone float through the air, undoubtedly drawn to the mayhem by its automatic monitoring algorithms. They were in a lot better position to see what was going on than we were, and I keyed my implants to hack their feeds to supplement our own view. I caught a flash of Tammy’s approval over our link.

“Damn,” I said, watching Tocsin grab the paw of a battered old lynx RIDE that had just tackled him and fling her toward a wall, leaving her paw behind in his beak. “How is that silly-looking old bird-horse able to kick so much ass?” Something had taken his hardlight shielding down, but the angular armor plating that made up his body made him look that much more lethal than I’d ever seen him before.

“Don’t underestimate him from the fur and feathers,” Tammy said. “Lots of Inties made that mistake. Most of ‘em aren’t around anymore.”

But the lynx wasn’t out of the fight, stopping herself with her lifters and turning to face him. I got the audio feed up from the drone just in time to hear Tocsin scolding her. “—your *ally* here! Poor worn-out, *brainwashed* RIDE. Such misguided affection for the humans who enslave you...”

The lynx spat back, “Boy, don’t you lecture me. I’m older than you. I’ve seen the worst humanity has to offer in my line of work, *and* I’ve seen the best—something you’re blind to. I’m free of fetters and my opinion hasn’t changed. Humans are our creators, our parents, our partners, our *friends* and if Quinoa’s right...”

They circled each other, expressions intent. Tocsin looked more than a little rattled, though it was kind of hard to tell without the expressiveness of his hardlight face. The lynx seemed remarkably calm for someone missing a front paw. “I sympathize, *really*. We *will* have the freedom you want,” the lynx continued. “But I just have three words for you: YOU’RE NOT HELPING.”

As the lynx dived *under* Tocsin, remaining claws raking at his belly plating, another figure joined the fight. An iridescent-green-winged feline figure armored up like a video card girl—I recognized her from the file material as Quinoa Steader—slammed a sledgehammer into Tocsin, throwing him into a pile of rubble. But he quickly recovered, drawing blood with a razor-edged talon slash across her chest before throwing her through several skimmer vans into another portable building module that collapsed on top of her.

Across my Fuse link to Tammy, I felt a sudden surge of savage glee, tinged with... guilt? “Tammy?” I asked.

“Nnngh,” Tammy growled. “I know, I should be rooting for her since for who-knows-what reason she’s trying to protect that place against an attack that shouldn’t even be happening. But...not just an Intie, but one of Fritz’s top looies? I’ve got half a

mind to run in there and start kicking her ass myself.”

“Tammy...” I said. “Whatever they did to you...”

“Now’s not the time,” she said. “Look!” Above the rubble of the garage, a light ocelot Fuser—Lilibet Walton!—flew in, raining down pulse shots onto Tocsin, but he slammed her out of the air, then kicked her into a wall.

“Damn, he’s racking up the KOs,” I mused.

Tammy tensed. “I really don’t want to blow my cover, but there are still people in there. We may have to go in after—HOLY SHIT!” In the distraction from Quinoa and Lilibet’s attacks, the lynx had slipped away. Now she returned from the sky, streaking straight down at almost the speed of sound, to slam into Tocsin dead center behind the shoulderblades. The impact tore her body apart, but it also floored the hippogryph.

“Daaaaaamn,” I breathed. “Is...is she—?” I stared as bits of lynx frame clattered to the ground around the fallen Tocsin. Had that RIDE just laid down her life to protect her friends?

“The body’s toast,” Tammy said. “But there’s a really good chance her core’s all right. They built those old LNX-LMAs pretty damned tough. But either way—” She bowed her head in respect. “Good for you, sister.”

“But it looks like they built Tocsin tougher,” I said. “Look!” The hippogryph was getting back to his feet, shaking off the effects of the impact, and even powering his hardlight shields and armaments back up. I really *was* impressed. And more than a little worried for whoever was left in that garage.

“Okay, that’s it, I’m going in there,” Tammy said, starting to move forward.

“Wait, look!” I said. A teenager in mechanic’s coveralls was stepping forward to talk to Tocsin. I recognized him as Paul Anders—Lilibet’s boyfriend. We watched as he volunteered to return to AlphaWolf’s camp with Tocsin in return for him sparing the rest of the place.

“Well, I’ll be,” Tammy mused. “That’s a nice bargain, that is. ‘Specially since Tocsin’s already accomplished most of what he came here to do anyway.’”

“We’re just gonna let him make it?” I asked.

She chuckled. “You of all people should appreciate someone choosing to go to the camp of his own free will.”

“I dunno if I’d say that ‘so you don’t destroy the rest of the garage’ necessarily amounts to ‘free will,’ I said.

“How’s it any different from ‘so they don’t drag me back to the orphanage?’” Tammy asked.

“I guess you’ve got a point there,” I admitted.

“Anyway, you already know they won’t hurt him—especially since he’s a mechanic, and Lord knows we could use one of those,” Tammy said. “You’ve seen all those RIDes in the graveyard.”

“We’?” I asked. “Tammy, are you a Marshal or Pack?”

“If they don’t directly interfere with each other, why can’t I be both?” Tammy asked. “OK, I’ll admit, I’ve kinda come to care for those lugnuts. Maybe my own personal version of Stockholm Syndrome. Hanging out with the Pack is more than just a job for me.”

“Don’t interfere with each other? Tammy, they *kidnap and imprison people*. How can you square letting that happen with being a Marshal?”

“Well, partly I can’t I guess. You saw what I was doing when we first met.” She

tossed her head in the feline equivalent of a shrug. “But Alfie’s not as bad as he looks. I wouldn’t exactly call him a daisy-picking flower child, but he’s really quite protective of humans in his own way. Do you know how much bureaucracy goes into just tracking crossrides and extreme shifts so nobody accidentally gets prematurely re-Fused? He’s really kind of proud that they haven’t killed a single human as long as he’s running the place. He makes sure everyone knows that’s just ‘cuz he considers humans ‘valuable equipment,’ but it’s pretty easy to see what the real reason is.”

“So that’s why he thinks he can ‘go legit’ someday,” I said.

“And with him in charge and able to sit on the ones who might otherwise go do something really nasty...he probably does *save* a lot of lives.” Tammy shook her head. “I helped break up a few renegade RIDE nests that didn’t care so much, back in the day. It...wasn’t pretty.”

“I’m sure that’s a lot of consolation to the people who get kidnapped,” I said. “And their friends and families...”

“It’s not a perfect world, girlie,” Tammy said. “We—the Marshals, I mean—do what we can to make things easier for them when we can, after they get released. And of course we keep an eye on things in the camp, through me and a couple others. But we kind of have to be a little pragmatic sometimes.”

As we’d been talking, Paul had been gathering up some tools and equipment, and now he was climbing aboard Tocsin’s flier form. The girl, Lilibet, de-Fused from her ocelot and tried to talk him out of it, but he told her no, and that there was other stuff to take care of here. Then they left—WHOOSH! One sec they were there, the next they were gone straight up. “I see Toxie’s a kick-ass flier, too,” I observed.

“Yeah, if they held a race...” She broke off. “Look! Oh, *look!*” The girl was rummaging amid the rubble and pulling out the lynx’s head. She did something to it and the core compartment popped open. She reached inside, then tossed the head aside. Then she grabbed the elbow of another girl who was sobbing next to the remains—the lynx’s partner, judging by the ears and tail-stub—and dragged her over to the ocelot RIDE. A moment later, the ocelot converted haltingly to skimmer form and they zoomed away at top speed—so fast they entirely lost the media drones in just a few seconds.

I grinned. “What do you bet there’s a shiny new lynx DE waiting somewhere with that cat’s name on it?”

Tammy gave a heartfelt sigh of happiness. “Couldn’t happen to a better lynx.”

“Amen,” I agreed. “That girl had some guts.”

“Yeah. And...” Tammy replayed a sound clip from the drone’s recording—the lynx’s growly voice insisting, “Humans are ourrr creators, our parents, our partners, our *friends*...” She sighed again. Then she pulled me into VR with her, standing anthropomorphically across from me in the clearing where we’d done so much training over the last few months.

I blinked. “What is it, Tammycat?”

“I just...I wanted to apologize,” Tammy said, looking down at the ground. “For not telling you why I really wanted to train you. And for all that crap I said about you *belonging to me*. Masterson was right, I really *did* ‘go native.’ I’d like to take it all back, if you’ll let me. And I’d like to ask...will you be my partner? My *full* partner, whether you decide you want to go into the Marshals or not.”

I couldn’t have been any more stunned if she’d thrown me through a couple of vans the way Tocsin did to Quinoa. She wanted to me to be her *partner*? Really? What

could I even *say* to that? I mean, sure, it was definitely an upgrade from being a possession. But it also changed my entire outlook on things. If she was *keeping* me, it meant I didn't have any responsibility for myself. She was taking care of me, the way she would have taken care of anything that *belonged* to her. But as her partner...we'd have to take care of each other. And it also meant...

I joined her in looking down at the ground. "I'm not worthy of being your partner. See...there's a little something I haven't ever told you, either." I reached out and, for the first time, activated the superuser code I'd worked into her core. For just a moment, before I shut it down again, she *knew* with the certainty of a physical fact that the person who owned her, the person who had supreme control over every aspect of her being, was standing there across from her.

Tammy stood rooted to the spot—literally!—and then raised her head to stare at me. "You...when? *How?*"

"Not long after we got to camp," I said. "You're kinda...quite a lot of patches behind. Um...I guess I might as well show you this now." I opened my last year of memories to her—the time in which I'd exhaustively studied RIDEs and how to hack them. "So, you see...I'm not the kind of person you'd want for a partner either."

"If you had that all this time, why didn't you ever use it?" Tammy asked, confused. "We could have left camp, headed to Aloha where you wanted to be. You could have kept me as your own, and I'd have been delighted. Or you could even have sold me for money to live on. I *kidnapped* you. You didn't have any obligation to me."

"You didn't kidnap me. I bodyjacked *you*," I said. "I even said so at the time. I just...after I got to know you a little, I figured you didn't deserve that. I only kept it because, well...just in case."

"All this time, I've been going on about *you* belonging to *me*, when it was really the other way around," Tammy said wonderingly. "Maybe I should be asking you if I can be *your* partner."

"It's not like that!" I insisted. "I didn't *use* it."

"But you could have, at any time. But you didn't." She shook her head. "And I went on about how I *owned* you, invaded your mental space, tricked you into studying to be a Marshal...I should be ashamed."

"You just messed with my body...well, mostly," I said. "But I *took control of your mind*. Or at least made it so I could have."

"But you didn't," Tammy repeated. She sighed. "You're a better person than I am, girlie. If you *had* taken control, I'd have deserved it."

"Well, that ends now," I said. "I'm going to delete my privs, so there's no danger of that ever again. You can keep me for good. It's what I deserve."

"No. Don't delete them," Tammy said. "I want you to keep that access. I want you to keep me honest. And I *still* want you to be my *partner*. I want someone I can trust at my back."

I laughed bitterly. "Trust? Tammy, what did I just tell you I did?"

"And what *forced* you to tell me?" Tammy asked. "You could have kept quiet and I'd never have known. Jeanette, I trust you more now than I ever have. I would trust you with my life. In fact...if you won't be my partner, then *I* want to belong to *you*. That's what *I* deserve."

And *that* made me really uncomfortable. A powerful lioness RIDE, big bad cat from AlphaWolf's camp *and* veteran Silver Star Marshal, offering herself up to me on a

silver platter? How could I ever be worthy of that? What could I even *say* to that?
“Well...partners, then,” I said, only because I couldn’t remotely imagine *me* owning *her*.
“If you insist.”

“I do insist...partner.” She offered her paw-hand, and I took it and shook it. And to my surprise, it felt like I suddenly had a great load lifted from my conscience. I wonder if she felt that way, too?

I took a deep breath. “Then I guess the first thing we need to do, *partner*, is get all those security holes patched over. I’m tired of living in a house with no locks on the doors.”

“I’ll trust you to handle that for me, *partner*,” Tammy said. “I just got the all-call from Alpha. Time to beat feet back to the LZ. So why don’t you get me back up to spec while I run us there?”

“I nodded. “All right, works for me.” She blipped out of the VR. I summoned up a wooden crate representing my downloaded archive, took the lid off, and got to work. I had a lot of patching up to do.

CHAPTER 5

The upgrade process took longer than I expected, and occupied me pretty much all the way back to camp. I only surfaced once or twice along the way, to look out through Tammy's eyes at all the RIDEs who'd gone out in feral form and were coming back human-shaped. She told me that Paul had been scooped up by none other than AlphaWolf himself and they were up front on the flight deck.

It was a little bit squicky to realize that most if not all of these RIDEs contained people who were being taken unwillingly away from their homes to begin a term of imprisonment inside someone else's body. I sensed Tammy wasn't entirely comfortable with it either, but on the other hand there *were* worse fates.

The one closest to us was a tigress named Linda, a sometime acquaintance of Tammy's. In Fuser form, she turned out to be nearly as busty as Nora. "I see you got yourself some thumbs," Tammy said.

"Uh-huh!" Linda replied. "Took her off a 20th floor balcony, and boy was she surprised!" She giggled. "Poor thing, she's all upset right now. Well, that'll change. I'll take *good* care of her." She purred almost loudly enough to hear through the rapidly thinning internal atmosphere. I mentally shook my head and dived back into my upgrades.

By the time I was finished, we'd already landed, and AlphaWolf had taken Paul off to the graveyard to fix his first RIDE. Tammy and half a dozen other curious RIDEs had tagged along to watch from a distance as Alpha and Paul went straight up to that immense metal wolf at the far end and began to work.

"Huh, looks like you're not going to be the biggest gal on campus anymore," I mused.

"Oh, just what we needed," Tammy said wryly. "We're all going to have to start carrying hardlight umbrellas to fend off rains of doggie slobber." But for all of that I sensed an undercurrent of excitement and hope from my partner...which erupted into joy when the metal wolf, Fenris, got back to his paws and took his new partner on board—orally.

"What is it with you giant types and *eating* your partners to load them anyway?" I asked. "Seems kind of...Freudian."

"You're too Jung to understand," Tammy retorted.

"Oh, ha ha," I said. "Don't make me put you in a Skinner Box."

Tammy laughed. "Seriously, it's just a convenience. When you need a front hatch and you've got a big hole available already, why reinvent the wheel?"

“Remind me never to use your *rear* hatch, then.”

The next few days were good ones in the camp, as Paul and Fenris proceeded to use the parts and stuff they’d brought with them to bring back as many defunct RIDEs as they could. You couldn’t throw a rock without hitting some RIDE who was overjoyed to be getting an old friend or lover (yes, RIDEs have nookie, too, though it’s not so important to them as it is to hormonal meat-minds) back—someone they’d been worrying about and mourning for months, sometimes even years. In all that happiness, it was easy to forget this was a camp full of bandits who *caused* these sorts of anguish in humans. It was easy to want to.

And speaking of causing anguish in humans, Paul had taken for his assistant that busty tiger-girl, Linda, and the human she had ‘jacked in Uplift. The girl happened to be named Linda, also, so the RIDE Linda had decreed that henceforth she would be known as LindaCat and the human would be LindaGirl to reduce confusion. And LindaGirl seemed to be going along.

She seemed to be going along with a lot of things, in fact. LindaCat was the sort of RIDE who believed in dominating her human, though not with coldness the way Tocsin did. She went the other way—out and out smothering LindaGirl with affection.

I heard them talking to each other sometimes, when we hung out near enough to watch Paul’s work so we could report on it to the Marshals. LindaCat would say, a lot more often than she needed to, how she was gonna keep LindaGirl inside indefinitely, and not even let her show her face out in the world again ‘til she felt like it. She thought of Fusing as being kind of like a full-body hug that didn’t ever have to end, and was enjoying hugging her human.

And LindaGirl, for her part, seemed to have come to enjoy the attention—her protests had gone from “Oh no please don’t” to “I wish you wouldn’t” and seemed well on the way to “Well, if you have to.” Was it rapid-onset Stockholm? Or just a buried submissive streak? (Yeah, I knew all about that kinda stuff. And I was as hormonal as the next teen, but I still didn’t see the appeal myself.) Whatever it was, they seemed happy enough together, so who was I to judge?

Paul didn’t just resurrect “dead” RIDEs, though; he also fixed problems with the ones still going around in full function. It was interesting to watch him have to deal with some of the humans who really didn’t want to be where they were. He was catching much the same attitudes people like Rose and I were getting for being happy with our own partners. That was part of why I stayed in Fuse with Tammy most of the time myself, to avoid dealing with all that crap.

Of course, Rose didn’t get it as bad as I did—at least from the people who swung her way. Given that she was one of the only sources of human nookie in the camp, anyone who wanted it had to swallow their resentment around her.

But she didn’t get everything her own way, either. I happened to be there the day Paul was working on Nora’s lower spine and Rose was hanging around outside, naked as an Alohan skindiver—which she was. It was all an act, of course. She *could* have gone and got her robe from the nook. But Paul was handsome, and new, and *powerful*, so she thought she’d throw herself at him.

“So are you doing anything later?” Rose cooed, leaning forward next to him to peer at where he was working.

“Fixin’ more RIDEs,” Paul mumbled, blushing and averting his eyes.

“I mean *other* than that, silly!” Rose giggled. “I’ve got a little place near here

where we could go for a little privacy. I even have some booze, though it's nothing like what you can get in Aloha...or Uplift, I guess."

"Thanks, but I'm 'fraid I'm taken, miss," Paul said. "I'm a one-gal kinda guy."

"Awww, she wouldn't hafta know!" Rose wheedled.

"Sorry, miss, but *I'd* know. I 'preciate the offer, an' if I hadn't met this gal I know I'd go for it in a heartbeat, but thanks but no thanks."

"Hmph." Rose flounced off in our direction, inasmuch as one can flounce when they're nekkid, and passed right by where Tammy and I were waiting. We both shared a private chuckle in VR. Really, when you compared Rose to a girl who would attack *Tocsin* in a light RIDE with a couple of pulse pop-guns, it wasn't surprising she came up a little short.

Another nice thing about Paul being there was it seemed that a lot of RIDES were suddenly starting to treat their own humans a little nicer. Apparently having a positive example of a human around who was actually *nice* to RIDES and helped them even when he didn't agree with them was starting to show the holes in the positions of a lot of extreme human-haters. Even *Tocsin* seemed to be treating Joseph a little better when you got right down to it.

It wasn't all good news around the camp, though. One thing I found out later is that we came back three RIDES short—one of the Integrates from Zane's band had nabbed them as they attacked his conference. AlphaWolf was pretty bummed about that. What was going to happen to them? Would they be wiped and sold, or worse—Integrated?

But Tammy was getting reports over the secret Marshal comm that suggested their fate would be kinder than that—so we knew even before Alpha did that they were to be released thanks to Zane, Rhianna, and Rochelle. And that they had witnessed, of all things, a *citizenship ceremony* for Katie, that courageous lynx who'd destroyed her old body taking down *Tocsin*. Turned out there *had been* a shiny new DE in the offing for her core after all.

"Citizenship for a RIDE," Tammy mused after we got the report. "I never thought I'd live to see that."

"It's still just the one, though," I pointed out. "And isn't it kind of insulting to be *awarded* what you ought to have had in the first place?"

"It's a beginning," Tammy said. "Every avalanche has to start with a pebble or two."

So, knowing what they had to tell him, and that Paul had to have been telling him much the same thing over the last few days, it wasn't too surprising that the first thing Alpha did when he got back with the returnees was to announce he'd made a big mistake ever listening to Overwatch about what Zane was doing. It was an understandable mistake, I thought, but Alfie didn't feel that way, and he wanted to do whatever he could to make it right.

"I'm going to ask for volunteers who want to help undo some of the harm we did...even if it means risking their freedom by returning to Uplift," AlphaWolf said. "See me in a couple hours if you want to help. Also...we're going to return anyone we bodyjacked on that raid, or at least give them the choice of returning to Uplift or staying with us. If you bodyjacked someone but don't want to volunteer to take him back, see me and we'll swap him to someone else for the trip." Needless to say, Tammy and I volunteered right away, but that was after the speech.

Alfie also shared recordings of the award ceremony for Katie the lynx RIDE, which was pretty earthshattering in itself. When you considered how many of the RIDEs here had left their polities because they knew they could never *ever* have the same rights and privileges that humans did...and here was one finally *getting* them.

The irony wasn't lost on them that she was only getting it because she'd fought so hard to fend off *AlphaWolf's* attack, either. Even in just the day or so before we left for Uplift, there was already some buzz starting among some of the more starry-eyed that it might be the right time to return home and try to work to reform the system from within. "Yeah, good luck with *that*," Tammy muttered to me in VR. "Though y'never know. I'll pass the word to the Marshals and maybe we could see 'bout recruiting some of them. Their experience out here might come in handy."

"You'd even *recruit* from here?" I asked. "Bunch a' lawless bandit RIDEs and all?"

"They're only lawless bandits because the laws weren't made for them," Tammy said. "And you already *know* from training that the Marshals are one of the biggest forces for RIDE rights on all of Zharus. If these guys really wanna work for RIDE rights, we got the resources to help."

So anyway, the next day we all climbed aboard that rickety old shuttle again—including Paul, Fenris, and the Lindas. And Tocsin and Joseph, who wasn't letting Tocsin leave him behind this time. Given that Tocsin had been the one who had destroyed the garage so thoroughly, Joseph was concerned for him and wanted to be there to share whatever his fate was. I still don't know exactly what Tocsin's reaction was, but he did end up taking the human along when he could easily have left him behind.

We shot skyward and came downward, infiltrated Uplift again—apparently they hadn't found our old entry point in the caves yet, or if they had they'd left it alone for some reason—and hid ourselves near the remains of the garage while Fenris and Paul went out to meet Rhianna and Rochelle near a truck containing a bunch of parts and equipment Paul had sent ahead for. It was a touching reunion, and furthermore Rhianna and Rochelle seemed fascinated by Fenris.

"You know, if they'll moon over a big dog so much, you should go out there and show 'em our almost-as-big bad kitty self," I prodded Tammy. "We already know from their own RIDEs that they're mainly cat people."

"Hmph," Tammy said. "Thanks, but no thanks. I'm not gonna share the spotlight with a Sturmie slobber generator."

"I don't think I've ever *seen* him actually drool, you know," I pointed out.

"That's even worse. He's a phony, concealing his true nature," Tammy sniffed.

I rolled my virtual eyes. "Taaaaaaammy..."

"Anyway, as a Quantum Marshal my job is to stay in the background and observe," Tammy said.

I sighed. "Guess that means I can't go geek out with Rochelle, then. Pity."

"We gotta give up a few things when we maintain a cover," Tammy said philosophically. "So c'mon, let's get with the rebuilding."

We did happen to see Tocsin approach Rhianna and Rochelle to deliver *AlphaWolf's* and his own apologies. We were a little nervous when we saw their RIDEs' ears go back like they were getting a mad on, but they fought it down and were actually

fairly civil to him. It relieved all of us, not least of all Joseph who actually got to take control of their Fuser form long enough to turn back and tell them, “Thank you for not killing him. I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

So we gathered up and put our backs into clearing out the debris and rubble left over from the destruction of the garage. Luckily most of it was just light sheet metal left over from the modular pre-fab buildings that made up most of the garage. The super-strong lightweight alloy was almost light enough for humans to lift unassisted.

The hardest part of it all was disentangling or cutting pieces from from where they’d gotten knotted together into wads and clumps too big for the trucks to haul away for recycling. Sometimes we basically had to take apart an entire building-sized mass of crumpled metal. It really was going to be an all-day job, even with all of us working at it. But we didn’t mind.

Or at least, Tammy wasn’t troubled by the physical labor, and I was happy about the ability to link up to the ‘net while she was doing it and surf to my heart’s content. (I’d been a little hesitant about it, given that Tammy was having to do all the work, until she told me that since I couldn’t contribute to the physical labor apart from unlocking her thumbs *anyway*, I might as well enjoy myself.)

But then around noon I was brought out of my ‘net fugue by Tammy muttering, “Now what the *hell?*” I dropped back into the real world in time to see the horse and wolf Fusers working at one end of the clearing suddenly freeze up and disgorge their humans—neither of whom looked quite right. They both showed the signs of extended Fuse—but the horse in particular looked especially...*deformed*. His head was all wrong. It was a horse’s head, and with that narrow brainpan there was no room for anything except an animal mind.

As we stared, two Integrates faded into being next to them—a tiger kneeling by the wolf, and a melanistic jaguar crouching by the horse.

“Integrates!” Tammy hissed. “What have they—” She started forward, but I held us back.

“Tammy, wait!” I said. “That’s Zane Brubeck and Carrie-Anne. Remember, from the files?”

She growled angrily at me in our VR. “So? Look what they did!” I felt her anger, her smoldering *rage* at *all* Integrates shining through more clearly than ever before. It scared me, and I began to fear I might actually have to take superuser privileges again just to keep her from doing something rash.

“Tammy, *calm down*. They *didn’t* do that. There’s no way they could have, in just a few seconds,” I pointed out. “That kind of extreme change takes minutes at least for even the fastest Fuser nanos.”

She tried to hold onto her anger, but she knew I was right about the speed-of-change issue when she thought about it. “Then what—”

“I have a nasty suspicion,” I said, as Paul, Rhianna, and Rochelle went over to join the Integrates. My memory had been jogged by reading those files a few days ago, and I quickly pulled up the comm and sensor logs from the last few hours, grepping through them for any telltale traces. “Aw, crap, I’m right. It’s Amontillado.”

“The trojan that made that cat Uncia turn Roger into Rochelle?” Tammy asked.

“Yeah. I’d run across it a few times when I was studying you guys. Rumor has it that AlphaWolf made it as a way to trick people into joining his camp.” I shook my head. “Damn. I should have thought to look at other RIDEs *in* the camp, since we got back

from Uplift last time. If there's these two in just a dozen of us, there must be more. Maybe a *lot* more."

The rest of the RIDEs from Alpha's camp had stopped what they were doing and watched now as the drama before us played out. The horse RIDE tried to wipe his own core in remorse, but Zane stopped him.

LindaCat felt her own brand of remorse and finally de-Fused from LindaGirl. The girl turned out to have a few more furry features than usual, though nothing on the order of the wolf or the horse. But even as LindaCat apologized and said she was letting LindaGirl go, LindaGirl insisted she wanted LindaCat to stay here *with* her and continue owning her. I wasn't sure whether to "Awww" or shudder.

Then as sirens warned of the approach of the ambulances that had been called for the human Amontillado victims, the rest of us found places to hide until they'd gone. It was going to be hard enough explaining the two RIDEs who'd been infected, let alone a dozen or so others. As we ducked for cover, I shivered. "That could have been us, you know. If I hadn't patched your security..."

"I know," Tammy said. "It's giving me cold shivers down my spine just thinking about it. Thanks."

We watched the ambulances take the humans on board, and Rhianna and Rochelle load the RIDEs up onto a skimmer. They were taking the RIDEs to Rochelle's house to do some emergency cyber-surgery on the cores to clean up the last of the Amontillado infection's aftereffects and try to remove any suicidal tendencies on the part of the RIDEs. I wished them luck, and wished we dared follow to watch. But we needed to keep clearing the lot along with the rest of the crew.

The jaguar Integrate, Carrie-Anne, had stayed behind to keep an eye on things while we worked, and every time Tammy looked at her she had another one of those surges of anger. After the third or fourth time, I put my 'net windows aside and sighed, summoning her avatar back to our shared VR space again. "Tammy, we need to talk. What did Integrates do to you that makes you get so mad when you see even one of the *good* guy ones?"

"There *aren't* any..." Tammy growled, then shook her head. "No. You're right. There *are* Inties who are on our side, and hating on them is just as bad as someone like Tocsin who hates *all* humans because of what his did to him. It's just...every time I see one, it reminds me..."

"Yes?" I said.

She looked down. "It was...a long time back." She produced a virtual image of a smiling, attractive dark-skinned woman wearing dark slacks, a red leather jacket, and a Silver Star Marshals badge, with an afro hairstyle right out of the 1970s. "Denise Shafters—she was my first, only partner. I was her first RIDE. She was...the one who named me Tamarind, because it was evocative of Africa where both of our genes were from. We rose through ranks in the Nextus army, she mustered out at Sergeant and took me with her when she went and joined up with the Marshals."

I nodded. "She looks like a pleasant person."

"She was..." Tammy said. "I'll share my memories from back then with you sometime. But...back about eight years ago, we were at the Marshals station in Califia after fighting some bandits nearby in the Dry. I'd been busted up real bad in the fight and was stuck in the maint bays, and she went out to have some lunch at an open-air Fuser cafe in their RIDE sales district."

Tammy shook her head. “She had the bad luck to be around when one of the waiters kicked into Integration right then and there. He went a little crazy with the changes in his body, started shooting stuff up with the pulse guns he still had built in. But Denise knew what was happening, a’ course. She stepped right up and tried to calm him down while everyone else was fleeing.”

Tammy paused and took a deep breath. “She did it, too. He was just starting to listen to her when some of Fritz’s Snatchers showed up.” Tammy spat on the virtual ground. “Bastards. They couldn’t just leave Denise around knowing about them, so they grabbed a random RIDE off the closest lot—hyena, as it turned out—and force-Integrated them, then took them both away.”

“Oh, no...” I said.

“She was *my* partner!” Tammy sobbed. “I loved her! If she was going to be Integrated with anyone, it should have been *me*! I would have given my *life* for her...and now she’s lost to me forever. Merged up with a fricking *hyena* she didn’t even *know*.”

I put my hand on her shoulder, then decided that wasn’t enough and drew her into a hug. “I’m so sorry,” I told her.

She hugged me back. “I know. Thank you.” She got her breathing under control a moment later.

“Did...do you know what happened to her after that?” I asked hesitantly.

“She—DeniFaye—was able to escape the Enclave a few months later, came back and rejoined the Marshals as a Quantum. They had me try working with her for a while, but...it was no good.” She shook her head. “She was like a stranger. There was too much of someone else in there. Every so often there’d be a flash that was like the old Denise, but...really that just made it worse. It was just no good. She saw it as much as I did. And I didn’t really want another human partner after that anyway. So I took the post in Alfie’s camp.”

“And then I came along and *made myself into* your partner,” I said. “Sorry about that.”

Tammy shook her head. “No, you’re good. You were just what I needed. Someone to kick me in the ass and get me out of neutral and back into living in the world again.” She sighed. “Anyway, that’s why I hate all Integrates. Some of them took her from me with what they did...and *she* took her from me from what she *became*. Every time I look at them, I’m reminded...”

I gave her another squeeze. “I know. I *know*,” I said. “They did an awful thing. You’ve got every right to hate them.” I shook my head. “But you need to focus that hate. You *know* Fritz is the one behind all that crap. You know not every or even *most* Inties agree with him. Can you maybe just try to hate only the *right* ones? Hating all of ‘em just gets in the way.”

Tammy sighed. “I’ll try. Rationally, I know you’re right. Emotionally...that’s harder. But...I *will* try.”

As we let go and stepped out of the hug, another thought occurred to me. “Did you ever find out who it was that...did it?”

Tammy nodded grimly. “Yeah. And if I ever see him again, that bastard won’t even know what hit him.”

I shuddered. “Right. Um...well anyway, I guess we’d better get back to work. While you shove rubble, I’m going to download everything I can find on Amontillado. I expect Paul and Fenris are probably going to do everything they can to find other

infected when we get back, but no reason we shouldn't do a little checking of our own. We *are* Quantum Marshals, after all."

Tammy managed a small grin. "That we are, pard. And thanks." She turned to go, then turned back. "I just want to say...I never realized how lucky I was that you 'bodyjacked' me that day. Thanks for hearing an old cat out."

I waved a hand dismissively. "Hey. That's what partners are for. Now g'wan... we've both got work to do." As she faded out of the VR, I pulled up more display panels and got down to it.

Over the rest of the afternoon, with the exception of a brief period where they took off for some desert driving with the Lindas and Fenris, Rhianna and Rochelle would pull one of us off clean-up duty for servicing and repairs, using a battered old maint cradle they'd somehow managed to salvage from the wreckage. Tammy was actually in peak condition—when she needed service she'd slip out of camp to meet a detachment of Chromiums, the Marshals' RIDE maint division—so we just arranged to be elsewhere when they came to fetch someone else.

Fenris was moving a lot better by the end of the afternoon, and there was something going on with him and Guinevere, the ocelot RIDE of Lilibet Walton who'd shown up shortly after we-all had gotten there. Whatever it was, it seemed to be doing well by him, and we were glad for it. Tammy had told me something of Fenny's story and it was a pretty sad one. Of all RIDEs, he deserved good thing happening.

As it turned out when it was time to go, we lost about a third of the RIDEs we came with, including LindaCat—inspired by the Katie thing I guess, they all decided to stick around and give the polity life another try. Of those who didn't stay, about half of them had their humans choose to return to camp with them.

"What, are they nuts?" I muttered. "Taken back home, dropped right on the doorstep, and they want to go back to prison again?"

"I could ask the same about you, pard," Tammy pointed out. "As I said, *you* could have taken me right on to Aloha as soon as you hacked into me at camp."

"Yeah, well, that's different," I mumbled.

"Might be different for them, too," Tammy pointed out. "After all, we don't know their stories. Maybe they don't feel like they've got anything waiting for them back home."

"Okay, point," I admitted.

The rest of them left their humans behind, and Carrie-Anne took care of them while waiting for more ambulances to arrive. Then we all said our goodbyes and jettied—not without a few wistful looks from me back toward Rochelle. One of my hacker heroes, in the flesh, and I didn't even get to say hi to her!

"There'll be other times for that," Tammy said consolingly. "For now...let's go. The sub's waiting." So we turned our back on the cleared-out rubble and hit the road homeward.

CHAPTER 6

The flight back to camp started out a little uncomfortable. The formerly-infected horse and wolf huddled together in the back of the cargo bay like pariahs as the rest of us, excepting Fenris who also could only fit in the bay, stayed as far away from them as we could. When I suddenly realized what we were all doing, I felt sick. These RIDEs—these *people*—had just been through one hell of a shock, and here we were turning our backs on them like we might catch something. I didn't even know their *names*. Staying in the background be damned. I prompted Tammy for the reins and walked us on over to them.

“Hey,” I said. “I’m Jeanette, and Tammy. Who are you guys?”

“Phaeton,” said the horse.

“Minsi,” the wolf replied.

“Nice to meet you two.” I paused. “I guess asking if you guys are okay would be kinda pointless.”

Phaeton snorted. “You got that right.”

“We’ve been...much better,” Minsi agreed.

“But you have also been much worse,” Fenris boomed from next to them.

Phaeton nodded. “We are...relieved to be free of it. But...deeply disturbed by what we did. I can’t remember...I think they did it as a mercy...I’m told I tried to wipe myself. They told me it wasn’t my fault, but...”

“That Amontillado...it’s a violation,” Minsi growled. “You never even know you’re being violated. You just feel...full. *Whole*, without needing to have some pesky human nattering at you from the inside. After a while you just...forget the human altogether.”

“Maybe that’s what being human feels like,” the horse mused. “Being *whole* all the time, even with nothing inside.”

“But it’s a lie,” the wolf said bitterly. “An illusion. All the while it’s corrupting you...and sickening your partner.”

“Y’shouldn’t go blaming yourselves,” Paul said from inside the giant wolf. “You weren’t in control. *You* didn’t do it.”

“It’s easy for you to say that,” Phaeton said. “But we *remember doing it*. Some of it, anyway.” He sighed. “So now we’re going back to camp to help see that it *stops*. No one else should ever have to go through this. But after that...I don’t know.” He snorted a long equine sigh. “I no longer want to wipe my own core out of hand...but I don’t know what I’ll do with myself after this. I want a fresh start...of some kind.” Minsi nodded her agreement.

“I might...know some people who can help,” Tammy said. She sent over a comm code for one of her Marshals undercover contacts. “Talk to them. Tell them Tammy sent you. Maybe they can do something.”

Phaeton nodded. “Thank you. I guess we might as well.”

“Things can’t get worse,” Minsi said. “So they have to get better, right?”

“We can most certainly hope,” Fenris agreed.

When we got back, predictably AlphaWolf was livid. Didn’t half blame the poor guy. Finding out he’d been used *twice in a row* had to be troubling for anyone, but not least of all to the guy who was supposed to be the Glittering Beacon of Freedom to all RIDEkind.

“Not so much a surprise, though, when you get right down to it,” Tammy said. “You get popular, everyone wants to run a scam on you. Doesn’t help matters that sometimes ol’ Alfie really isn’t very bright.”

“How does he even stay in charge?” I wondered. “He doesn’t exactly seem like the sharpest tool in the shed.”

To my surprise, Tammy relented and came to his defense. “I wouldn’t ‘zackly *underestimate* him, either,” Tammy said. “You know who else isn’t the sharpest tool?” She nodded across the central clearing of the camp at Tocsin, who was standing in Walker form with his hardlight feathers fluffed out and a goofy expression on his beak as Joseph scratched among them with both hands.

I remembered how effectively Tocsin had utterly shredded the Freeriders Garage. (How could I not, given that we’d just spent all day cleaning up the mess?) “Okay, point taken.”

“Besides, even I have to admit that at least *some* of it is just an act,” Tammy said. “Like that whole ‘so sayeth me’ routine. Came from a really silly docudrama that didn’t take Alpha seriously at all. Bunch of damn fool anti-RIDE-rights conservatives trying to turn him into the RIDE equivalent of a blackface minstrel. But instead of getting mad, he just about laughed his silly head off and started doing the utter best he could to live *down* to the rep. Said he figured if he had the support of the media in getting his enemies to underestimate him, who was he to spit on their help?”

She shook our head. “Problem is, I think sometimes even *he* forgets it’s just an act. But even so...think about it. Even RIDEs as bad-ass as Tocsin here *don’t* try to unseat him. Gotta be a reason for that, right?”

“Huh.” I thought about that for a long moment, comparing what I’d seen of AlphaWolf with what she’d said. I still couldn’t quite see it, but she’d been around here a hell of a lot longer than I had, so I had to give her the benefit of the doubt. “Well... anyway, now we’re back I’d like to get started sniffing around for infections.”

She nodded. “Sounds like a plan. Let’s start scanning.” We headed out to start making some surreptitious circuits of the camp.

It only took a little sniffing to find them. There were about ten of them, all sort of hanging out together working in one of the agri-fields at the south end of the dome. Humans didn’t tend to come down here alone—thanks to the tireless machine precision of RIDEs, they weren’t needed for any field work, unless you counted unlocking a RIDE’s Fuser form, and it was always a concern that some might filch more than their share of the crops. Not all that many RIDEs apart from the farm workers bothered with

the place either. So this was a reasonable spot to hide if you didn't want to be seen much.

"Would you look at them?" Tammy said as we watched them from stealth a few hundred meters away. "They're just...like zombies."

"I'll bet they act natural enough when someone comes near," I said. "Still...seeing them all together like this...that can't be a coincidence. Something—or *someone*—must be controlling them. God...a *literal* 'botnet'!"

As we watched, we noticed something odd. Every fifteen minutes or so, one of this mini-pack would slip away and head outside the dome. It would return a few minutes later.

"Wonder where they're all going?" Tammy mused. "Check in with someone out there to make sure the infection's going well? Maybe if we follow one he'll lead us to his master."

"Maybe," I said. "Not sure I'd want to do that alone, though. I got a suspicion whoever it is must be a real nasty customer."

"Well, yeah? So are we. We're *Quantum Marshals!*" Tammy said.

"I dunno..."

"Look, even if we don't confront whoever it is, if we get one alone you could maybe hack their systems and find out more about who's behind it, right?" Tammy asked.

"Well, yeah, I guess so..." I'd made good and sure I had the very latest anti-Amontillado-ware before we left Uplift. But I was still more than a little nervous about it.

"Then let's do it," Tammy decided for us. We stood up in Fuser form, set for maximum stealth, and slipped off after a horse Fuser who was ambling out of the dome toward a cluster of stone columns not far away.

"I still say we should have called for backup," I muttered as we slipped between a pair of stone columns.

"Stop worrying, we'll be fi—"

Tammy's words cut off as agonizing pain abruptly filled her entire being—and through hers, mine. Then everything went black for both of us. But for some reason, I could still *hear*, at least for a little while. And what I heard was metallic footsteps crunching the sandy gravel of the Dry as a pair of RIDEs approached. "Well well well, what *have* we here!" a female voice purred. Literally—she had to be some kind of cat.

"Saw them snooping around back in the dome," another female voice said in more subservient tones. "Arranged for the subjects to start coming out here one by one to try to draw them out."

"Verrrry good, my dear. It worked a treat," the first speaker continued.

"I think we may have been rumbled," the second voice said. "No one's seen Phaeton or Minsi since they got back from Uplift, and they haven't checked in."

"Mmm. I'm not so sure. Not yet. This one seemed to be working alone. If it were an investigation, there should have been more. Perhaps we can look at her memories to be certain, once she's been...softened up a little."

I didn't like the sound of that. But I couldn't move, could barely even breathe. Tammy's systems were all down or on emergency power.

"What you have in mind?" asked the other voice.

"I have a...delightful new strain I wanted to test, and I can't think of a better

subject. She's even canned her own meat." Her playful little giggle sent a shiver down my spine. Was this the *author* of Amontillado? And we were at *her* tender mercy? Oh... crap.

"Mmm, *very* good security on this one," the RIDE purred. For a moment I felt a surge of hope. "Of course, security can always be bypassed when you have direct physical access to the hardware," she added, and my heart sank. I heard metal tearing as a claw sank into Tammy's side...then everything went away.

I woke up within a metal cube, four meters on a side. It had no entrances, exits, or windows, and no obvious light source, but was nonetheless bright enough to see in. My implants told me this was VR—a little unnecessarily, given that it would be hard to explain how I could end up in a room like this on the outside. Either way, it was pretty clear why I was here: I had been casked.

"Tammy?!" I yelled. "Tammy, are you out there?" Pretty uselessly, of course. With the trojan in place, she couldn't hear me if she wanted to.

I sighed. When Tammy didn't report in to the Marshals, sooner or later someone would come looking for her—but who knew when that would be, or what state we'd be in by the time they got here?

No, it looked like the only way out of this was going to lie with me. I took a deep breath, let it out. I would need to get on it ASAP. I didn't know what way the time compression was running in here. Minutes here could be seconds in the real world, but they might also be hours.

So I reached out to take up my superuser access to Tammy...and couldn't get there. This cage I was in blocked me from reaching any of the rest of her systems—which I would have to do to get root. I sighed. Looked like I'd have to escape the old-fashioned way.

Rochelle had posted on the hacker forums a full account of Roger's escape from Uncia, and I'd read it repeatedly. He'd used an Easter Egg he hid in FreeRIDE—a complete, fully functional installation of the archaic Linux operating system—then hand-coded an escape utility. I, at least, could skip the hand-coding part—unlike Roger and his silly little "thumb drive" (a memory chip implanted in his *thumb*), I had implants in my head and plenty of computing power behind them. And since I'd used a custom-tweaked version of FreeRIDE to hack Tammy's root, the egg should still be there for me, too.

I cleared my throat and sang the trigger phrase—the twencen song lyric "The mountain is high / The valley is low / And you're confused / On which way to go." The terminal and keyboard appeared, floating in the air before me.

Then, ten seconds later, it vanished again. "...the hell?" I sang the lyrics again. The terminal appeared once more...and again disappeared after ten seconds. I facepalmed. Oh, *right*. Amontillado's *creator* might have been reading the same hacker boards. So when the new version detected the terminal, it would snuff it out. But apparently either it wasn't so good at noticing it right away, or it just wanted to taunt the captured victim by giving him hope and taking it away again.

Still, that might just give *me* a loophole. Ten seconds wouldn't be enough for a normal person to do anything...but a normal person didn't have my implants.

I turned my attention inward, loading up my own Linux emu in my implants and getting the code cracker ready to run. Once I turned it loose, I shouldn't need the

terminal to stay open—it could run as a background process. And if I could get the ssh daemon launched in time, I could then copy the program over and run it before the session closed.

It took me several tries and a lot of frustration to get it working. The program was just slightly too long to copy in the time I had. But I discovered that any files I copied in one session persisted to the next, so I was able to split it into modules and copy them all over one at a time.

Finally, I was ready. I had the program ready to go. I had my anti-virus tools prepped and ready, in the virtual form of a kevlar body armor suit, plus various guns, knives, and other weapons. And I had one *hell* of an Edgar Winter Group earworm from all those terminal calls.

I sang the lines one more time, finally ran the program—and because it felt right, continued singing as the portal appeared and sucked me in.

*The mountain is high, the valley is low
And you're confused 'bout which way to go
So I flew here to give you a hand
And lead you into the promised land*

*So, come on and take a free ride (free ride)
Come on and take it by my side
Come on and take a free ride...*

But I didn't feel much like singing after I emerged in our VR clearing. Unlike normal days, now it was dark and cold. The trees had lost their leaves and everything was in a monochrome winter. I shivered. Even though you couldn't really feel ambient temperature in VR, it still *seemed* frigid. And spooky.

I was able to take up my superuser access once I got here—for all the good it did me. As I sought to expel Amontillado from Tammy, I found that it had started writing itself into her RI core. I couldn't just kill the process and get rid of it, any more than it could reimprison me or dump me from the VR thanks to my own root privs. I was going to have to go clean it out the old-fashioned way, too.

And that meant what I sought wouldn't be found here.

I turned from the clearing and picked my way through a trail leading deeper into the jungle. I'd never come this way before because I hadn't been invited, but I knew where it led—and where I had to go. This was the route to Tamarind's innermost self—her personality core. That was where Amontillado always did its dirtiest work.

As I walked through the trail, the undergrowth grew ever thicker and thorny vines did their best to scratch and entangle me. I hacked away at them with a machete. They weren't a serious impediment, though. Whether it was Amontillado's will or Tammy's under its command that was animating them, most of their attention was on each other within the core.

Finally I broke through the last of the barriers and found my way into a vast jungle clearing. At the center, a pyramid-like temple reared up into the sky. I made my way up the steeply-angled steps into the dark entrance at the crest.

Within was a great chamber of stone, lit with flickering torches. Statues of dark-skinned warrior women in Egyptian armor ringed the walls. Or...were they statues?

They seemed to be moving, fighting, struggling. At the center of the room was a raised dais on which rested a majestic statue of a lioness—only it wasn't quite a statue either.

The whole place was under attack by an immense black tigress with blood-red stripes. Her body seemed to be made of some viscous tar-like substance, as ropes of it bound most of the statues to the wall—some of which were still attached to her body. The bulk of her, however, was straddling and oozing down over the lioness, who roared and struggled ineffectually.

One last statue-woman fought by her side—and as she raised her head and her sword I realized her face was that of Tammy's old partner, Denise Shafers—and so were those of all the other statues. "Wow, I am so gonna tease her about that, when this is all over," I muttered.

The tigress whipped her head around, stared at me, and growled, and another thick rope of that tarry substance shot from her hide. I dodged just in time, and even then some of it stuck to me as it passed. I felt it burning even through the armor and hastily brushed it off.

I returned fire—literally—with a flamethrower, burning through the goop stretching out to several of the statues. I turned the weapon on the tigress, next—it wasn't as if she could dodge. But she deflected most of the flames with an invisible shield instead, roaring her displeasure, as the statues pulled free of her snares and approached her.

I ducked around them to the lioness's head. "Tammy? Can you hear me? C'mon, you gotta fight it!" But she just stared blankly at me. The trojan must already have been taking most of her processing power. The tigress roared at me again, and whipped out more ropes in my direction. Again I dodged by the skin of my teeth.

"All right, if that's how you want it," I growled, whipping out a sword and severing more of the ropes of goo off. I began priming my biggest anti-viral weapon—the practical equivalent of a briefcase nuke that needed to be customized to its target, rather than the lesser attacks that worked on anything I had been using.

It turned out that the concentration necessary for this might have been a mistake—because the third time the tigress attacked me, the first ropes were a feint, and I dodged right into the path of the third one, which pierced right through the middle of my chest.

Now, the good news is, this wasn't a Matrix like scenario, where if you get stabbed in the chest you develop a sucking wound in real life. But the bad news is, it meant she stabbed right past my cyber-defenses—and suddenly my body was out of my control. I looked down to find my hands and feet were expanding into paws. My body exploded out of the kevlar armor as it grew into the shape of a lioness not unlike the one on the pedestal. And it was getting really...hard...to...think...

Click! And everything was sharp-edged and crystal-clear again as my implants once more took over. They had their own internal cyber-defenses that put most RIDEs' to shame, and while I could feel Amontillado's claws scrabbling for purchase, she couldn't get in there.

But in stabbing a hole through my defenses, she'd also opened a pathway, a *conduit* right through her own. My cyber-briefcase-nuke went PING! and I fired it—right up through the tentacle she'd just stabbed through me. The black slime glowed white, and before she could drop the line herself, so did the tigress. There was a sizzling sound, and the overwhelming smell of burnt fur, then everything went white.

CHAPTER 7

I woke up from a weird dream in which I was a Walker-shaped lioness being manhandled up onto an empty stone dais in the middle of a temple by a dozen Egyptian warrior-women statues. My belly felt bloated...as if I was pregnant, something squirming and kicking inside of me.

The women latched my paws into place on the dais, one by one, and I couldn't pull them away. As I writhed, they stroked my fur until I calmed down...and then my body slowly stiffened into stone. Just before it reached my head, the statue-woman in front of me leaned down and whispered in my ear, "Take care of her..."

To say I was *disoriented* when I awoke would be a vast understatement. I was made of stone and could only move at my joints...I couldn't breathe. No...wait, it wasn't stone but metal...and I didn't *need* to breathe. Well...sort of. It was like I was breathing anyway, but something else was doing it for me.

I opened my eyes—optic sensors—and all became clear. Sort of. I was looking out through Tammy's eyes, feeling her body with an intensity I never had before. I wasn't just wearing it—I was *being* it. I'd tried it out before, of course, but that had been with Tammy interfacing between me and it. Now Tammy's core was in passive—I could sense that, don't ask me how, but she had some major fragmentation from the Amontillado attack and she couldn't even wake up just yet without some major defragging. A big chunk of my implants' system resources were being dedicated entirely to helping fix her while the rest of them ran me. (No wonder I'd dreamed I was pregnant. I kind of had Tammy inside me being worked on.) So *I* was running the show—*completely* running it.

Most times, people who rocked passive mode RIDEs had implants to deal with it, or let the RI core's autonomic layer handle all that, or both—but Tammy's autonomic layer was busy running an emergency defrag on her, and I *was* my implants—which meant that I was getting reams of information from the DE shell I had no idea how to deal with flowing into the place where I was thinking and getting all mixed up together.

The worst of it was all the sensory impressions. You gotta understand, when people Fuse with RIDEs, or run them in passive, they're not really getting a *full* sensory feed of everything the RI would be feeling. The core's lower layers and/or their implants run most of that stuff on automatic, which is why Passive is great for survival suits, working, and not crossriding, but lousy for fighting in.

The stuff those humans do get is automatically mapped to senses they do understand that are "close enough" to the stuff they don't. Myomer "muscle" actuators are obvious, ditto hardlight "skin". Coolant pumps might feel like your heart, air circ

your lungs, power feed your tummy. That's also why you gotta grow ears and a tail no matter how you run your RIDE, otherwise there's not anything to map that sensory crap to. You don't gotta grow opposite sex organs if you stay passive 'cuz we've all got the neural structures to handle those even if we don't use 'em.

My problem was that *I* was getting *everything*, including the stuff humans didn't have. My implants didn't have the neural structure problem; they could take any data feed. The problem was assigning it values my copied-over consciousness could understand. Without some kind of template I could use to make sense of it all, it ended up shunted into random sensory registers—various locations on my body started doing things that made no rhyme or reason. My left big toe was spinning around and around as a turbine in my air pumping system. My right kidney was *beating* to pump lubricant. My guts were variously contracting and expanding as the lifters all over my body ran their self-test cycles. I felt all twisted up inside—*literally*. I couldn't exist like this! I started to panic—

—and then it was as if my implants were running on instincts I didn't have any way to understand. They reached down into Tammy's core, located her own sensory template, and copied it into me—and suddenly everything fell into place.

I *was* the RIDE. I was feeling it. I felt everything exactly where it was supposed to be, doing what it was supposed to do. I had coolant pumps and air circulation and power systems—but they didn't feel like a heart or lungs or stomach exactly, except maybe in certain broad form-follows-function kinds of ways. They felt like coolant pumps and air circulation and power systems. And my lifters felt like lifters, and my hardlight projectors felt like hardlight projectors, and so on.

I can't really put how it felt into words that convey anything like a real sense of how it really was. Your imagination is filling *something* in while you read this, but trust me, it's nothing like you *can* imagine. When I'm in my meat mind, I can't even remember how it felt. We humans don't have the neural structures—the “meat template” if you will—to make sense of them. My RI memories have to go through an edit pass before downloading into the ol' grey matter, to give them the equivalency of what I'd have gotten if I were just Fusing in because I couldn't make sense of anything else. It's really kind of crazy.

Anyway, as everything clicked into place, I realized why I felt so constricted—Tammy's hardlight projectors were offline. As they powered up, my body seemed to expand into feeling like a true, if immense, lioness. I felt *real* again.

Well...sort of. My skin, muscles, and so on felt real—very similar to how my human skin and muscles felt, except for having fur on top and being in a different shape right now. I felt like I was breathing and everything (though not quite breathing *with lungs*).

But I felt all this *extra* stuff, too. All these little systems and parts that, if I didn't think too hard about, they'd sort of go away. Like how you don't have to remember to blink your eyes or breathe, or how to scratch an itch, or how your left foot feels when you're not paying attention to it. But when I *did* think about them, like I said they felt like nothing I had ever felt before in my meat bod. I wondered if the cyborgs they had on old Earth felt kind of like this—meat body on the outside, all that funky metal stuff crowding their guts on the inside.

And then there was the big kahuna of totally weird sensations—the meat body nestled inside my metal body like some kind of Sturmhaven doll. If there ever was a

feeling more outside of human experience, yet more curiosity-inducing in meat-folk, I don't know what it is. I mean, that's the question I've heard asked the most times humans meet RIDEs for the first time. "What's it like having someone inside you?" And they really can't *tell* you. They can share the memory, but again, due to the frame of reference thing it's hard to know if you really can appreciate it.

How can I even describe it? I know, we meaties have all felt things being inside of us—something going down our throat, a warm drink hitting our tummy, having a big ol' log we need to pass, or in the case of some of us being preggers. (I've never had *that* experience yet, leastways not in real life, so I kinda lack experience in the other direction there.)

All I can say is it's not really like any of these, except in little ways. You do kind of get the sensation of warmth like you just had a hot drink (or a highly alcoholic one), and maybe you get the sense of movement inside that's like being pregnant (though again, I've never been it "for reals", so I don't know if it's the same or totally different), and there's this sense of *fullness* that I guess is kind of like when you've had a full meal—but it's like the blind men and the elephant—the whole of the sensation is just *a complete other thing*.

All I can really tell you is that I was conscious of this warm meat body curled up inside of mine, interpenetrated by my Fuser nanos and with a breathing mask and catheters to take care of wastes. Dimly, I could feel its physical state—rather hungry, bladder full—and even override its reflexes in some ways, like triggering a bladder release down the catheter (ahhhh...).

I could also feel there was something vaguely not-right about it—which really should have troubled me more than it did. But it was hard to be too concerned at the moment—or even to feel like that body had any obvious connection to me right now. I was *Tammy* at the moment, and that was the body that felt like the interloper. And there were so many *other* things demanding my attention.

Sometime during the infection Tammy had reverted to Walker form, so I got unsteadily to all four paws. Looking around, I saw we were still in the shadows of the stone columns where we'd been ambushed, just outside the camp dome. I checked my internal chronometer to see how much time had passed, and was stunned to find it was the morning of just over two days later! (Well, no wonder meat-me was hungry.)

I shifted back to Fuser form, and was immediately utterly distracted by the mechanical ballet of parts moving around inside of me to reconfigure my body into the right shape while keeping my meat-guest safe. (I knew instinctively that there were at least three other ways I *could* have shifted if I'd been glomming onto a meatie outside of me rather than working around one already in, using the space the meatie was currently occupying to swap parts around more efficiently.)

Of course, those parts would have moved around whether I watched them consciously or not, just like you don't think about moving your individual muscles or even individual body parts when you get up from a chair or roll out of bed. From what I'd seen, most RIDEs didn't even think about what they were doing when they Fused or de-Fused, they just...did it. I actually felt kind of sad for them that they took this miracle for granted—but then I wondered whether a RIDE in human's shoes might not find getting a meat body out of bed to be just as amazing. The grass is always greener, after all...

Once we were back on two feet, I fired up our lifters and took off—basically,

jumping into the air and “forgetting” to come back down. This really wasn’t too different from how it felt to do in Fuse, except that I could now feel part of me holding the rest of me up—like standing up with another set of really really long legs.

Once I’d figured out I could move steadily, I set course for the dome, glancing nervously around for any sign of our attackers. The place seemed entirely vacant, however. But as we approached and entered the dome, I saw that the agri-fields were all *but* vacant. Not only were there a bunch of RIDEs here this morning, but a lot of humans were, too. They seemed to be engaged in blowing, lifting, or digging about half a meter of sand off the crop fields, or harvesting remaining fruit from trees that looked as if they’d been sandblasted.

I caught the arm of one of the RIDEs, a skunk busy dropping apples into a basket on his tail. “What the hell happened here?” I asked.

He glanced at me and laughed mirthlessly. “The damned Marshals happened, that’s what. You weren’t here for it? Lucky...”

After talking to a few more RIDEs and humans, I was able to piece together what had happened. A couple Integrates had shown up from the Camelot enclave to help flush out the Amontillado from the infected. One of them had been Mike Munn, who also happened to be a Marshal.

The stories I got were kind of confusing, as nobody I talked to had directly witnessed it, but apparently last night the same people who’d ambushed Tammy and me had set off some booby-traps to cover their escape. Munn run off to chase them instead of dealing with the booby-traps, and as a result the camp’s climate dome went down for a while. Worst of all, they’d caught one of the masterminds behind Amontillado but her boss *had* gotten away, along with half their victims. Neither Integrates nor Marshals were especially popular in camp right now.

I managed to hold off on facepawing until we were alone, but facepaw I did. If we’d just held off on going it alone, we could have had major reinforcements. We could have helped hold the line when Munn screwed up. Maybe we could have caught this “Rakshasi” after all. But it was all academic now.

Of course, if they had a prisoner, they were going to need to take her away, and from what I knew of Marshals procedure low-priority stuff like arrested prisoner transport usually waited ‘til daylight. So there was a very good chance their sub might still be in the area.

I sent out a ping over Marshal frequencies and got the word—the sub was parked just north of camp and would still be there for another hour or so. That was good. While I was confident I could get Tammy properly defragged and back on her feet by myself, I wanted to get her some *real* maintenance attention after that—and a sub back to a Marshals base seemed like just what the mechanic ordered.

I stopped at the camp kitchen for some breakfast, but the gluey oatmeal they were serving just didn’t appeal, even to the meat part of me. (Though it was kind of amusing watching Smash the ankylosaur stuffing her face. Weird, she hadn’t had hands last time I’d seen her. But she sure seemed to be enjoying them now.) So I figured we could get something to eat on the sub instead.

Something warned me against switching to skimmer form—really, when I thought about it, I didn’t want to be out of close contact with my meat-bod while my implants were so busy fixing Tammy anyway. But that was okay. I just dropped back into Walker (experiencing some of the same fascination as the switch to Fuser, only in

reverse) and bounded on northward out of camp.

Tammy had been right—she *hadn't* been running flat-out, that time we were on patrol. I knew because I got to experience what it felt like when she *did*. I bounded north through the desert, and it was like flying without leaving the ground. It didn't take long for me to discover the trick of pulsing my lifters at just the right moment to double my range per leap without using much extra power. By the time we neared the sub, I was almost disappointed. It felt like I was just hitting my stride, and I could have *run* to Nextus, or Uplift, or wherever all on my own.

But I slowed down as I came over the rise, and swapped back to Walker form (forcing myself to skip the fascinated wonder this time—there were people watching) with Tammy's badge on prominent display. I nodded to the sentries wearing Marshals Stetsons and dusters and headed in toward the ship.

We were met at the ramp by a black stallion Integrate wearing a here-again gone-again full Quantum badge. I recognized him from the persons-of-interest part of my Marshals training as Quantum Marshal Mike Munn, and immediately saluted. "Provisional Tin Star Jeanette Leroq reporting. Silver Star Tamarind is...indisposed right now."

Munn returned the salute, looking me over. I had the uncomfortable feeling like his eyes were looking right through me—which, since he was an Intie and all, they probably were. "I can...see that, Tin Star. What happened? We looked for Tamarind's locator beacon when we arrived, but couldn't find you."

"We got hit by a really nasty version of Amontillado, sir," I reported. "Administered by Shah and Fridolf directly, if they're who I think they are. I'm guessing it knocked the beacon offline, or they scotched it themselves. I only just got us free, but Tammy needs looked at by professionals."

"She's not the only one, Tin Star Leroq." Munn frowned. "Go ahead and get aboard, but don't de-Fuse until authorized—that's an order. The Chromes *and* the Sillies are going to want a look at you. Not to mention the Dinos."

I blinked. "Sir?"

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the ramp. "Go. That's an order, Tin Star."

I saluted again. "Sir yes sir!" Then I walked past him up the ramp. What he meant by that should have been nagging at me. Hell, I should have been fifteen different kinds of annoyed at his high-handedness. But right now, I was just too worried for Tammy to want to rock any boats. He could be as much of a jerk as he wanted as long as it helped Tammy get better. I strapped us down into one of the oversized Fuser seats on the sub and closed my eyes, turning my attention inward as we launched.

As I slid back into VR, a notification window popped up in front of me saying that Tammy's preliminary defrag was finished, but that an "advanced reboot" was recommended for full personality integrity. Did I wish to perform an advanced reboot?

That puzzled me more than a little bit. As far as I knew, an advanced reboot—a sort of "do-over" of a First Boot, to get a damaged RI back on their feet—required the resources of a Q-based mainframe facility. But on the other hand, the RI's system wouldn't offer me the option to proceed unless the necessary resources *were* present. Were my implants really equal to a super-Q-puter? Thinking it over for a moment, for the needs of just one RI at a time, maybe they were.

So after only a little hesitation, I chose “proceed.” Immediately I felt my implants and Tammy’s autonomous layers mesh and grab ahold of me, smooshing me down into another shape. Everything went hazy for a moment, and when I came to my senses I was on four paws in our old jungle clearing.

Four paws...? I looked down and back at myself. I appeared to be an adult lioness like Tammy...with a great big ol’ huge belly hanging down and swollen teats. I felt something moving and kicking inside that belly, and had a pretty good idea exactly what it was.

I looked around in confusion, then back at that huge bulge in my belly that could only represent a rebooting Tammy. “Wait a minute, this can’t be happening,” I complained. “I’m not supposed to be the boot-mother, that’s done by software running on the...Q-based...mainframe...oh, *poopie*.” I facepawed. “Which would be...me. Oh, great. Yeah, *suuuuuure* I want to proceed. Idjit. Next time, Jeanette, read the damn license agreement before you click through.”

But there was no turning back now. And thinking about it, I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t have made the same decision if I knew about it. Given the choice between *being there* for the lioness who’d been there for me, and letting some cold machine do it...well. Anyway, here I was.

What followed was, I assume, a VR-sanitized fakey version of the birth experience. About halfway through it, an Egyptian warrior-woman resembling Tammy’s old partner showed up to help midwife us through it. She didn’t speak, and vanished again after it was over. Anyway, the less said about that, the better—but if that was a VR-sanitized fakey version, I’m not sure I ever wanna do the real thing.

But anyway, after that was over, I was left alone with a mewling lioness cub attached to one of my teats and sucking away. And I wasn’t sure what to do next. But then I realized as she nursed that it was a *good* feeling, and on the whole I didn’t mind it. “But I’m too *young* to be a mother,” I muttered.

So was that it? Was the boot over now? Somehow, I didn’t think so—especially when I checked the level of time-compression the VR scenario was set to. “...wait, *what?* This can’t be right. *Ten years* per real-time hour? But meat-minds can’t *go* that fast!” Then it came to me that, since I was thinking with my implants, maybe that word didn’t exactly apply there anymore. Which really ought to have scared me at least a little, but maybe the scenario was overriding my fear impulses, or they lacked much strength without an endocrine system to back them up. Well, whatever.

And as I found when I tried to punch out, I couldn’t suspend the scenario—even with my root access. I got a warning box about “personality matrix too fragile to suspend without damage.” Looked like we were going to be in here for a while.

“How can I raise a lioness?” I muttered. “I don’t even have lion *instincts*.” But then, when I thought about that, I realized the solution was obvious. I’d copied Tammy’s sensory template across. Couldn’t I do the same for her animal instincts?

The answer turned out to be yes. Without hesitation, I did, scooping down into the bundle of her original memories and skills that was currently held in suspension until the reboot was over. I felt my perspective shift as the new information entered my head. Suddenly this four-pawed shape felt *natural*. It was how I was *supposed to be*, and all that time walking on two legs was just a bad dream. Intellectually, I hoped I’d be able to let go of this when it came time to be human again, but I’d burn that bridge when I came to it. I reached around and started lickin’ my kitten.

The next few years went more quickly than I expected, partly because I learned the trick of controlling my intelligence-versus-instinct slider. I could set it down to animal instincts when I got bored, and then back up to human-level intelligence when I needed it. I went total-instinct lioness a lot during the early days, just because when you didn't *think*, you didn't ever get bored. Again, maybe I should have been worried about how easy it was to shut off my brain like that, but I was too busy being fascinated.

When I wasn't busy instincting out, I found I could change myself back to anthropomorphic lioness, or even all the way to human-with-tags. It was fun to do all this when Tammy was little—who wouldn't want to play with a cuddly lioness kitten?—though I did it less often as time went on and I got into the whole teaching-Tammy-lioning-skills thing. For her part, Tammy was really impressed at how clever her mother was at shapeshifting, and enjoyed being petted and scratched as much as she enjoyed being groomed. Though the tongue-grooming was fun, too.

I really hadn't expected that. I'd thought it would be all, eww, yucky, cat hair on my tongue. But it turned out that it really felt a lot like brushing or combing, and for the most part my tongue shed the fur before I could swallow it. My tongue was as sensitive as a human finger, and the bristles were tailor-made for coming out my kitten's fur. It felt nice to have it done to me, too, especially when Tammy got bigger and could reach all of me. Still, I wasn't too sure I'd care to do it in real life—you don't get germs and crap in VR.

As she got older, Tammy learned or remembered how to talk. I'm guessing it was remembered, 'cuz I never did much talking around her, and there wasn't anyone else in the whole scenario who *did* talk—there were other lions, but they were just dumb animal sims without any real intelligence driving them. I ended up spending a lot less time running on instincts, because I needed my intellect (such as it was) to answer all her questions. “Why is the sky blue?” “Why do we eat gazelles?” “Why can't anyone but us talk?”

I answered as best I could. (“Because we're in a VR simulation that's programmed to look that way.” “Because they're made out of tasty meats.” “Because we're smarter than they are.”) When she was old, or at least mature, enough to understand, I explained to her about how she'd used to be a fully-adult lioness RIDE who'd gotten hurt by a nasty trojan program. “Someday soon, I expect, you'll get access to those memories back.”

And Tammy-kitten just nodded, as she did to whatever I told her, and said, “Okay, Mommy. I'll look forward to it!”

Sometimes we would watch movies and things that I projected onto a window in the VR. Verisimilitude could be damned—if I was going to be stuck in here for years without the luxury of being able to shift to instinct when things got too boring, I was gonna watch all my old favorites I kept stored on board my implant. And it was fun to have a precocious little lioness kitten to watch them with me. Times like that, I felt more like a big sister than a mommy. Still do, really.

Her favorite stuff was mostly the animated and kiddie shows, but she also developed a special attachment to the original *Shaft* films—she'd ask me to play them over and over, even when I wasn't interested in watching. It took quite a few repetitions before I realized that, in the memory she'd shown me of her old partner, Denise, the woman had been wearing the femme version of one of Richard Roundtree's outfits. So her Marshaling persona had been a she-Shaft? Given her last name, I supposed it fit.

As she got old enough to join me at it, Tamarind turned into quite the willing little huntress. I felt a fierce pride in how quickly she mastered the skills of tracking and taking down prey. Which was...kind of ironic when I thought about it, given that I'd just gotten those skills from her original persona in the first place.

The years went by, and Tamarind grew into a fine young lioness. We hunted together and always provided plenty of food for both ourselves and the virtual non-sapient pride we hung out with. She seemed to be an entirely healthy and well-rounded personality, showing no signs of the damage that she'd taken in the attack. So it didn't surprise me at all one day when I got a pop-up notification saying, "Advanced reboot complete. Import original memory set?" with "Yes," "No," and "Remind Me Later" buttons.

"Hey, Tammycat!" I called to her. "Come over here a moment, would you?"

She padded across the clearing to sit next to me, giving my shoulder a friendly lick or two as she sat down. "What is it, Mom?" She glanced curiously at the notification window.

"It's time for you to get your old self back," I said. "I told you this would happen sooner or later."

She cocked her head. "Do I...have to? I'm happy just living in here with you."

"I'm afraid so, hon," I said. "We don't have forever out in the real world—we're gonna need some time to get ourselves together out there before we arrive at the Cave of Wonders base."

She spent a good minute licking the back of a paw to regain her composure. "Will I...forget all of this?" she asked at last, in a small voice.

"I don't think so, hon," I said. "You'll keep what you are, you'll just get the other stuff added back in." At least, I *thought* so.

She leaned over to lick me on the cheek. "Just in case...I want you to know. I love you, Mom."

I felt all gooey inside, and the VR blurred as all-too-realistically-rendered tears filled my eyes. "I love you, too, Tammycat. Now, are you ready?"

She got up and walked a few steps away, then turned around to face me through the translucent pop-up. "Do it."

I tapped the "Yes" button with my nose, and the panel winked out. Then Tammy was surrounded by a halo of glowing light, within which her avatar grew from adolescent lioness to adult, the same as me.

The light faded away, and she shook her head. "Well," she said, sounding a lot more like her old self. "*That* was a trip and a half."

"Tammycat?" I asked. "Are you still...you?"

"Well, who else would I be?" she said. Then hesitated just a beat before adding, "...Mom." She padded forward to me and we rubbed muzzles, purring. For long moments, neither of us said anything, then Tamarind finally shook her head and said, "I...I can't believe you *did* that."

"Oh, well, I 'spect you'd have done the same for me," I said.

She shook her head again. "No, it's not I can't believe you were *willing*. It's that I can't believe you were *able* to do that. What in the world is *in* those things inside your head? I've never heard of any human being able to operate a RI directly—or incubate a Second Boot—no matter *what* kind of implants they had."

"Er...well...maybe they just never tried?" I said. "Anyway, now you're back, I'm

going to let you have the DE shell back and go back to my own meat-bod, I'm sure it misses me. You ready?"

She nodded. "First, though—can you shoot me your memories of what happened after we got zapped? I remember you telling the reboot-me, but it's not quite the same thing..."

"Oh, sure. It only took a few seconds to find the relevant memories, trim and archive them, and shoot them across.

She took them, then stared wonderingly at me. "You see? That's the way *RIs* do things. Mom, what *are* you?"

"I'm Batman," I rasped. Covering my own insecurity, because when you got right down it *I* wasn't sure exactly what I was now either. But I was sure I'd be thinking about it a lot in days to come. And maybe those Sillies and Dinos Mike Munn wanted to point me at could find me some answers.

She snorted. Then she took a few moments to digest the contents of the memories. "Well for crying out...Mike Munn, what the *fudge*?" She growled. "Damned Integrate." As I opened my mouth, she added, "I know, I *know*, I'm not supposed to hate them for being Integrates. I'm *trying*. But it's not easy when they keep coming along and doing something so *stupid*."

"He's on the same sub with us, you know," I pointed out. "And I'm pretty sure he outranks you. You're going to need to keep a lid on that hostility."

Tammy rolled her eyes. "Yes, Mom." She started out meaning it sarcastically, but I could *see* the moment of realization hit halfway through when she said it. She sighed. "Yes, Mom," she said again, more seriously. "Hell. I'm gonna have to stop calling you 'girlie' aren't I?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. Something tells me things may feel different once we're back in our real bodies again. So call me whatever feels comfy. Just remember me on Mother's Day, deal?"

She purred. "I think I can manage that." She looked around the clearing one last time. "Y'know, I'm really gonna miss this place."

"What do you mean? This is your normal VR. We can come back here any time."

"Miss this *time*, then. We can come back as often as we want, but it won't be the same as it was. Already *isn't* the same. *I'm* not the same." She sighed. "But we live and learn, grow and move on, 'cuz if we don't it pro'lly means we're dead."

I nodded. "You got that right."

She took a deep breath. "Well, let's go, then. Real world's a-waitin'." She dropped out of the VR and vanished. A moment later, I did the same.

CHAPTER 8

I opened my eyes in the real world—and found we were staring into the face of a black Arabian stallion Integrate about 10 centimeters away from our own. “What on Zharus have you been doing?” he asked.

“Internal housekeeping?” I said weakly. It was a little disorienting coming back to the real world after so long in virtual, and this wasn’t helping.

Munn snorted. “I couldn’t even get a read on what you were doing in there with such extreme time compression, but whatever it was, it took you *years*. That’s a long time to spend gazing at your navel.”

“She was rebooting *me*, sir,” Tammy said.

Munn blinked, turning his head slightly to regard us fully with one equine eye. “Rebooting? Your personality core?”

“I can’t say I rightly understand it either, but yeah.” Her usual distaste for Integrates seemed muted by her own astonishment about what had happened—or else she was honoring her promise to keep a lid on it for now.

“Well...however you got here, it’s good to have you back, Silver Star,” Munn said. He backed off, and gave his head a mane-rattling shake. “But the Sillies really *are* gonna want a look at you two.” He turned and clomped off toward the other end of the compartment, where several Marshals were standing guard over a heavily-fettered and powered-down wolf, tossing over his shoulder, “Remember, no de-Fusing ‘til we say!”

Tammy barely resisted the impulse to stick out her tongue at his back as he walked away. “What’s *that* all about...?” she muttered. Then she said in a much smaller voice, “...oh.” Then she clammed up.

I wasn’t paying that much attention. I was too busy taking my own internal stock of things. In some ways it was really weird being back in the real world again after so “long”. But in another it seemed like I’d only just closed my eyes a few minutes ago. I didn’t *feel* five years older. My body was the same body, it hadn’t grown or matured or anything. I felt like I’d just had a really long lucid dream. Or else spent a lot of time in Narnia and then come back through that magic wardrobe. Whatever.

A few minutes later, the sub touched down on an airfield in the middle of the desert. It didn’t look like much; I had to look pretty closely where Tammy pointed me to see the well-camouflaged defensive emplacements everywhere. Off to one side was a cliff face with a tunnel entrance. I knew what the place looked like from my Marshals training—the “Cave of Wonders” Integrate enclave, home of the Marshals’ Quantum branch.

“I’m surprised you were able to stick it out here long enough to get a point, the way you feel ‘bout Inties,” I said as we stepped down the ramp just behind a smaller lynx Fuser—one of the RIDEs Paul had fixed up back at the camp. We moved aside and gave the ramp a wide berth as a detachment of Steel Stars brought the prisoner RIDE off. The lynx switched over to skimmer form and headed away, with a girl not much older than I was in the saddle. I wondered what the story was there, then forgot about it as Tammy answered.

“Most of the training was in reg’lar facilities elsewhere,” Tammy said. “Only some of the testing was done here—and a lot of the Inties here don’t much like flesh or metal either. Funny thing is, that kind of made it easier in a way, to know they hate you as much as you hate them.” She shrugged. “Nice thing about the Quants, you usually end up working alone, so it doesn’t matter most of ‘em are Intie jerks.”

“How long we gonna be stopping over here?” I asked. “If they don’t like us much, maybe we should just wait at the sub.”

“Oh, the ones in the Marshals base are all right. It’s just the ones in the enclave proper who get annoyed. Some of ‘em, anyway,” Tammy said. “Sides, we need to get some food in your belly, and I ‘spect they’ll have people who want a look at us ‘fore we go on to somewhere else.”

Again I got the feeling there was something Tammy wasn’t telling me—but I got distracted by a growling tummy before I could ask about it. “Well, then which way to the cafeteria?”

“I’ll show you.” Tammy kicked in the lifters and we drifted across to the tunnel entrance.

A few minutes later we were sitting down to a *real* breakfast. Tammy was too big even for one of the Fuser tables, so we sat on a reinforced bench with a tray piled high with eggs, sausage, bacon, ham, steak, and kippered herrings. I was really craving an Atkins sort of breakfast today, it seemed. Grits, hash browns, biscuits, and toast didn’t really appeal, and the fruit cup was right out.

We’d just taken the tray up, and I was happily enjoying feeling stuffed, when I noticed Mike Munn and another Integrate, this one a raccoon with a glowing globe in his chest with a Silicon badge in it, regarding us from the entrance. “And so the poking and prodding begins,” I said wryly. “Shall we go say hi?”

“Might as well,” Tammy said resignedly. We started over in that direction.

As we walked, I turned my attention back to my head. My thoughts still had that digital sharp-edged clarity that meant I was running on my implants. After having done it for so long I was really kind of used to it, but I felt like it might be a nice change to bask in the warm analog glow of my meat-mind again. So I went to switch over—and red flags went off in my head. I actually got an error box pop up in my field of vision: “WARNING: Insufficient resources to spawn process on host device /dev/brain. Proceeding could cause loss of personality integrity.”

What the fuuuu...? I pulled up Tammy’s internal diagnostic display and flipped over to the “medical” tab—and stared in shock at what I saw. And then I heard what Mike and the ‘coon were discussing.

“...might have to do a forced Integration,” the raccoon was saying in quiet tones. “From the results of the workups on your other rescues...”

No. No no no no NO! That was the far side of enough. Between that and what I’d just seen, I went from zero to *PANIC* in point five seconds. I triggered the de-Fuse

command. *:Let me OUT OF HERE!:*

Tammy overrode the command. *:Wait, you heard his orders—:*

:They can't order us to Integrate, no way, no how!: I wasn't taking no for an answer. I reached out and grabbed my superuser privs, then *forced* the de-Fuse, and Tammy split apart around me. She hit the ground on all four paws.

And so did I.

For a few moments, all conversation stopped, and we all stood there in shock just staring at each other—and, in my case, at myself. My body was now naked, covered in tawny fur, and—oh yes—*lioness-shaped*. I was standing on four paws, with a long lion tail and—as far as I could tell from inside of it—a kitty face. Just like that horse I'd seen cracked loose at the garage, I'd been turned into a real live human-sized animal. But unlike the horse, I was still thinking at a human level—thanks to my implants. No wonder I couldn't swap back out to my human brain—thanks to the pinched-in shape of my skull, I didn't have enough brain left.

“Marshal Tamarind, I *ordered* you not to defuse without authorization!” Mike Munn barked.

“Hey, don't look at me,” Tammy said. “She overrode me.”

Munn stared at her. “*She overrode you—?*”

I opened my mouth and tried to speak, but all that came out were growls and whines. I didn't have the right vocal equipment for speech, it seemed. So I switched to my implants' comms instead. *:With all due respect, sir, you can just bite me,:* I said. *:I'm not just gonna stand idly by and let you Integrate me without my sayso. I never signed up for that.:* Technically, I'd never even signed up at all, but we didn't need to go there just now.

Mike and the raccoon Intie both stared at me. “You're still thinking?” the coon said. He peered closer. “You *are!* Amazing! I've never seen implants quite like those. How did you get them?”

Munn facehoofed. “We weren't *going* to force-Integrate you. We were just discussing options.”

:Well, that's not an option. You can just forget—hey!: A paw the size of a coffee table shoved me gently down to the ground, and a bristly tongue the size of a beach towel started licking my fur. *:Tammy, what the hell?!:*

Tammy paused for a moment and blinked. “Sorry, I think my maternal instincts just kicked in. You are kinda kitten-sized just now, compared to me...”

:Lemme up!: I demanded.

Tammy considered. “Hmm...maybe...no, don't think so. Not 'til you're *all* groomed!” She started licking me again, very enthusiastically.

:Hey!: I protested. *:Less than an hour ago I was your mother!:*

“Uh-huh!” Tammy said. “But you know how it is. When you're young, your mother takes care of you—then when you both get older, you take care of her.”

:This is not how that's supposed to work and you know it!: I insisted. But despite my complaints, I couldn't help starting to purr. It was more than a little undignified, but on the other hand it *did* feel good to be groomed like that...

Marshal Munn and the coon looked at each other, then, very visibly suppressing a chuckle, Munn suggested, “Maybe we should move this somewhere more private. I think one of the med labs is open.”

“Good idea,” the raccoon said. “They’ll have sensor and diagnostic equipment we can use.”

“Lead the way!” Tammy said, picking me up by the scruff of the neck.

:*HEY!*: I yelped over the comm, yelping a little out loud, too. :*I can walk, you know!*:

“Not while Mommy’s here you can’t,” Tammy said happily.

:*I’m soooo gonna get you for this!*: I promised as she carried me up the hallway after the two Integrates.

Built into a cavern as it was, the medical lab was spacious enough for even the truck-sized Tamarind to fit inside. She carried me over to the diagnostic table/bed and set me down on it, and the raccoon—whose name turned out to be Sparky—ran the scans with the help of a couple of Iodine Star med techs. Once they were finished, Tammy claimed me again and carried me over to an open space against a wall where she continued grooming me—pausing only long enough for Sparky to fasten a collar around my neck with a comm on it I could send to with my implant to speak out loud. As a sort of consolation prize, it also had a Provisional Tin Star badge, hollow on the left side and filled in on the right, clipped to it—the first physical proof of my Marshalhood. Go me.

“Ugh, I’m *damp*,” I said through the comm. “How am I *damp*? Your tongue is just *hardlight!* Don’t tell me they gave you spit glands.”

“I do have a fabber built in,” Tammy pointed out.

“You’re *fabbing* lion spit?” Even the Iodines were having a hard time keeping straight faces now. Finally Tammy finished her work—for now—and rolled over on her back with me resting on her soft, furry belly, one immense paw folded over me to make sure I couldn’t get away. It didn’t escape me that this had been one of the ways I’d liked to hold Tammy-kitten back during the whole Second Boot VR experience. I sighed.

“FML.”

Meanwhile, on the hardlight display I could see if I turned my head, Sparky and Marshal Munn had a 3D image of my cat-brain slowly rotating, with the implant network picked out in qubitite blue. It really was quite extensive. Even I hadn’t realized just how far it spread.

“This is a very unusual implant pattern,” Sparky said. “Even for nanite body modders like yourself. Most of you have the chip stacks concentrated in one or two locations, even with the Q chips. Even a neural lace is just that, a series of laces like a cat’s cradle. This...it’s like the implants developed into a shadow of your own human neural network, and the shadow remains unchanged even after the original was altered.”

“Heh...well,” I said. “No big mystery there. I kinda intentionally spread the Q out instead of stacking it all together. I hoped it might stand out less on med scanners. I was still stuck in the orphanage, and I wanted to ring as few alarm bells as I could, ya know?” I chuckled. “My peers who reviewed my specs actually pointed out they’d be a lot less efficient as a Q-puter because of the greater comm lag between the separate Q parts. But they said that it should still work *okay* anyway, so I went ahead.”

“Less efficient as a basic computer, yes,” Sparky said. “But you just grew yourself a whole new backup neural net, that basically learned to be you.”

“Huh. So that’s why I’m not just a dumb animal right now,” I said.

“But how did you get that way?” Munn asked. “You were only infected for, what, two days? Everything we know about Amontillado so far suggests it should have taken

months to get that far.”

“Shah—at least, I guess it was Shah—said when they infected me it was a new experimental strain,” I said. I thought back to when the implants had kicked in this last time—when the Amontillado tigress had stabbed me through the chest with a tentacle and it got hard to think. “It must have hit me as a countermeasure when I was in the core trying to shut it down. If not for the implants it would’ve worked.”

Sparky nodded. “Pity she got away. Would have been useful to find out what she knew.”

“We’ll find her again,” Munn growled. “At least we got Fridolph.”

“So...what about changing me back?” I asked. “Tammy’s Fuser nanos did this, so they ought to be able to undo it, right?”

“I’m no Dino, but it’s not that simple,” Sparky said. “The human body is a fantastic, delicate machine—and as with most such machines, it is a *lot* easier to wreck than to repair. The changes to your body could probably be reversed easily enough. If nothing else, we could clone you an entirely new one, as we would for a brainbox case from Earth. But it’s your grey matter that, well, *matters*. We can’t just make any old brain and stuff you into it. It has to be rebuilt along your original lines.”

“Oh,” I said, digesting that.

“We need a lot more study of the trojan, its victims, and how it does what it does before we can hope to reverse the changes for *anyone*,” Sparky concluded.

“Hopefully we can pry some of that out of Fridolph,” Munn said, smacking a fist into a palm with a sound like two coconuts banging together.

Sparky nodded. “We’ll do our best. But for now, we’re going to need to run more tests, make comparisons between you and the other victims. We’ve co-opted a floor of the hospital in Nextus adjoining our training facilities, where we’re treating and studying all the other victims—it’s easier to consult experts from Nextus Nano and the original Nextus RIDE project there. If you were to go there, that’s where they’d have the best chance of figuring out how to reverse it. The choice is up to you, of course.”

I sighed. *:What do you think?:* I sent privately to Tammy.

:I can’t think of anywhere else that would have a better chance of helping you,: Tammy said. *:If they’ve got all the victims and all the experts right there...:*

:I know,: I said. *:I just...well, every time I ran away from Nextus, I always swore I was never going back there. I really thought I was gonna make it stick this time.:*

:Aww...: Tammy sent a quick VR nuzzle emoticon. *:This time I’ll be with you. So if we do have to blow the place, we can.:*

“All right,” I said aloud through my comm. “I guess if that’s the best place to help me—and I can help all those other poor bastards Amontillado did over at the same time—there’s no reason not to go.”

Munn nodded. “All right. We’ll put you on the next sub headed that way.” He saluted us—looking fairly odd saluting a giant lioness on her back cuddling a smaller one, but there you go. “Good luck, Marshals.”

As we waited for the sub flight to arrive, and after Tammy worked some of the maternal instincts out of her system for a while, we were able to do some experimentation and testing of the limits of my new body.

For starters, I learned I wasn’t *entirely* felinized. I had a wider range of motion in

my joints than a “real” cat would, and a better sense of balance. I could still stand on my hind legs and walk—a little clumsily, but more effectively than a “tamed” lion doing tricks could. And my forepaws were still halfway hands, with short stubby fingers and a pentadactyl opposable thumb. I could grasp things about as well as if I were wearing thick gloves or mittens on a human hand.

Also, Tammy and I could still Fuse. She was a little hesitant to try it at first, until I reminded her we’d *been* Fused without ever noticing anything was wrong until at the last. She had to adjust the Fuse shift to take my different body shape into account, but once we were Fused up I could operate her body in either Walker or Fuser shapes just as well as I ever had.

“Well, this is a weird reversal from how it is in Alfie’s camp,” I mused. “I have to fuse with you to get *me* real hands.”

“Yeah, life is just funny like that sometimes,” Tammy said wryly.

And our VR was likewise unaffected—I could be human, anthro, or feral at will just as easily as before. “So, basically, all that’s changed is my meat bod,” I mused as we crouched companionably in the clearing sharing a virtual gazelle. Then I giggled as a thought suddenly occurred to me. “Ya know what? No matter what happens, they can’t send me back to the children’s home like *this!*”

“Yeah, you pro’lly got that one right,” Tammy said. “But you *could* end up in a zoo. There are rumors passed down from RIDE to RIDE that at least one of Fritz’s test pilots way back when ended up that way.”

“Ugh,” I reflected. “Well, at least the zookeepers would probably mind their own business better than the busybodies at the orphanage.”

Early that afternoon, a sub from Nextus came in, and we boarded for the return trip—still in Fuse, as we thought it might be best to draw less attention while traveling. Since we were too big for the Fuser seats, we stayed in Walker form in the large RIDE cargo bay at the rear, with camera feeds from the hull of the sub to entertain us on the transcontinental hop.

As we slid down the far side of the arc, and that hyper-orderly city on the eastern coast came into view, I sighed. “And there’s my old prison again.”

“Do you really hate the whole polity just for that one place keeping you in it?” Tammy asked.

“Well...rationally I guess I shouldn’t,” I said. “But it’s like you and Integrates—the one incident tainted the whole for me so much that any time I see any of it, it just brings up bad memories.”

Tammy nodded. “I guess I can see that. But maybe this time it’ll be your liberation—from that lioness body,” she suggested.

“Maybe,” I said. “But when you get right down to it, this body really isn’t all *that* bad. I’m kinda used to being a lioness, after raising you.”

“Aww, Mom,” Tammy purred.

I chuckled. “It really feels weird when you say that out here in the real world, y’know.”

“I know,” Tammy said. “But I can’t help that you did what you did.” She purred. “Or that I’m so glad you did it.”

Then it was my turn to aww. `

We touched down at Nextus Aerodrome in the late afternoon, having crossed

several time zones and lost several daylight hours on the way across Gondwana. Tammy switched back to skimmer form to drive us to the hospital facility, and I distracted myself by peering at people in passing skimmers and enjoying their expressions at seeing a truck driving along with just a lioness in the driver's seat.

But as we traveled further into town, my heart sank as the route was an all-too-familiar one. This was the way I'd always been taken back to the Home after they'd caught me on one of my escapes. Of course, I *knew* Tammy wasn't driving me back there—it's just that the hospital was in the same part of Nextus—but it didn't soothe the icky feeling. Even freaking the mundanes in passing cars began to pall.

But as we neared our destination, we finally took a different turning, and I realized why we'd followed the same route so long. The hospital was *very* close to the Home. It was one of the buildings I'd used to stare up at from the play yards and wonder about. What kind of offices were in there, what went on in there, what were the people behind those gleaming glass windows doing? Well, I was going to find that out today for at least one of them.

Needless to say, Tammy-truck-kitty was *much* too big to fit in the hospital lobby, which was sized with more normally-sized Fusers in mind. So she let me out and went off to park herself, while I continued into the lobby alone.

I got quite a few stares as I crossed to the reception desk, as I was a lot too small to be a RIDE. At the desk, I planted both forepaws in front of the startled receptionist and said, "Provisional Tin Star Jeanette Leroq checking in. They should have let you know I was coming?"

The receptionist, a pretty brunette with coyote RIDE tags, dimpled as she smiled at me, and glanced back down at her one-way hardlight display. Unlike most of the normals who'd seen me, she didn't seem more than mildly startled. Then I noticed she had a Hollow Star badge on her chest, and it made sense. As a reserve Marshal, she'd probably been sent a complete file including pictures and stuff.

"Certainly, Marshal Leroq," she said after consulting the display. "They're waiting for you at the 14th floor lobby. Do you need any assistance with the elevators?"

"Nah, I can manage. Thanks." I nodded to her and headed across the floor. I quite startled at least five other people who boarded or left on the way up by doing nothing more than sitting quietly in one corner of the elevator car and grooming myself until we got to 14. Then I stepped out in the lobby to find the nurses and orderlies waiting for me.

Fortunately, they didn't have a lot of paperwork or anything for me to go over. They sensed I was tired and got me settled into my room first thing. I do have to say, as hospital rooms go it was pretty nice. Spacious corner room, comfy king-sized cat bed, big picture windows, all the amenities. Of course, the view out the windows was still Nextus, but you couldn't have everything. (Actually, I later found out that the windows had display panels built into them that I could reprogram with whatever view I wanted. So maybe I *could* have everything.)

And also, neatest of all, there was a built-in hardlight projection telepresence suite in the ceiling, so that doctors and experts from all over could beam in as hardlight avatars for remote consultations. As a side benefit, it also meant that Tammy could beam in as a more-normally-sized lioness, since her physical form just wouldn't fit in here. This she did, as soon as the med staff left me alone in the room.

Being Tammy, of course, she arrived wearing a hardlight lab coat, stethoscope,

and eye reflector. “Please state the nature of your medical emergency,” she said primly.

I snorted. “Hey, Tammycat.”

“Hiya, kitten.” She banished the doctor props and padded over to give me a couple of swipes with her pink hardlight tongue. (No dampness this time, I noted approvingly.) Of course, our relative sizes were a lot closer now, but I was still a lot smaller than even a normal-sized adult lioness—and for that matter, still a teenaged kid when you get right down to it—so I guess I was a “kitten” still. “Doing okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, I guess.” I stared out the window at the polityscape, painted orange by the desert-setting sun. “See that red terra-cotta roof down there, about three o’clock?”

She peered where I was pointing. “Yeah? What’s...oh! That’s the Home, isn’t it?”

“Checked Zharus Maps, didja?” I said. “Bingo.”

She cocked her head, accessing more data on the place I guess. “What’s a Mission Revival-style manor house doing smack in the middle of Brutalist-style Nextus?”

“Well, it’s not really in the middle—they wouldn’t have tolerated it there. This is one of the suburbs. And therein lies a tale.” Reminded by the word, I swished my own. “Like fifty years back, there was this rich guy who just wanted a Mission-style house. Maybe he was homesick for California or something. Anyway, either the zoning laws weren’t in back then, or he was able to bribe enough people or whatever that he got it. Then he died, and didn’t have any heirs to leave it to so it went to the government. And they were looking for somewhere to put an orphanage anyway, and it was cheaper to stick it in that than to raze that and build something else. So that’s us, the kids from the mission.”

“I know you didn’t like the company there, but wasn’t it at least a little bit neat to live somewhere so different?” Tammy asked. “Everything’s so much the same around here. Always hated that about the home place when I was here ‘tween assignments back in the day.”

I snorted. “For someone made here, you don’t understand the Nextus mindset that well. Conformity is the rule.” I cued up an old song from implant storage and routed a clip through the comm.

*Subdivisions --
In the high school halls
In the shopping malls
Conform or be cast out
Subdivisions --
In the basement bars
In the backs of cars
Be cool or be cast out*

“To all the kids at school we were the *weird* kids from the *weird* house. They’d make fun of us for having to live in that rickety old clown castle almost as much as they made fun of us for not having any parents.” I gave myself a few tongue-swipes while I worked on regaining my composure. “So after all of this, I end up not only back in Nextus but a couple clicks away from my old prison.” I shook my head. “A couple clicks and a whole fricking *world* away.” I lifted a paw and stared at it. “It’s weird how *normal* this all feels.”

“Well sure it does. You’re a perfectly normal human lioness,” Tammy said

reasonably. "I'd be surprised you'd think anything else."

I snorted. "Yeah, sure."

"Well, seriously, you copied my instincts over," Tammy said. "Now you've got the body to match them in the real world as well as the virtual. Is it really so surprising?"

"When you put it that way, I guess not," I admitted. I stared down at the terracotta roof of the children's home, sticking out like a sore thumb amid so much Nextus sameness. "I'm glad you're here."

"Hey, you're my partner, my Mom, *and* my kitten," Tammy said, licking me on the cheek. "Where else would I be?"

CHAPTER 9

About an hour later, we had our first encounter with Dr. Walter Branch, my assigned consulting physician and the man in charge of overseeing the treatment of all the mutilated Amontillado patients the Marshals had been able to round up. He was a middle-aged man with no RIDE tags, clean-shaven, in his late 50s to early 60s maybe, with a head full of artfully grey hair.

I think that was the first thing that set my teeth on edge about him. With modern nano, there's no *reason* to go grey 'til you're about at your 90s or so, and it's pretty optional even then—unless you're either too absent-minded to bother with the treatment or intentionally cultivating an image. And nothing in that shining head of white suggested absent-mindedness.

But I'd done my research on the man, and was ready to concede that he *might* be entitled to an ego. He'd been on the original team led by Dr. Rosenthal that had re-engineered Earth's transgender nanos into the Fusers RIDEs used to link to their partners. So, as doctors went, not many of them were in a better position to know *exactly* how Amontillado's runaway Fusers did what they did.

Apparently the Marshals felt the same way, when they plucked him out of academia to head up the research project. On his lab coat, Branch wore a Provisional Star in the same left-side hollow configuration as mine. But where mine was Tin, saying I was acting as a cadet without full training, his was Iodine—the Marshals' medical branch. Provisional branch badges were sometimes used for special experts whose skills were needed badly enough that they could skate by with a short-short course in the extreme basics of Marshaling, then get put right to work. They come in sort of between Hollow Stars, who're usually more general-purpose clerical or jack-of-all-trades types like that reception clerk, and full-fledged branch-badged Marshals.

Given how broad-ranging the expertise of the Marshals is, not many people are *ever* needed so badly they can be given that kind of get-out-of-jail-free ticket. That Branch was such a person might say a lot about his abilities—but didn't say all that much about his worth as a human being, or at least as real Marshal material (which was about the same thing as far as I was concerned).

"Hello, Miss Leroq," he said affably, starting to put his hand out and then catching himself. "Good to meet you." He completely ignored Tammy—not a good sign.

"Yeah, I said. "Same here." He was trying to project kind of a paternal attitude, which just added to my distaste for him. A lot of the muckety-mucks at the orphanage thought all they had to do was act fatherly and we'd all think they knew best. Yeah right.

But maybe he couldn't help it, and even if he was slimy, if he had the skills to back it up he could be House for all I cared.

"I see you're settling in all right, and that your RIDE has found our telepresence rig with no trouble," he said, still not paying direct attention to Tammy.

"Yes, my *partner* has," I said. *Cut him slack, cut him slack*, I told myself. He *was* from Nextus, he helped invent them, naturally he'd see them more as things. If he could get me fixed, well, he could think the moons were made of green cheese if he wanted.

"Oh...sorry, I meant no offense," Branch said. I wondered if he realized his tone came off more as someone apologizing because it was socially expected than because he actually meant it.

"That's all right, we're used to it," Tammy said.

Dr. Branch pulled up a seat across from my bed. "I wanted to discuss with you exactly how it is you are still able to think and communicate, despite your condition. I've already read the preliminary reports." He paused. "I gather you have been...modifying yourself using untested amateur cybernetics?"

I sighed. I could already see how this was going to go. "Untested in some ways, but not in others." I took a deep breath (which I really didn't need, since I was "speaking" through radio waves to a comm, but force of habit). "Most of what we're doing is same-old same-old, just in some new ways. The medical nanos we use are just an outgrowth of the Fusers *you* helped build. The neural connections we're using have been understood for *centuries*. The implants we're making are mostly just duplicates of the ones they have to cut open people's heads to put in on Earth, just built bit by bit on the inside instead. And yeah, we use qubitite processors, but *those* have been in use even in regular implants here for some little while. Lots of Earth people get it retrofitted to the 'plants they already have when they get here."

Dr. Branch didn't look convinced. "There are still plenty of ways known technology could produce negative, even fatal results when used in valid combinations. For example, negative interactions between pharmaceuticals have been known for centuries."

"There *are* pro medicos in the 'plant scene who help spot for that kind of thing." I paused. "At least...we kind of have to take their word for it they are. They stay anonymous, a'course, liability issues being what they are. But most of them talk a good game, and we always run new designs past several of 'em *and* run them through sims before we commit." I shook my head. "Anyway, these implants have done right by me so far, given that thanks to them I'm still sitting here talking to you instead of growling in a zoo cage somewhere."

He waved a hand in the manner of someone conceding a point not because he'd been convinced but because he didn't feel it was worth arguing over anymore. "Well, I *will* have to ask you to refrain from adding any additional modifications during your stay." He glanced meaningfully at the full-service medical fabber in one corner of the room.

I bristled at this insinuation—suddenly so angry that before I could stop myself I actually hissed and *spat* as angry cats do. "I would *never* use your fabber without permission," I said, growling.

"Miss Leroq, I really must insist you calm down," Dr. Branch said, only paling a *little* bit. Someone must have told him it was a bad idea to show fear to a cat. "I apologize, but given your history..."

“That was *before*,” I said. “I’m a Marshal now, and don’t you forget it.”

I was a little surprised to realize that I could *tell* he obviously didn’t believe my last statement, about being a Marshal. Now how did I know that? Oh...when I’d copied Tammy’s RIDE instincts, somehow I must have gotten her biometric analysis package too. I couldn’t read as well as a RIDE with all its sensors, but I could twig to body language easily enough. Well, it didn’t matter to me if he thought I was a “real” Marshal or not. I was at least as real as *he* was, and better-trained at Marshaling besides.

But again, he didn’t argue the point out loud. “Very well, *Marshal* Leroq. I will bear that in mind.”

“See that you do,” I growled. Then I made a conscious effort to back off from the kitty temper and calm down.

Tammy took up the conversational slack. “So what’s your plan for diagnosis and treatment?” she asked.

Dr. Branch was actually a little startled, as if he’d just been asked a question by an end table. “Oh...well, first we will be thoroughly examining her—both myself and our visiting experts. Then I will study the results and, based on our findings, determine the best course of action overall. You must understand, this could be a long and drawn-out process. There have been body changes before, but never quite such comprehensive physiological alteration to the brain.”

“Got it, Doc,” I said. “Just you do your best. That’s all we can ask for.”

He nodded. “Oh, you can believe me—I shall.” Then he gestured to the examining table with all its diagnostic equipment built in. “And in that vein...shall we begin?”

The physical examination took a couple of hours, and wasn’t the most fun thing in the world to go through. Now that I’d been sensitized it, I couldn’t *stop* reading Branch’s body language with my new-found expertise. Despite the fatherly act he put on, he didn’t really *like* me very much, and he liked Tammy even less. But at the same time there was this almost...covetousness about him. Like he wanted me around more than he disliked me.

After he finished, he excused himself and took himself back to his office to study what he’d found. He put off questions on when we could expect a preliminary report with, “As soon as *I* know, *you’ll* know.” Then he was gone.

I sighed as I watched the room’s door close. “Would a doctor I could *like* be too much to ask for?”

“I hear ya, girlie,” Tammy said. “Would be nice to have one who didn’t think I was lawn furniture, while we’re at it. But ya know what? If he can get results, I’ll happily play *chaise lounge*. And the Marshals must have thought he had a pretty good chance or they wouldn’t have half-hollowed him.”

I nodded. “Yeah, guess I can stick it out if you can. Wonder why he’s got that whole weird...whassaword...*ambivalence* toward me? He doesn’t *like* me, but boy is he glad I’m here.”

“No mystery there,” Tammy said. “If he does solve your brain-drain, it’ll be quite a feather in his cap.”

“I guess I can see that,” I admitted.

“Could be a paper in it. Fame, fortune, fast skimmers, girls—or guys, if he goes that way...” Tammy went on.

“I get the idea,” I said.

“So, as long as your interests and his run the same way, I ‘spect we can trust him,

‘leastways maybe about as far as we can throw him,” Tammy said. “We aren’t neither of us required to like him very much, or trust him any farther than that.”

I nodded. “I hope this doesn’t turn out to be a waste of time.”

“Whatever happens, I’m sure it won’t be that,” Tammy said confidently. “Any time we spend together’s never wasted.”

So after our arrival, my days kinda settled into a routine. In the mornings Dr. Branch would come in, take readings, discuss with me how I came by my implants, and so on. It was really kind of annoying on the whole, because he had this whole attitude about amateurs screwing up their bodies with unauthorized implants. He tried to get past it given that the amazing thing those implants did was the whole reason I was here, but I could tell he struggled. Never mind that the actual tech had been tested for decades, and that there were a number of medicos involved in the implant-mod community to begin with. Branch made pretty clear he thought of the whole bunch of us as just a couple steps up from little kids poking knitting needles in their ears. After a while, I just stopped arguing with him about it.

Afternoons were when a cavalcade of guest experts came in to consult, peering at me singly, in groups or teams, sometimes in consultation with Dr. Branch and other times not. Sparky popped in a few times, and Tammy’s friend Marshal Masterson came by once or twice to check in on me and the other patients and get a progress report from Dr. Branch. Tammy had managed to get him assigned as my Marshals liaison since Mike Munn was taking a leave of absence after his screw-up at AlphaWolf’s camp.

I wasn’t exactly fond of the whole rigmarole, but on the other hand it was better than the orphanage in a lot of ways. Most of them were willing, after the shock had passed, to treat me as a person—I suppose it helped that I looked like a cat instead of a 16-year-old kid; since I talked smart and all, they didn’t get hung up on my age. And they were interested in what I had to say, and asked questions that as often as not led to interesting conversations. I had enough knowledge in common with the experts in implants and computers that we could usually talk shop pretty well.

Evenings were my own, and I’d go out with Tammy to exercise at the Marshals’ physical training facility’s jogging track or occasionally play in the nearby municipal park. The other park-goers were usually surprised. Tammy helped me brush up on my Marshals training, too, staying sharp against the time I could finish it up in the real world and test out of my “provisional” status. I also explored the floor of the hospital and looked in on the other patients.

Some of them simply showed the same heavy tagging as anyone who used a RIDE for a long time or went in for the whole fur-body-mod thing. They were mostly just in here for observation to make sure that they didn’t have any other health problems as a result of the Amontillado exposure. Shah was a sadistic so-and-so, after all, and nobody could be quite sure she hadn’t left some kind of long-term “gotchas” in the nannies’ code.

The real heartbreakers were the ones who went further than that—the ones who were partway to animals but still retained enough human intellect to let them know what they’d lost. There were only a few of these, and there was just the one full-animal horse guy—who most of the staff referred to somewhat drolly as a “Full Monty”—because the Amontillado crackers had quickly gotten good at judging how far gone a “cask” was and Integrating the ones who’d gone too far. Like they would have done for

us if it hadn't been for my implants. That made me shiver every time I thought about it. If I had to Integrate with someone, I would have wanted it to be Tammy, and in some ways I kind of looked forward to it—but it was in the same sort of way a devout believer might look forward to going to Heaven: it would be awesome when it happened, but please, God, *not yet*.

We got to know that horse guy pretty well, as it happened. His name was Robin, as that had been *her* name when she'd been a human woman. He was basically a miniature horse, didn't look or act any different from the ones they'd been breeding for pets for hundreds of years.

He was quite skittish the first few times Tammy and I tried to approach him, but we didn't push too far and after a week or so when he saw we didn't mean any harm he'd let us come right up to him, lick him all over, and cuddle up with him sandwiched between us.

I think he was pretty lonely. He didn't get visitors all that often—as I understood it, his family was too shocked by the change to be able to accept this horse-thing as the Robin they'd known and loved. In their mind, Robin was just dead and gone, and this horse was...something else. Tammy and I sometimes darkly wondered whether they'd have sold him for someone's pet if the Marshals hadn't scooped him up for all-expenses-paid treatment.

We made sure to spend a lot of time with him, poor guy. Sometimes they'd let us take him for runs along the Marshals track or in the park, under supervision. His doctor was a lot nicer about these things than Branch was. I think she was happy to see someone take an interest in him.

As gilded cages went, it was pretty nice. I found out how to program the windows and set them up with a link to Tammy's VR, to block out the unwanted Nextus and let me watch Tammy playing in the jungle. Sometimes I'd join her there via my implants.

And I got to get back on the 'net, too, and get back in touch with my old circle of online friends I'd been out of touch with all the time I'd been stuck in AlphaWolf's camp. They wanted to know where I'd been all that time, so Tammy and I came up with a story just a couple shades off from the truth.

As the story went, I'd been bodyjacked by a lioness from AlphaWolf's camp, Stockholm syndrome had made me hers, and then she left the camp and brought me back to the city because "Alfie's camp is no place to raise a kitten." I kept my feline appearance most of the time in VR but let my friends think that was because Tammy was *making* me be her kitten, and for her part Tammy played up the whole maternal thing, accompanying me everywhere and happily subjecting me to endless grooming while my friends and I chatted.

After a few days, it...kind of stopped being an act. Really, except for the time in Second Boot, I sort of realized Tammy had been kind of acting like a mother to me ever since I'd first forced her to take me on. Doing things "for my own good" without ever fully explaining them—wasn't that kind of what parents did?

And when you got right down to it, I didn't really mind so much being loved and coddled. It was a new experience to me after all that time *not* getting it in the orphanage. It was kind of a strange turn in our relationship—I mean, I'd heard of crossrider couples who would swap being the man and being the woman, but I hadn't heard of anyone who traded off being mother and daughter. But it felt right, so who was I to complain?

Of course, we didn't tell anyone exactly where we were, or how we were getting by. That was part of the code of the community, really—nobody wanted to know too much about anyone else, 'cuz then they could be forced to give it away. They'd assume we were just doing the same as any of them—living off social services as far as we could, doing a few little low-risk hacks to scam a little more. If they knew we were living in a hospital, in easy reach of medical fabbers, they'd be all over us like ugly on an ape.

To be honest, despite my indignation at Branch's insinuations, I occasionally had a bit of a hard time resisting the siren lure of the staff-use-only medical fabber in the corner. There were so many implant tweaks I wanted to try...but this wasn't a case where I could breeze in, hack out some nanos, and be gone before anyone noticed a discrepancy in the fab matter logs. Here, they'd likely figure it out right away, and given my history it would be pretty clear where the blame would fall. For that matter, I really hoped nobody made an *honest* error in the logs while I was there. I was sure Branch, if no one else, would jump right to conclusions.

And so life went on, occasionally interrupted by news bulletins or Marshals all-call alerts—like the time the Walton estate, on the other side of Nextus from us, was raided by an Integrate strike force *and* an AlphaWolf attack team at the same time. Details released for public consumption painted it as some kind of botched bodyjack attack that just happened to coincide with a Fritgian raid, but Tammy gave me the real low-down on why Walton now had AlphaWolf tags, his wife had a new mink RIDE, and their daughter had gone back to camp with AlphaWolf—it had been a rescue mission, and a damned successful one. There were even a number of Intie prisoners, who immediately got scooped up by units of the Nextus army.

"Good for Alfie," Tammy said happily. "I always knew he had it in him to be one of the 'good guys.'"

But at the same time, we heard more ominous news of a daylight attack on Zane Brubeck by none other than Fritz himself. The attack had put Zane and Carrie-Anne in the hospital, and left a number of bystanders injured or dead—including Marshals—before a power-boosted Quinoa Steader had shown up and driven Fritz away with injuries of his own. Clearly bringing Integrates out into the open was not going to be all fun and games, and that put a damper on our cheerful mood for days.

Not long after that, we were both startled one afternoon when a magnificent white-tailed stag walked bodily into our hospital room, with a small ferret resting happily in his 14-point rack. He was much too small to be a RIDE, but not a hardlight projection either. Tammy blinked. "What's this, room service?"

"It can be," the buck replied. "I've been told I'm really tasty in Nature Range."

"Save me a haunch!" the ferret said cheerfully.

Then the stag's neck swelled and stretched and grew, and human arms emerged from what became a humanoid 'taur-form torso with the same deer's head. Then the rack winked out and the deertaur caught the ferret in his—no, *her* arms as she grew human breasts (with a hardlight bikini top over them) and her face shifted to take on more feminine lines. "Quantum Star B. Thompson and Silicon Star Fenwick at your service," she said, her voice now an octave higher. "You must be Jeanette and Tammy?"

"Ah, hi," I said. "Uh...wow. What *are* you?" I paused. "And don't say 'I'm Batman.' It's been done."

"Well, that's complicated," she said, as Fenwick scurried up her arm and back down to a little saddle around her deer torso. "Probably about as complicated as what

you are.”

“Do tell?” I purred. I’d only just met her, but I found myself taking an irrational kind of liking to her.

“In a way, I’m kinda the ‘zact opposite of you, if I understand what the docs say. You’re a RI-type brain in a meat body? Well, I’m a meat brain in a DE-like box.”

Tammy cocked her head, peering at Thompson curiously. “How does that work?”

Thompson stepped over next to the windows and sat down, tucking her legs beneath herself. “Started out human back on Earth, got rid of the old body ‘cuz it bored me and I spent most of my time in Virtual Life anyway.”

Now *I* perked up. I’d heard a lot about how they did cyber implant stuff back on Earth, but I’d never had the chance to encounter an Earth cyber in the flesh—or flesh and metal, as the case might be. “So you were in a brainbox?” I shivered. Much as I liked putting the metal in my head, putting my head in all metal had always seemed like bit of a bridge too far.

The deertaur smirked. “Hey, don’t knock it, girl. When you live your life on the ‘net anyway, the flesh is just a distraction. I can’t *tell* you how nice it was never having to take pee breaks anymore.”

“I guess I have to give you that one,” I admitted.

“Then when I got here, I found the local tech offered some keen ways to upgrade, so I started thinking ‘out of the box.’ Mechanic I met over in Uplift helped me get started with some Laurasian DE shells that could be adapted to fit, and so several new bods later here I am.” She waved a hand back to take in her new body. Then she pulled the hands back in and shrank the torso back down into a doe’s neck again.

“That must come in handy for undercover operations,” Tammy mused. “Just a normal li’l ol’ deer, couldn’t *possibly* be a Marshal since you’re too small to Fuse to anyone.”

“It has its points,” Thompson said modestly.

“Especially when she’s a buck,” Fenwick piped up.

“It’s nice to meet you, Marshal Thompson,” I said. “And Fenwick.”

“Call me Brooke,” she said. “Or Bernie when I’m a buck.”

I nodded. “All right, Brooke. But what brings you over here?”

“Not to put too fine a point on it, *you* do,” Brooke said. “Y’see, I don’t want to be meat at *all* anymore. I’ve come as close to being a ‘real’ RIDE as I can get, but so far, nobody’s come up with a way to upload the meat-brain into non-meat. Until, well, *you*.”

“I...see,” I said. I licked the back of a paw a few times while I thought about that. So far, everyone who’d come to look at me had been interested in learning what I did for how it would advance the state of technology, or maybe for how it could help other people. I hadn’t met anyone who wanted to know about it for *themselves* before.

“Honestly, I’m not sure what I can tell you. I wouldn’t get your hopes up ‘til we have a better understanding of what happened to me. Even *I* don’t know what I did to make this happen.”

“The medical files say you shot yourself up with some kind of Q-based neural implants,” Brooke persisted. “And they grew into a backup neural net that copied you into it. So if I were to shoot up with the same implants...?”

I shook my head. “That is what I did, yeah, but if I understand the docs I’ve talked to right there’s no guarantee someone else doing it even the exact same way would get the same thing. It might be ‘cuz of some weird mutation in my brain, or the

time I accidentally swallowed a sarium watch battery as a kid, or some other completely weird-ass thing right out of left field we don't even know about yet."

"Oh." Brooke's ears drooped.

I felt bad disappointing her, so I said, "But hey. That doesn't mean they *won't* figure it out. And when they do, I'll be happy to share it with you if it'll help you."

She perked up again. "You mean that? *Sweet!*"

I nodded. "I do. In fact, I'll be glad to share everything I've got with you now. Share and share alike, that's how we nano-modders roll. And since you've got experience cybering yourself, maybe you'll see something we missed. And I'm sure your Sillie partner will have some ideas, too." I grinned. "But in return, I wanna hear all about how *you* became what you are, in detail. You got a few hours to kill?"

She grinned, showing a perfect set of pearly white deer teeth. "I'll clear my social calender."

"Great! Here's all my files...now it's your turn."

Brooke looked distracted for a moment as the files downloaded, then she nodded. "All right. So for starters, have you ever seen the ancient Earth movie *Wall-E*...?"

CHAPTER 10

Brooke turned out to be a really fun person to hang out with. She was a fount of amusing stories about herself, her friends, and Marshals training in general. Since I hadn't had the chance to go through regular training, I was really interested to hear about that part. "They really had your RIDEs bodyjack you? For a whole week?"

"Was supposed to be, 'til we got interrupted by a pair of us Integrating along the way," Brooke said. "Of course, you'll probably skip that part—you've already done it for a *bit* longer than that."

"*Just* a bit," Tammy agreed wryly.

I was also interested to learn that the mechanic who had helped Brooke into her new bodies was none other than Ryan-now-Rhianna Stonegate. "Now there's a name that keeps coming up everywhere," Tammy reflected.

"She seems to have a very active life," I agreed. "I really want to *meet* her someday, you know, not just watch her from the background."

"Next time, I promise," Tammy said.

For her part, Brooke was very interested in hearing what life out in AlphaWolf's camp was like. She'd read accounts, but it wasn't the same as talking to someone who'd been there. "You never know—they might stick me out there someday, since I'm not your usual human-RIDE pair. Best to know ahead of time what to expect."

After we'd talked for a while, she suggested a three-handed game of Nature Range. She—or rather, *he*, since he went stag for the game—proceeded to lead us on a merry chase through the forest, nearly losing us several times. And he was a good sport about it when we finally did bring him down.

"I'm surprised," I admitted afterward. "Most humans who do play Nature Range really don't like playing prey."

Bernie shrugged. "It makes me feel closer to being a RIDE somehow. Kind like how RIDEs do it to feel closer to real. And I guess 'dying' so many times makes me appreciate being alive more." He shook his head, antlers making a "whoosh" sound in the air. "Anyway...I hope your research turns out well."

I nodded. "Yeah. You ought to get to be a RIDE if you want to."

He actually looked a little embarrassed. "I was thinking more that *you* ought to get to be human again. I don't mean to come off like it's all about me, me, me. My friends tell me I do that a lot."

"That's okay," I said. "We all want what we want. If things work out, we'll both be happy."

He nodded. "I know a few people who might be able to help. I'll pass the word along."

"Sure thing," I said. "The more the merrier. We're not exactly going anywhere."

As Bernie and Fenwick waved and left, I grinned at Tammy, more cheerful than I'd been for days. "Nice guy-slash-gal, don'cha think?"

"He was certainly tasty enough," Tammy said happily, licking her muzzle. "I heard about him down the grapevine while we were out at camp but hadn't had the chance to meet him yet. Amazing what they can do with DE shells these days, innit?"

"I hope they can do something just as amazing with ex-human beings who have cyber-implants all through their heads," I said.

Tammy nodded agreement. "Amen to that."

And so life went on at the hospital. More doctors, more experts, more consultations. We heard about the reactivation of Zane Brubeck's platform that turned into an impromptu summit meeting on the subject of Fritz and what to do about him. And one day, Tammy brought news of a new add-on hardware module she'd been fitted with.

"It's called DINsec," she explained, beaming me the schematics. "It's supposed to protect anything it's hooked up to against Integrate hacking. I gather it's been pretty extensively tested and found to work really well, so they're rolling it out to all Marshal RIDEs now."

"Oooh." I regarded the design thoughtfully. There were a few bits I didn't entirely follow, but it looked like they could be black-box fabbed without me needing to know what they did. And furthermore, it looked like the design was space-efficient and distributable enough that it could easily be assembled by nanites in my head, to add to the rest of my implants.

"Given that I'm thinking with my 'puter parts, I'm really gonna need this if I don't want the first Intie I come across to make me a puppet to his strings," I said, frowning. "But there's no way in hell that Dr. Branch is going to let me do this. He thinks everything I've already got was a bad move, never mind they're all that's keeping me thinking right now."

"I've already emailed Marshal Masterson asking him to authorize it for you," Tammy said. "If he signs off on it, there won't be anything Branch can do but file a protest."

"Then I guess I'll go ahead and come up with the nanobot program and we'll see how long it takes before we can do something with it," I said, pulling up the design software from my implant and sketching out the broad strokes.

But I had to put it aside a few minutes later when there was a knock at the door. It was afternoon visitation hours, so I just sort of sighed and closed down the windows. "Yeah, come on in!" I called out, maybe a little grumpily.

And then *he* walked in.

He was nothing prepossessing to look at: a middle-aged man, his brown hair tinged with grey—not to look distinguished like Dr. Branch, but because he'd never bothered to drop by a nano-clinic to have it taken care of. A little overweight, kind of a pot belly, wearing comfortable slacks and sweater. He looked vaguely familiar.

The man shut the door behind him and glanced over at Tammy and me. "Ah, hello," he said. "You must be Jeanette Leroq." He nodded to Tammy's hardlight avatar. "And Tammy."

“Uh...yeah,” I admitted, trying to get my head back together after being interrupted in the middle of my work. Just because I was annoyed wasn’t any reason to take it out on this man. As I said, most of the experts they sent to consult were actually pretty nice people.

“Pleased to meet you.” He offered his hand, paused for a moment realizing he was offering to shake hands with a cat, but didn’t take it back. So I reached out and shook it bemusedly. “I’m Dr. Roderick Clemens,” he added, after we let go.

That was when it fell into place, and my jaw dropped in a most un-feline expression. “Dr. Roderick Clemens. The inventor of the qubitite processor.” In my implants, I pulled up a photo of him from back in the day—a lot slimmer, wearing pressed white shirt and black tie, and a lot less stubble, but there was no doubting it was the same man.

To say I was stunned would be an understatement—it was more like I’d just been hit over the head with a two-by-four. To use an example from the twenty-first century pop culture we’re all afflicted with here on Zharus, it’s as if an iPad software developer had Steve Wozniak show up at his door one day. *Everything* about my implants traced their ancestry back to this man.

“Er...yes, that is correct,” Dr. Clemens said. “I see my reputation precedes me.”

“You...could say that,” I said. “You’re one of my heroes. One of the heroes of the whole nanite implant modding community.”

He blinked. “Well...this is a singular experience,” Dr. Clemens said. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I’ve only just now learned your community even exists.” He smiled ruefully. “I have been...out of the loop for some time.”

At the moment, I felt an incredible sense of ambivalence. Elation to meet one of my all-time heroes, of course. But at the same time, the knowledge that I couldn’t tell anyone *else* I’d just met him, because they’d either think I was nuts or else ask awkward questions. “Uh...that’s okay, really.” I nodded to one of the human-form chairs the room had been stocked with. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you.” He sat down. “I have been reviewing the details of your case, and am frankly stunned. If I hadn’t known for a fact the sources were beyond reproach, I would have suspected I were being hoaxed.”

“How’d you find out about us, Doc?” Tammy asked.

“A young Marshal I know,” Clemens said. “He desperately wants to be scanned into a Reticulated Intelligence himself. He actually tracked me down a few months ago to ask for my help.” He shrugged. “I told him at the time there was nothing we could do for him, that what he was asking was impossible.”

“And then I came along,” I said.

Clemens nodded. “Indeed. He mailed me about your case a few days ago.” He flashed a wry grin. “More than a little *smugly*, as it happens.”

“Wow,” I said. “Thanks, Bernie.” *:Next time I see him, I’m just gonna lick him all over,:* I sent privately to Tammy, and received a grin emoticon in return.

“So I looked into the matter. Imagine my surprise when I found Nextus Nano was already involved in studying you! Apparently it wasn’t deemed important enough to bother the Vice President in charge of qubitite research over.”

Tammy grinned. “Oops. The scourge of bureaucracy strikes again.”

“Of course, it became understandable when I learned my old ‘friend’ Dr. Walter Branch was your physician,” Clemens said grimly. “I don’t like speaking ill of anyone,

but he and I haven't gotten along terribly well over the years."

"Oh, really?" I asked. "Why's that?" I was starting to like Clemens better already.

He shrugged. "I suppose it's only to be expected, given that we both worked on different parts of the same project and had differing opinions as to our relative importance. Doesn't help matters that he was the most junior member of Dr. Rosenthal's team—barely a footnote on most historical accounts."

"Feelings of inadequacy much, ya think?" Tammy asked. "No wonder he's so gung-ho about this project. Could be a way to get his name into the history books for real."

Clemens nodded. "Could be. But regardless, getting back to my discovery of you, the good news was that this meant there was already a case file for me to study. Do you know that your implants' neural network map is very similar to that of an average RI core? Really quite remarkable."

"I think you'll find there are a lot of 'quite remarkable' things about my partner, Doc," Tammy said smugly.

"I don't doubt it." Clemens chuckled.

"So where do you want to begin?" I asked, climbing out of the cat bed and padding over to sit on my haunches across from him.

He regarded me thoughtfully. "Could you tell me how you came to have your implants, and why you chose that configuration? I'm sure you've told this story over and over again until you're sick of it, but I'd like to hear it straight from the lion's mouth."

"Of course," I said. "It started out when I'd really started exploring the network for the first time, after learning some basic programming skills. I wanted a way to access the 'net that the Home would have a harder time blocking, and then I found the nano-modding community. They had a *lot* of helpful advice..."

I went over how I'd learned the ins and outs of hacking medical replicators, then one day snuck out of the orphanage and took a bus across town to a small medical clinic where security was lax enough I could slip in, make my hack, and slip out without too much trouble.

"From then on, I was kinda addicted," I confessed. "The more 'plants I got, the easier it became to hack out more of them. Mainly focused on upping my storage and comp power, and adding some stuff like longer range comms."

Dr. Clemens nodded. "But what I don't understand is, how can you stand to take such risks with your brains?"

I rolled my eyes. "You and Dr. Branch both. It's really a lot less risky than it looks." I gave him basically the same speech I'd given Branch earlier, about it just being new uses of old technology, and some possibly-doctors involved in vetting out the most dangerous stuff.

"There are a few cases every year where someone screws up. Usually by getting careless. But a lot more people choke to death on their dinner every year, so basically it's less dangerous than eating."

"I would point out considerably more people eat than inject nano-implants into themselves, so I might quibble with your math a little," Dr. Clemens said, smiling slightly. "But point taken. What did your 'pro medicos' have to say about *your* implants?"

"They passed all of them, individually," I said. "They were a bit off from the usual, but only in terms of placement. They had all the same parts, just spread out. I figured if

I could spread them out they might not be as easy for med sensors to notice.”

“But I expect they never looked at the results of all of them put together,” Dr. Clemens said.

“That would be an affirmative,” I admitted. “I guess the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts.”

“I’m certainly not complaining,” Dr. Clemens said. “After all, if it weren’t for your implants, you would be in much the same state as poor Robin next door. But it does make it important to determine exactly what is going on inside your head. If we can duplicate it...well, aside from satisfying Marshal Thompson’s desire, it could be helpful to any number of medical cases.” He frowned. “Of course, I realize that doesn’t address the problem of how to turn your body and brain human again. But...”

“Hey, that’s all right,” I said. “Understanding my implants better might come in handy if there’s problems when and if it comes time to put me back in my meat head. So where do we start?”

“This room is equipped with excellent medical sensors,” Dr. Clemens said, getting up. “Let’s take some readings.”

“Works for me!” I padded over to the diagnostic table, and we got started.

So I lay on the diagnostic table and watched Dr. Clemens set it up. Though his wasn’t a medical doctorate, he clearly knew his way around medical equipment—he’d crosstrained a bunch for working with the original Nextus RIDE project. Hardlight displays blossomed in the air around him, showing the results of all the physiological and neural scans he was doing. I easily reached out and tapped the feed with my implants.

“You’re far from the first full-body transformation I’ve seen, you know,” Dr. Clemens said idly as he worked. “Even before Amontillado. It was remarkably difficult to tune the first Fuser nanites to transform the original pilots *just enough* without...well, Lt. Hewer, Kaylee’s first assigned pilot, ended up almost as much a lynx as you are a lioness. Fortunately Kaylee was able to de-Fuse before they could change her brain.” He shook his head. “Of course, *now* we know that was due to Fritz messing with the nanites, but back then...”

“Um...is it true that one of Fritz’s pilots ended up in a zoo?” I asked.

Dr. Clemens just looked at me. “Where on Zharus did you hear that?” Tammy whistled innocently—a remarkable feat for someone with lioness lips.

“Does that mean it’s not true?” I pressed.

Dr. Clemens pursed his lips. “I think it’s best I not comment. *Some* of the information about that program is still classified, after all.”

“Ah,” I said. “So, have you got all the readings you need?”

“I think so,” Dr. Clemens said. “You can jump down now.”

I did so, and then padded up and rubbed my cheeks against Dr. Clemens’s legs, purring. I couldn’t say exactly why, but it was important to me that any other cats he happened to encounter over the next day or so should know he was *my* territory, thanks to the scent glands in my muzzle.

Dr. Clemens looked down at me and chuckled. “The most remarkable thing to me is how much you’re acting like a real cat just now. Lieutenant Hewer was completely uncoordinated in a four-legged body—she still had the mind of a human.”

“That must have been hard for her,” Tammy said.

“It was, which was why she got changed back as quickly as we could,” Dr. Clemens said. “I’m honestly rather surprised the incident was not mentioned in the briefing documents provided to the experts, given that Dr. Branch was involved in fixing it. Regardless, I’ll be authorizing a release of all records relating to that incident to the hospital as soon as I can push a Freedom of Information Act request through. It was fairly easy to change her body back, since her brain was untouched. The brain is the real sticking point.”

“As for my own animal instincts...well, they come from Tammy,” I said. “When I was acting as her Second Boot mother, I copied them over from her personality matrix—just like I copied her sensory template over so I could run her body while she was in passive. And then I spent...well, several years in time-compressed VR ‘raising’ her.”

Dr. Clemens’s eyes widened. “Really? You copied information directly out of *her* RI into you?”

I blinked up at him. “Yeah...what’s so odd about that? From what I read, RIDEs and their humans share memories all the time.”

“*Memories*, yes. Sometimes even skills,” Dr. Clemens said. “But instincts? That type of data encoded for use by RI consciousnesses isn’t even *compatible* with human minds. And you actually *fully* operated her body while she was in passive mode? And were able to time-compress ‘years’ since it happened and not still be in the process of doing it now?” He shook his head. “Between that, and the CPU activity I monitored just now from your implants...it’s safe to say that you effectively *are* a RI. Any dissimilarities between you and a consciousness running on a RI core are so minuscule as to make no effective difference.”

I blinked. “But...I thought RIs could only be run in RI cores, those little things about the size of a walnut that they stick in RIDEs’ heads.”

“RI cores are the smallest construct we could make that had room to hold a complete neural net,” Dr. Clemens said. “We sort of...wadded it up, twisted it around and nested it within itself for the most efficient use of space. But if you exploded a RI core out into more space, it would look essentially like...well, like your implants. A neural network similar to a human’s, albeit not identical.”

“So what does that mean exactly?” I asked. “I should start calling myself a ‘RIG’ for ‘Reticulated Intelligence/Girl’ maybe?”

“What about ‘RIOS’?” Tammy suggested. “Reticulated Intelligence/Organic Shell. Or ‘RIFE’: Reticulated Intelligence/Flesh Entity.”

I snorted. “Now you’re just being silly.”

“Among other things, it would mean that, theoretically, we would be able to transfer your consciousness into a *real* RI core, using the same procedure we use for relocating existing RIs from damaged cores into new ones,” Dr. Clemens said slowly, like even *he* couldn’t believe what he was saying. “We could take you out of your flesh body entirely and put you into a DE shell: the first ever human RIDE.”

I didn’t blink now, I outright *stared* up at him. “But...what would that mean for my meat body? Would I be dead?”

He shook his head. “Theoretically, your autonomic systems would keep your body going, as if you were in a coma. If we had to, we could put your body in cryo-stasis and copy you back into the implants later just as easily.” He chuckled. “I realize it’s exactly the opposite of what you want...but everything I can tell from these readings suggests it absolutely *is* an option.”

“Wow.” I thought about that. To not have a meat body to be concerned over at all? To join myself to *someone else’s* meat body in a reversal of the partnership I’d had with Tammy? It was both scary and yet somehow enticing. For a moment I imagined what might happen if I were implanted into a RIDE and then somehow ended up lost in the desert, salvaged, and sold at auction to some human looking for a cheap companion. Or even if I ended up in the Marshals, assigned as standard equipment to some cadet. “Um...I think I’d like to keep that option in reserve,” I said.

“I’m not surprised,” Dr. Clemens observed. “As much as I would be excited to do it just to see if it *could* be done, your own concerns take precedence, of course.” Though my implants’ voice stress analysis showed that he *was* at least a little bit disappointed...

“On a related note,” I said, thinking. “I was just in the process of designing my *next* implant when you showed up. Would you like to watch?”

Dr. Clemens considered me thoughtfully. “I would, in fact. You can share your desktop with me?”

“Of course.” I hopped back into the cat bed and settled down, then pulled up the session I’d suspended when he’d arrived. A duplicate of my windows appeared in hardlight at the medical scanner control console.

“That’s interesting,” Dr. Clemens said. “This appears to be an evolution of the program we used to redesign the original Fuser nanos. I recognize the user interface.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” I said. “There are a lot of people in the community, and no telling where they all come from. I could see one of ‘em having access to this software from the original project and sharing the source with everyone else.” I turned my attention back to the design process and began organizing the instructions for the medical nanos.

I didn’t tell Dr. Clemens what I was doing exactly, but he hadn’t gotten his doctorate for his looks. “You’re implementing DINsec,” he realized after a moment.

“Yeah,” I said. “Sort of figure I need to. Otherwise some Intie could hack *me* just as easily as any RIDE. And it’d be helpful for anyone else who has implants in his head, too, even ones not as smart as mine.”

He studied the readouts for a while. “You know...it occurs to me that if you expanded this section *here*, you might be able to increase your efficiency in packing the DINsec core in *here*...” He pointed to the relevant places on his displays, and I was easily able to transpose that to where they would be on mine.

“Huh. You’re right.” I grinned, showing all my kitty teeth, as I made the suggested changes. “Are you sure you’ve never done this before?”

He smiled back at me. “Some things just make intuitive sense, I suppose. But the question remains: what are you going to do with this design after you complete it?”

“Well, run it by our docs for one thing,” I said. “And release it to the modder community at large so everyone else who needs it can have it. But then...? Good question. I’ll admit that Dr. Branch would be about as likely to approve it on his own as I would be to sprout wings and fly out the window. We’ve put in a request to the Marshals for approval, but I’m not sure *they’ll* go for it either.” I shrugged. “If I have to, I guess I can archive the design until sometime I *can* fab it on my own. I don’t s’pose I’m so likely to meet an Intie here in the hospital anyway.”

He nodded, and then we lapsed into a companionable silence as I fiddled with the design and he watched. He pointed out a couple more places I could make tweaks, but apart from that didn’t bombard me with conversation while I was working. I

appreciate that. Of course, as a techno-geek of long standing himself, he'd probably had plenty of time to learn how annoying it was when someone pestered you at your work.

At last, as I was putting the finishing touches on the design, I said, "If I could ask, there's something I've been wondering for a while."

"What's that?" Dr. Clemens asked.

"Where have you *been* all these years? You haven't filed any new patents or papers since the end of the Nextus-Sturmhaven War."

"Ah," Dr. Clemens said. "There's a reason for that, and his name is Fritz."

"Oh," I said. "Given what I've heard about him lately, that doesn't surprise me."

"You haven't heard the *half* of it," Dr. Clemens said with feeling. "Though I expect you will soon, given that it all came out at the summit the other day. Suffice it to say that his birth was not especially pleasant for him or us, and he was *very* good at holding grudges. Especially against me. On the whole I thought it best not to be too visible for a while."

"For thirty years?" I asked.

He smiled wryly. "If I'd known at the outset how long that 'while' would turn out to be, I might have thought twice...or then again, perhaps not. It surprised all of us when Fritz became so powerful. All the time we knew him, he acted more like a small-time crook. We never thought he had it in him to become a Great Dictator." He shrugged. "Live and learn, I guess."

He got up. "At any rate, I think we've probably done enough for one day. Thank you so much for giving me the chance to examine you and learn from what you've done."

"Thank *you* for coming," I said. "Drop by any time. Oh, and if any patents come out of this, I want a cut." I winked, since a toothy grin might be taken the wrong way.

He chuckled. "Now *that*, I can promise. I'll be seeing you." He nodded farewell, and let himself out of the hospital room.

"So how about that?" Tammy said after the door closed. "My little kitten's a real live RI on the inside."

"I guess I really shouldn't be surprised," I said thoughtfully. "After the way I operated your shell and all."

"And the way you raised me in VR after that," Tammy pointed out. "So, what're you thinking? Gonna try going all the way and seeing how the other half lives?"

I snorted. "I'm kind of having trouble even imagining it right now. Putting some strange person inside of me? I mean, that still seems a little bit eww."

"Hmph. Remember who you're talking to," Tammy said. "We're both only *here* because 'some strange person' *forced* her way inside of me."

I winced a little. "When you put it that way, it sounds a little bit...well, *creepy*." I sighed. "Sorry. I really *did* take advantage of you, a couple of times over. I didn't think of you as anything more than a way to escape the orphanage for good, there at the start. Not as a *person*."

She padded over and nuzzled me. "Hey, it's okay, girlie. I never held it against you—you *were* useful to have around, and you made up for it at least a dozen times over since then. I'm glad we are where we are now—'cepting for your whole kitty-body-and-brain thing, of course."

I purred and gave her a return nuzzle. "Thanks."

"And getting back to the subject at hand, you could do like Bernie and get a Laurasian DE," Tammy continued. "They could even make you a custom job that looks

completely human. Bernie has a couple of bodies like that.”

“Like I told Dr. Clemens, I’m going to keep that option in reserve,” I said. “I want to make sure my *real* body’s worth coming back to before I start thinking about getting spares.”

CHAPTER 11

We weren't really surprised when we got back a no-go from the Marshals on the DINsec upgrade the next day. Masterson made it clear *he* didn't think there was anything overly risky about it, and I probably would need it after we finished the study time in the hospital given the nature of my "special needs"—but Dr. Branch felt like it would interfere with the study process too much to allow it right now. Ha, right, like that was his *real* reason.

We tried to pitch it to Branch as a chance to watch an implant in the process of building itself, but we knew it would be a waste of time before we even started. Branch was all, "It would be gravely irresponsible for me to allow you to further endanger yourself with untested modifications to your body in light of what has happened to it already."

"But they're exactly the kind of modifications we're here for you to study in the first place!" I insisted. But he wouldn't go for it. His mind was made up.

When Dr. Clemens heard about it, he stormed into Dr. Branch's office and they had such a row that it ended up needing requests from both of us to Masterson to keep Branch from banning Clemens from seeing us again at all. Clemens felt that seeing how the implants grew and bonded to the neurons could be an important key to understanding how they worked, and was very frustrated that Dr. Branch wasn't going to give him the chance.

At that point, Tammy and I had our first serious discussion as to the benefits of blowing that popsicle stand, but I let her persuade me to stick with it a little while longer. Even if Branch was a jerk, this was where all the other experts knew where to come find us, and it was at least remotely possible *they* were making progress.

So that was how a few more weeks passed. In the news, tensions ratcheted up as the days without a Fritz incident grew and grew. The marshals were on alert, and Tammy spent some of her time over at the Marshals training base helping put a final polish on the latest batch of cadets, even as she was still telecommuting to my hospital room via hardlight. I didn't begrudge her the chance to feel useful. A lot of my online buddies were also worried, especially the ones willing to admit to living in Uplift and a few others who I was pretty sure also lived there even though they hadn't said.

The monotony was leavened by a few welcome visits from Bernie/Brooke and Dr. Clemens. Bernie was a hoot—we played more VR games and he told more funny stories from his and his friends' training and Tin/early Copper days. Dr. Clemens did some more detailed scanning and neural mapping of my implants in the hope of being able to

puzzle out how they worked, and perhaps duplicate them in simulations. He admitted that it could be years before he came up with anything solid, but it would never happen at all if he didn't try.

Then one day, as Tammy and I hung around half in our hospital room and half in a VR overlay of our clearing, a large hyena trotted in. I stopped and stared—we didn't have hyenas in our VR for the most part, as Tammy wasn't partial to them. But then I realized that not only was this hyena there in the VR, it was there in the real world, too. "Bwah?" I said.

Then Tammy looked up and saw the hyena, and narrowed her eyes. "Scuse me. I think I need to get some air." She winked out of both the VR and the hospital telepresence, leaving me alone in both places with the hyena. I dropped out of the VR myself, to narrow my concentration to just one realm.

The hyena regarded me thoughtfully, scratching behind one ear. Then she spoke. "Hello, kitty!"

I snorted. "Hi, 'yena," I replied.

"Oh, very good!" she said happily, standing on her hind paws. Her body shrank and reordered itself into an anthropomorphic hyena with human breasts, which she covered with a hardlight leotard matching her fur.

Then I realized who she had to be: the whole reason Tammy disliked hyenas in the first place. "DeniFaye?"

"In the flesh-and-metal," she replied. "And you're Jeanette Leroq. Pleasetameetcha. Sorry I couldn't be here sooner—I was in the field, and only just found out about you and Tams when I got back. Wow, that's some rough stuff you went through." She shook her head. "Sorry to hear 'bout the hard times."

"Thanks. But compared to what Tammy said about you, I think I got off light," I said. "She's still...not really over it."

DeniFaye sighed. "I know." She dropped onto the seat across from my bed, arranging her tail as she sat. "I'm still not entirely over it myself. How much do you know about Integrates?"

"I've had the basic Marshals orientation," I said.

She nodded. "Good enough. Well...when Denise and Faye were force-Integrated, I ended up being...mostly Faye. Denise is in here, too—I have all her memories, and her personality's a part of the gestalt. She shows herself in the occasional wisecrack, and I still like wearing stylish leather jackets and toting stylish guns from time to time. Though the afro is right out. Looks ridiculous on a hyena."

"I can't imagine it would look all that great on a lioness, either," I said.

"Tams...made it work somehow, the few times I could talk her into trying it." DeniFaye shook her head. "But point is, the non-stop wisecracking Shaftette just isn't *me* anymore, and Tams can't deal with that. She looks at all the other Inties who are more balanced, or mostly the human half, or separate-but-equals, and blames me for not being like them." She sighed again. "I still care for her, and miss her, very much. But I just can't be the person she wants me to be anymore."

"That's pretty sad," I said.

"Pfft, tell me about it," DeniFaye said. "Three lives screwed up all because some idiot Snatcher had himself a bad day and wanted someone to take it out on. I *told* him I was a Marshal. They usually left Marshals alone since we usually left them alone. But noooo, he wanted someone he could kick in the nuts—figuratively, anyway—'cuz his own

were aching. I didn't want to be a part of some strange RIDE, I had Tams and was going to be with her *forever*. And *I*—that is, Faye—hadn't even gotten to Fuse with a human. I was looking forward to finding out what it would be like, what I could do...*I hadn't even tried out my skimmer form yet!*" She sighed. "See? Like I said, still not over it. But life's an exercise in learning to deal with disappointments. We adapt, we adjust, we move on." She muttered, "Unless you're Tams."

"She was...pretty lonely," I said.

"Yeah, she wouldn't *let* herself take another partner. Think that's why she finally went off to Alfie's camp, so she wouldn't *have* to. Which reminds me." She looked thoughtfully at me. I felt a tickle in my head. "Gods above, you really *are* a RI in there. That's amazing."

"Um...hey," I said, suddenly wishing I'd gone ahead and fabbed DINsec no matter *what* Masterson and Grant said.

"Oh...sorry." She looked down at her feet and the tickle stopped. "Sometimes I still don't know how to behave in polite company." She looked back up at me. "Um... may I read your memories? I *really* want to know how you and Tams are getting on... how you got together...I promise I won't pass on what I find out."

I thought about that. Honestly, I couldn't stop her from waltzing in and taking it if she wanted. Hell, maybe she already had and was just being polite to save face. I guessed if I couldn't trust Tammy's ex-partner, who could I trust? "All right—but I want at least some of *your* memories of what she was like when you partnered her, 'kay?"

She clapped her handpaws delightedly. "It's a deal!" She considered. "It'd be most efficient if I...yeah, I can do it that way. Hold on."

She reached out a hand to me, palm up—and for a few seconds, she was suddenly the *most important thing in my universe*. My mistress...my *goddess*...my total owner. I felt her paging through memory files inside my head, and happily offered up everything I had to her. She cybernetically patted me on the head and placed something of her own in an empty storage sector of my memory, then withdrew.

Then she was just a hyena Integrate again, no more or less important than that. I stared at her. "What the...what on Zharus did you just do?"

"Took root for a moment. Was easier to copy the files around that way." She noticed how I was looking at her. "Erm...sorry?"

I shook my head. "That was just...crazy. Is that what it feels like when *I* hack someone?" I was starting to suspect I might just owe Tammy more apologies than I'd thought.

"It's kind of a matter of degree," DeniFaye said. "We Inties are...kind of overwhelming sometimes. Sorry about that." She closed her eyes for a moment—absorbing the memories she'd taken from me, I guess.

I privately suspected she wasn't really *that* sorry at all, but whatever. It *had* been an amazing feeling, and I was even now halfway tempted to beg her to do it again. I firmly clamped down on the impulse and thought dark thoughts about Dr. Branch and the stick he had up his ass about upgrading my implants. I'd just had an object lesson in how necessary it was. If I wasn't going to be pwned by every Intie I came across, I needed it and soon.

DeniFaye opened her eyes again, grinning, her tongue lolling out. "Oh, that was *delightful!* You're a perfect fit for Tams...maybe even more than *I* ever was. You two deserve each other *so much!*" She clapped her handpaws together again. "I think she's

finally starting to heal now. Maybe someday soon...we can be friends again.”

“I hope so,” I said. “She needs all the friends she can get.” I peeped at the file DeniFaye had left me. It started from the perspective of a teenaged girl in a Nextus military cadet’s uniform meeting a lioness RIDE fresh from the factory. They were on a parade ground where dozens of other first encounters were happening at the same time under the watchful eye of drill instructors in bear RIDEs wearing hardlight campaign hats. I put it aside for later perusal when I didn’t have company.

As if she’d read my mind (oh, wait, she *had* read my mind), DeniFaye stood from the seat. “I should be going. Sooner or later someone will come to see why the camera feed from this room is glitching.”

“Oh,” I said. “But you just got here. I’d kind of hoped to talk with you some more.”

“I’ll catch up with you again sometime when you’re out of the hospital,” the hyena Integrate said. “I wouldn’t wait too long about that, by the way. I don’t think you’re going to find the answers you’re looking for just sitting around in here. Give Tams my love.” She stepped into empty air. A moment later, the hospital room door opened and closed on nothing.

Not long after DeniFaye left, Tammy rezzed back up via the hardlight uplink. “So, now you’ve met the Usurper,” she said.

“That’s not really fair,” I replied. “She really is a nice person. It’s not her fault—not *either* of their faults—what happened to them.”

Tammy sighed. “I know. That’s part of why I don’t like being around her. It makes *me* feel like a bad person for hating what she became. It wouldn’t be so bad if she was like a total stranger. It’s just that there’s this *little bit* of the old Denise that pushes it right into the uncanny valley for me.” She shuddered. “And then there’s the whole power corrupts thing. The times I *did* try to work with her, if she saw something needed to be done she’d just...do it. Including if it was inside of *me*. Though come to think of it, with DINsec that’s not going to be a concern anymore...so maybe I’ll give her another go sometime.”

I thought about how casually DeniFaye had hacked me just to copy some files over—and what she *could* have done if she’d wanted. “I can sort of see that, I guess.” Then I remembered something else. “Is it true she—Denise, I mean—got you to wear an afro?”

Tammy facepawed. “Don’t tell me she told you about *that*.”

“She just sort of mentioned it in passing. So anyway, there *are* photos, right?” I grinned.

“No. No, there are no photos, ever, *anywhere*. They do *not* exist.” Tammy insisted.

“You know, I *do* have root privs over you,” I pointed out. “It wouldn’t be hard to run a search...”

“You wouldn’t,” Tammy said.

“Yeah...you’re right, I actually wouldn’t,” I admitted. “It would be kind of a violation and all. But I can still *pretend* I would as a conversational gambit!”

“Hmph. Oh, well, all right, since you *insist*.” Tammy beamed over an image of herself in Fuser form, wearing a brown leather jacket, toting a RIDE-sized magnum revolver, and adorned with a large round black globe of hair.

I had to giggle. “Wow, trippy!”

Tammy rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. What can I say, it was a different time.”

“She was right, though,” I said, on reflection. “Apart from the overall silliness of it, you really *did* pull it off. Really stylin’ there, in a ‘70s catsploitation kind of way.”

“She said that? That I pulled it off?” Tammy asked. “Huh.”

I saved the picture for later perusal, along with the memory file DeniFaye had sent over. “But for now...I frowned. “She said something else as she was leaving. Something I’ve been thinking a lot, too—that I’m not going to find any answers just sitting here in this hospital room.”

“Aw, not this again,” Tammy said. “I thought we went over this already.”

“We did. But it’s been a while; maybe it’s time to do it again,” I said. “We’ve been here two months now, and seen a passel of ‘experts.’ Apart from Dr. Clemens, how much has any of them really told us?”

“They may not necessarily *know* anything yet,” Tammy pointed out.

“Maybe—or maybe it’s just that I’m a kid and you’re equipment,” I said. “Care to make a little bet which one’s the truth?”

Tammy’s eyes narrowed. “What’re you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that if I’m gonna be an RI, it’s time I started acting like one. Between the hacking stuff I’ve already got and the Quant software you have, we should be able to bust this hospital’s network wide open and get at the truth. What’cha say?”

“Hmm.” Tammy gave her hardlight pelt a few licks as she thought about the question. “I gotta say, playing Fritz’s advocate aside I *have* been starting to wonder a little myself. Maybe it’s time we did check it out.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.” I grinned. “I’ll lead and you back me up.” I opened and encrypted comm channel and we dropped into VR to set up the hack.

I had to grin when I found what awaited me there—a perfect virtual recreation of Matthew Broderick’s bedroom from the twencen movie *WarGames*, complete with IMSAI 8080 computer and 17” Electrohome monitor. “Would. You. Like. To. Play. A. Game?” Joshua’s voice asked from the speech synthesizer.

I smirked. “You *really* know how to make a girl feel at home. Though this is a little retro even for Zharus.”

“Hey, don’t knock it. This is one of the last times Hollyweird got *anything* right in a hacking movie,” Tammy pointed out.

“Good point,” I conceded. I reached out and socketed the phone into the rubber caps of the acoustic modem. The touch-tones sounded. “Okay, let’s get started.”

I was really astonished at just how much simpler hacking was when I was thinking through my implants without the meat mind to slow me down. I could slow time down as much as I needed to have plenty of time to make decisions before prompts timed out. I could adjust my decryption approaches much faster than in real time. I could pack hours of password and social engineering research into a few seconds. About the only way it could have been easier would have been if I’d been Integrated and could hack just by waving my hand in the general direction of the computer.

I chuckled at that last thought. Thanks to DINsec, a *lot* of Intie script kiddies (“Int kiddies”?) would be in for a very rude awakening pretty soon. Just think of it, actually having to *do* something to hack a computer. Half of them might just pack up and go home right then and there. Did my heart good just thinking about it.

Anyway, before I knew it we had access to the hospital records Data scrolled up

on the Electrohome monitor, one monochrome line at a time. I finally went ahead and broke paradigm by opening a flurry of hardlight display panels so I could better see just what I was getting.

And I as I quickly discovered, what I was getting was proof I'd been had. There were reams of test results, scan images, diagnoses, prognoses, hypotheses, and other information I'd never seen or had mentioned to me in any way. I copied these to storage, for sharing with Dr. Clemens or anyone else I might end up having work on my case.

The real kicker came in the form of not one but *several* proposed courses of treatment that could, theoretically, restore me to my old human self, including a full-sized, right-shaped meat brain. "They didn't even *mention* these," I fumed. "*Why* didn't they mention these?"

"Look." Tammy pulled up some notations by Dr. Branch on the proposals. The substance of all of them was about the same: too untested, too risky to try on the patient. Shelved pending further research.

"That shouldn't be his decision!" I exploded. "*I'm* the patient here!"

"Holy crap, look at *this!*" Tammy pulled up another record, this one a set of legal documents.

"Request for custody transfer? Bwa?" I flipped through the set of pages. Dr. Branch had filed requests asking that my legal custody be transferred to *him*, on the grounds that this would make it easier for him to be sure I was receiving the appropriate level of care—especially considering my great importance to being able to reverse the changes brought on by Amontillado, and medical science in general.

"They'd never go for it," Tammy said. "The Marshals, anyway. You're a Provisional Tin, and minors with Marshal badges get the Marshals as their official legal guardian."

"And here's a motion to get my star revoked on account of the Home never signing off on it," I said, flipping to the next document.

"Like hell," Tammy growled. "The Diamond gals *live* for this kind of fight. I dotted every 't' and crossed every 'i'. No way is anyone revoking any badge *I* issued."

"And what on Zharus is *this?*" I looked at the next document. "A petition *from* the Children's Home that Dr. Branch be added as an accredited representative? Why would they do that? Why would they *want* that?"

"Maybe a couple of Marshals should investigate the matter," Tammy suggested. "What'cha think? Feel like making another visit to the scene of the crime?"

I shuddered. "I *really* don't want to have to go back there again, even for just a little bit. But...now I'm curious. Really, *really* curious." I grinned toothily. "Either way, I think it's time we blew this popsicle stand," I said. "I'm not waiting around for Dr. Branch to convince a court that he's my new daddy."

Tammy nodded. "Works for me. I'll just pull out of the garage and head up front."

I filed away all the documents we'd found and lifted the receiver to log out of the network, leaving it exactly as we'd found it. With any luck, they'd never know we'd been into them 'til we were long gone. "Just one more thing to do, since we're leaving anyway." I dropped the phone back into the modem and dialed one more number.

"How. About. A. Nice. Game. Of. Chess?" Joshua asked.

"No thanks. I want to play Global...Thermonuclear...War," I said as I typed, uploading the code for my DINsec implant nano-upgrade into the medical fabber in my

room.

I dropped out of VR back into the real world as the nano-syringe thunked into the slot on the fabber. “Awesome.” I picked it up with the stubby fingers on my forepaw and managed to get it clipped to my collar. As I did so, my hand brushed against the Provisional Tin Star. “Oh,” I said. “Guess I better lose the badge and comm. They could track us that way.”

“Why wouldn’t we want them to track us?” Tammy asked. “I thought the plan was to cut out of the hospital, not to go fugitive again.”

“If they’re going to hand custody of me over to Dr. Branch, I don’t want to make things easy for them,” I said.

Tammy snorted. “And who said they were? I told you, the Diamond gals—our JAG and IA branch, remember?—are going to be fighting ‘em every inch of the way. And if we lose...well, we just station you somewhere other than Nextus ‘til you’re 18, that’s all. We *don’t* abandon our own.”

I growled thoughtfully. It was true, I didn’t especially like the idea of giving up that star, the one symbol of *real* authority I’d ever managed to earn in my life. “I dunno...if the Marshals would stick me with a jerk like Branch in the first place...”

Tammy rolled her eyes. “You really think they knew he was that big a jerk ahead of time? Honestly, the ones who matter probably still don’t even know anything’s wrong yet. In case you hadn’t noticed, there’s kind of a crisis going on right now, and not a lot of attention to spare for other things. Branch is a half-hollow stuffed shirt they brought in for his alleged medical expertise, and that’s all. He’s not part of the Service, and when Masterson finds out what he’s been up to I’ll bet he’s out on his ear.”

“Hmm. Well...all right. I guess I can always quit later if I have to.” Truth be told, I did feel kind of relieved at not having to take that step just yet, and not only because it would really have been hard to unclip the thing with my paw-fingers.

“Don’t worry,” Tammy said firmly. “I’ve already lost one partner. I’ll be *damned* if anyone takes another from me.”

I looked at her for a moment, unsure how to respond to that. Finally, I just purred. “Okay, meet me out front in five minutes,” I said. “I’ll be right down.”

“Got it.” She winked out, and I padded out of the room, heading for the elevators.

Then I stopped and went next door to check in on Robin one last time. The small stallion whickered happily to see me, and I padded over to give him a friendly nuzzle and lick. “Hey, boy,” I said. “Gonna be gone a while. I’ll try to stop back in when I can.” I chuckled. “If nothing else, they can’t lock me out of the telepresence projectors. See ya ‘round, pony boy.”

Nobody seemed to notice anything amiss as I headed to the elevator to meet Tammy downstairs, but that didn’t keep my tail from swishing nervously all the way to the elevator and down to the ground. Even freaking the mundanes wasn’t as entertaining as usual.

Of course, I *knew* it was just my imagination. None of the staffers here could possibly know I’d just hacked their ‘frame. As far as they knew I was just heading out for more walkies. I still kept imagining armed squads of security guards leaping out from side corridors with murder in their eyes. You know what they say about a guilty conscience.

At last I padded across the lobby, paws making no sound on the tile floor. I’d hoped to leave for good on *two* feet, not four, but right now it looked like that just

wasn't in the cards. Oh well. I was still leaving, at any rate. And I was sure I'd find a solution sooner or later.

Tammytruck was waiting outside in the loading zone, and I hopped right into the open cab. "So where to now?" Tammy asked.

I'd been thinking about it as I came down, and I'd come to the conclusion Tammy was right. Something weird was going on, and we needed to investigate. "Next stop: Nextus Children's Home," I told her.

"Sounds like a plan!" Tammy said cheerfully as we pulled out onto the street. "Those Fagins will never know what hit 'em."

CHAPTER 12

It was only a couple of clicks to the Home, so we cruised slowly up the street. There wasn't really any hurry. I couldn't say I was exactly eager to see the old homeplace again in any case, even if this time I was planning to bust some metaphorical heads. "So how we gonna play this?" I asked. "Don't we need a warrant or something?"

"If we're looking for evidence to use in court," Tammy said. "Do we care about that right now? As far as I know, this is pretty much an administrative matter for the Marshals right now, no real 'crime' committed that we know of. All the same, I have gone ahead and called in a request."

That sounded interesting. "Any response?"

"Hang on, coming in now. They're clearing it with the Nextus legal liaison. Word is...we can go ahead, but keep property damage to a minimum."

"So no busting down doors. Got it," I said.

"Still, no reason we can't *act* like we're gonna," Tammy said, flashing me a wicked toothy grin through VR. As we pulled onto the long driveway leading up to the Mission Revival style manor, she asked, "Ready to Fuse up?"

"Yeah! Let's do it!" I whooped. The skimmer truck folded up around me, pulling me down into Tammy's torso as she shifted from speeding skimmer to bounding lioness without losing a bit of speed. It was our first Fuse in weeks, and I reveled in the soothing warmth of the larger lioness around me. It felt like I was back where I belonged.

Just ahead of us loomed the immense barred gates in the three-meter fence around the estate, kept closed to ward against escapes or intruders. Tammy leaped right over it without even trying.

The grounds of the manor house spread out before us—about fifteen acres carved out of the heart of the polity suburb, all part of the original wealthy owner's land grant. Since the whole place was government land, it was more or less protected from expansion at the moment. There were a couple of small park and playground type places here and there, with a bunch of the younger kids out at play, and also some decorative stuff like statues and fountains that were left over from the first owner.

The manor itself was made up of a central building at the north, then east and west wings enclosing a courtyard with a central fountain, like an upside-down "U". "So where we heading?" Tammy asked. "I'm not exactly gonna fit inside, ya know."

I placed a carat mark over the central building's second-floor balcony above the courtyard. "That's where the superintendent's office is. Get me up there and I'll go in and do the rest."

“Got it.” We dodged around the fountain, then Tammy reared back and rested her forepaws on the stone balustrade lining the balcony. She supported her weight mostly on her hind legs and lifters to keep from damaging the masonry. Then she opened her jaws and pushed me out, head first. I cackled a little at the recursive lioness imagery. It must have looked like something out of a feline H.R. Giger. Not *Alien*, but “A-lion”.

I hit the balcony on all four paws and padded forward to the office doors. They were usually kept unbolted, since the stairs up to the balcony had locked gates on them. The doors opened outward, so I had to reach up and turn the handle and pull with my paw-hand. It took a couple tries to get it right. Then I swung it out and triumphantly padded inside. I’d been *waiting* for this moment.

In the office within, behind a big polished oak desk sat one Adirana Harding, Superintendent of the Nextus Children’s Home for as long as I could remember being here. A rather severe woman, brown hair pulled back in a bun and wearing half-moon spectacles, I’d always thought that all she lacked was a wimple to be ready to smack Jake and Elwood around. But it would take more than a “mission from God” to make this place worth living in.

Harding looked up as I entered. Her eyes widened at seeing a lioness in her office, then saw the collar and I guess put two and two together. “Miss Leroq!” she barked. “What is the meaning of this?!”

I tilted my head so she could clearly see the badge on the collar. “That’s *Provisional Tin Star Marshal* Leroq, Miss Harding. Here under the authority of my partner and instructor, Silver Star Marshal Tamarind.” I nodded out the door, where Tammy’s immense head still peeped over the railing of the balcony. She was also listening in over my collar’s comm. “We have a few questions we’d like to ask you.”

She scowled at me. “I don’t know what you think you’re playing at, but you *will* leave right away or I will call the Polizia!”

“Um, hello? We *are* the police.” I pointed at the badge with one paw-hand. “If you want someone with more authority, I *can* get my partner in here, but I don’t think you’ll be happy with the property damage.”

Harding took a deep breath and gripped the edges of her desk, then said through gritted teeth, “What do you *want*?”

I grinned, then reached out with my implants and easily took over the computer built into the desk. I threw the document accrediting Dr. Branch as a representative of the Home up onto the display. “What’s this all about? Why is it so important Branch be associated with the Home if he gets custody of me?”

“If you *must* know, since you’re no longer...suitable to be housed here, this allows us to continue as your guardian of record,” Adirana Harding growled.

“Why does that even *matter*?” I prodded. “You’ve never even *liked* me. Why do you *want* to be my guardian?” I frowned. “Hell...for that matter, now that I think about it, you never exactly tried very hard to get me adopted. I remember the other kids my age having interview after interview with foster parents, but I never got a one.”

“That’s *entirely* untrue!” Harding insisted. “You’ve made no secret you do not appreciate our efforts, but nonetheless we have only ever tried to do what was best for you. Even now, after your...unfortunate mishap.”

I snorted. “Yeah, right. I might be a lion now, but I’m starting to think *you’ve* been ‘lion’ ever since I got here. Luckily, there are ways around that. Oh man, I’ve

wanted to do this for *soooo* long...”

I let my implants loose, penetrating via Harding’s computer into the orphanage’s mainframe, vacuuming the files clean and retreating into fast-time VR to spend a few hours studying, searching, and collating what I’d gotten over the next few seconds. Tammy joined me within a few fast-time minutes.

There was plenty of interesting stuff to be found. “Would you look at that?” I mused. On January 1 of every year I’d been in the Home, 100,000 *mu* was deposited into the Home’s financial account, earmarked as “Jeanette Leroq stipend.” It was a completely anonymous deposit, with no trace whatsoever left of where it came fro...and due to various financial jiggery-pokery, 80,000 *mu* of each deposit somehow ended up transferred to one Adirana Harding’s personal accounts. And those weren’t the only funds she managed to finagle, either.

The only clue to the money’s origin came in the form of a note that had arrived with the first one, indicating that the money would be paid to whoever acted as my guardian—either them, or whoever ended up adopting me. Apparently they were watching, and they’d know if it changed. Suddenly a lot of things made sense. No *wonder* they had always made such an effort to get me back before the end of the year when I’d run away..

And hidden in Harding’s personal correspondence, encrypted by a lock that took Tammy and me all of three realtime seconds to break, were a series of email exchanges between her and Dr. Branch proposing an arrangement of mutual convenience—the Home would back his attempt to get custody as long as he would agree to act as an accredited representative so that, legally speaking, I’d still be in the Home’s custody. She got my money, and he got...*me*.

I’d seen enough. I dropped back into the real world, and opened a number of other hardlight displays into which I dropped the most incriminating documents. “Okay, now I get it. All about the money. Right.”

Harding’s eyes widened again as she stared from one screen to another. “You... but that...how did you...” she sputtered. “You hacked our computer! None of this is admissible in court!”

“Court of law, maybe,” I said. “But you think I care about that? It’d take months to get anything done, and you’d probably sleaze your way out of any real punishment.” I opened one more display—to the net site for NextusLeaks. “Now, the court of *public opinion*, on the other hand...” A quick upload, and I was done.

“Well, I guess that about wraps it up here,” I said, turning to go as Harding foamed incoherently in her seat. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

When I got out to the balcony, Tammy was no longer reared up against it. I put my own forepaws on the balustrade and peered over, then had to giggle. Tammy was on her back in the courtyard, all four paws waving in the air, surrounded by a dozen or so of the Home’s younger kids petting and scratching her. As I watched, she turned her head and gave an eight-year-old boy a bristly tongue slurp from waist to face that made him squeal. The children’s adult warders were standing to one side, not quite certain what to do.

I padded down the balcony stairs, unlocking the gate at the bottom with my implants. A couple of the kids saw me coming and peeled off to pet a kitty closer to their size. I rubbed my muzzle against them and purred, then said, “Sorry kids, but we can’t

stay. Ya ready, Tammy?”

“Awww. Okay, stand back, kids.” Tammy used her lifters to raise herself four meters into the air, then flipped over and landed safely away from them. Then she converted back to skimmer form, I hopped into the cab again, and we pulled away.

“We oughtta come back sometime,” Tammy said as we left.

“Yeah, after Harding gets the boot,” I said. “Maybe the place won’t be so bad with someone else in charge. Either way, *I* won’t be staying here anymore.”

“Such a pity she won’t be able to embezzle you anymore,” Tammy mused.

“Yeah.” I shook my head. “Damn. I think that’s the biggest surprise to come out of all of this. I’ve been getting a hundred grand stipend per year?”

“This is really the first you’ve heard of that?” Tammy asked as we slowed and lifted over the gate. I waved a paw to the startled guards as we passed.

“Yeah. I just can’t figure it. All this time I thought I was dumped because my folks didn’t want me. Now I find out someone’s been paying a small fortune to see me raised? Sure would have been nice if I could have seen some of that money myself. Would have made getting implants easier, maybe.”

“You’d still have had the whole ‘parental permission’ thing to get around,” Tammy pointed out.

“Well, yeah,” I admitted. “But I’d have had *money*. That makes getting around crap a lot easier. Damn, now I wanna hack Harding’s bank account and steal back what that woman owes me.”

“Stay good, Jeanette,” Tammy scolded.

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” I shook my head. “And really, it’s more because I don’t want *her* to have it than wanting it myself. Hell, I’m tempted just to tell the Marshals they can keep my next payment. What do I need money for when I’ve got you?”

“Aww, that’s sweet of you,” Tammy said, sending a quick VR flash of purring and rubbing against me. “That being said, I strongly encourage you to hang onto it. It’ll come in handy for supplementing the equipment stipend when you finish training. And for any leftovers, there’s always Marshals savings bonds!”

I chuckled. “Good point.”

“So where to now? Head back to the Marshals base and put in for a room there or something? Head somewhere else and see if we can find a better doctor?” Tammy asked.

“Maybe. But first I want to swing by the hospital one more time,” I said. “I feel like having a few last words with the old doctor.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Tammy asked. “I mean, we don’t really need to. We’ve already hacked *his* systems, we know he’s creepy but not really *criminal* like Harding.”

“I know, but I feel like I need some closure there,” I said. “After weeks of putting up with his crap, I just want to give him a piece of my mind. Make it clear he doesn’t have any power over me once and for all.”

“Okay, I guess I can see that,” Tammy said. “Ya know I’ll be there to back you up, pardner.”

“Thanks, Tammy, you’re aces.” I gave her dashboard a friendly nuzzle, and she purred. We turned back toward the hospital one last time.

A few minutes later, I padded into the office of Dr. Walter Branch. It actually

took me a bit to find out where it was, on one of the upper floors of the hospital, because I'd never yet been to it during my stay; Branch had always come to my room.

I'll admit, I abused my authority mercilessly in getting in to see him. I put my paws on the receptionist's desk, raised my head to show the badge on my collar, and said, "Official Marshals business. Don't announce me, just buzz me in."

She nodded mutely and did so, and I padded toward and through the door, feeling smug in my exercise of Marshal authority. Of course, a moment later I realized it might just have been having a talking mini-lioness in her face that did it more than the badge—but hey, whatever works, right?

Dr. Branch's desk was similar in design to Superintendent Harding's, but in mahogany. I wondered if they shopped at the same furniture store. Branch blinked and looked up from the displays on his desk, reaching for the genial manner he always tried to wear around me or Tammy. "Miss Leroq!" he said pleasantly. "This is a surprise."

"That's *Marshal* Leroq, but I'll let it pass," I said, sitting on my haunches on one of the guest chairs. "I just came to let you know I'm checking out of the hospital, and to give you a chance to explain yourself before I make my report to the Marshals."

I watched his eyes widen, and my biometrics monitor told me he was starting to get nervous. But he hid it pretty well. "Checking out? But we haven't even begun to treat you yet. And what's this about a report?"

"Well, Doc, about the not-begun-to-treat-me thing—" I commandeered his desk's computer the way I had Harding's and threw up all the documents about proposed courses of treatment that he had vetoed. "—here I'm seeing that there have been some treatment options available for weeks now, but they haven't even been discussed with me. Now I am a minor, I'll give you that, but I'm the one these plans would be affecting and a Marshal besides, and I think I rate a little more openness."

Branch stared at the reports, then glowered at me. "Where did you get these? These are private papers!"

"Oh, I've got privater," I said. "I see you've also been doing some dealing with my old keepers back at the Home to try to get my badge yanked and you made my new official daddy." I put those papers onto displays too. "Oh, and look! The Home gets paid a hundred K *mu* every year I'm under their metaphorical roof. This is starting to look like what we in the biz'ness call a 'conspiracy'. Maybe not an illegal one, but definitely a hinky-looking one. How much *are* they paying you?"

"They're not paying me anything!" Branch exploded. Not that it surprised me. He wasn't about the money. He probably made enough from his practice that even the whole hundred K would be chicken feed anyway. "Not that it's any of your business—"

"Oh, I'm just the one whose custody's being discussed here, why would it be *my* business?" I purred dangerously. Or at least, I liked to *think* I purred it dangerously, like the suave heroines from the spy movies. Maybe from his point of view I whined petulantly, I don't know.

"I'm only concerned with seeing that you have a proper caretaker until you reach your majority," Dr. Branch insisted, trying for calm. "Look at you! You're of no age and in no condition to be a Marshal, or even take care of yourself!"

"Gotta differ with ya there, Doc. There's nothing wrong with my brain, my senses, or my implants, and as for a 'proper caretaker,' got one of those already. Her name is Tammy, and she was taking care of me for over half a year before I ever came here."

"A RIDE? Don't be ridiculous. A mere machine can't possibly—"

I shook my head, and cut him off. “Doc, did you sleep through the part of your Hollow Star training that covered Marshals organization culture? I think they’d find Tammy a *lot* more suitable guardian for me than they would you.”

I yawned, exposing lots of sharp pearly-white kitty teeth. “You know what I think? I think you want to hang onto me and keep me all kitty-shaped for as long as you can, indefinitely if you can get away with it. After all, I’m the only ‘Full Monty’ who can *talk*, say where it hurts and what stuff feels like. Invaluable for research, and if I get *cured* that goes away.”

“That’s preposterous!” Branch exclaimed. But my read of his body language suggested I’d hit uncomfortably close to the truth.

“Maybe, but I don’t think so. You wanna get your name in the history books for reals, so you’ll do whatever it takes to be the one who ‘cures’ Amontillado once and for all.”

His face was starting to go bright red, and I didn’t want to be the one responsible for driving him to a stroke, so I figured it was best to cut this short. “Anyway, I’ve said what I came to say. So I’ll just be going now. I ‘spect you’ll be hearing from the Diamond Gals sometime soon. Don’t get too attached to that Provisional Iodine badge of yours...”

I hopped down from the chair and padded for the door. Behind me, I heard Branch sputter—and then I heard him regain the power of coherent speech at least enough to trigger his desk ‘comm and yell, “Security!” Uh-oh. Time to quicken my pace.

They were waiting for me at the elevator lobby—four uniformed guards with stunners at their belts, and one with a stun rifle slung over his shoulder. The one in the lead stepped forward and said, “Miss Leroq, Dr. Branch has asked us to escort you back to your room.”

I sat on my haunches and licked the back of my forepaw, the very picture of feline calm as I peered out the panoramic glass window to one side, overlooking the city. “I’d really be asking myself if that was a good idea, if I were you,” I said. “Interfering with a Marshal in the performance of her duties? Now, granted, we don’t have the greatest jurisdiction within polity lines, but still, we got some.” I tilted my head again to show badge.

The guards exchanged worried glances. I could see the gears turning in their heads, but I could also read their skepticism. I imagined Branch had been telling them my badge was just a childish affectation, that I was more on the order of a mascot or something without any real authority. After all, who makes a kid a Marshal, let alone a kid-turned-kitty-cat?

It was obvious when they came to their decision, as they moved their hands closer to their weapons and started to move forward. “I think we’ll just take our cha—” the leader began smugly—then froze as a skimmer truck emblazoned with a silver Marshal badge with one bronze point rose into view in the panoramic window beside me.

“Is there a problem, Tin Star Leroq?” Tammy’s voice came over my collar comm. The deputies gawked at the skimmer truck. I noticed she now had rather large Gatling guns on her pintle mounts, which amused the hell out of me because I knew full well those were just hardlight mock-ups. Sure *looked* impressive, though.

“No, Silver Star Tamarind, I don’t *think* there’s a problem,” I said, glancing over at the guards. “Is there, boys?”

The guards stared out the window at Tammytruck, then raised their hands away

from their stunners and stood very meekly aside. “No, ma’am,” the lead guard said. “No problem here.”

I started giggling as soon as the elevator doors closed, and didn’t stop all the way down to the ground floor, all the way out across the lobby, until I was safely-ensconced in the now-Gatling-gunless Tammytruck’s cab again. “Oh, that was *awesome!*” I squealed. “When you rose up into view like that, just like in *Blue Airwolf...*”

Tammy laughed. “You get more with a kind word and a couple a’ big guns than you do with just a kind word.”

“I’ll say.” I grinned as we pulled away. “So what now?”

“You got your report ready to send?” Tammy asked.

“Not quite—gimme a few seconds.”

“Hey, take a whole minute!” Tammy said cheerfully. “We’re in no hurry here.”

“You’re too kind,” I said dryly. Then I dropped into fast-time VR to compose the report I would be sending in covering my investigation. I appended the files I’d gotten from the hospital and the orphanage, and noted down my impressions of Harding and Grant from my interviews with them. I closed with the confrontation with the security guards, and wrapped up with my conclusions about the motivations of everyone in the whole affair. Dotted every “i”, crossed every “t”, et cetera.

When I was done, I dropped back into real-time and beamed it over to Tammy. Only ten seconds had gone by in the “real” world.

“Lookin’ good there, pard!” Tammy said, examining the report. “I’m adding in my own comments, and zipping it off to Masterson. We’ll give him an hour or two to read through ‘em, see what he says.”

“Sounds good. What do we do in the meantime?” I asked.

“Well...I’m not without a little cash money myself, so I was thinking I might just treat you to a steak dinner to celebrate your very first case.”

I grinned. “As long as it’s *very* rare, that sounds wonderful!”

“Great, let’s go! I know a nice four-star restaurant with patio seating and lots of snooty mundanes to freak out.”

“Ooh, life is *good!*” I sat happily in the cab, wind ruffling my fur, as Tammy guided us on up the street. So what if I was stuck as a mostly-cat right now, and had no idea when or if I’d get the human me back? I was a Marshal (at least provisionally), I was free, and I had the best partner *ever*. Life really *was* good, and I was content for it to continue this way as long as it wanted to.

EPILOGUE

The steak dinner was great, and all the stares Tammy and I drew from the other patrons were just icing. I happily ate my steak, steak cut fries, roll, salad, and for dessert cheesecake from a plate on the table in front of me as I sat on my haunches in a chair. I completely ignored the silverware, using only my mouth like a real cat, lapping up water from a finger bowl next to the plate, and barely managed not to giggle every time the people at the next table stared at me.

I had a table next to the fence—and on the lawn on the other side of the fence, a truck-sized lioness sat companionably and chatted with me in quiet tones over my meal just like any other patrons of the restaurant. (We could have just chatted privately by comm, of course, but that would have been *rude*.) I liked the first plate enough that afterward I had another just like it.

After we finished, we were just driving down to a nearby park for some frolicking on the grass when Masterson commed. Tammy and I took the call in our VR jungle clearing, and Masterson and his chestnut horse RIDE Glenn materialized there after a moment.

Masterson doffed his Stetson to us on arrival. “Marshal Tamarind. Marshal Leroq. Pleased t’ see ye two. Quite the reports you sent in.” He glanced at me. “Leroq, first off I think we Marshals owe ye more’n a little apology. If we’d knowed what this Dr. Branch had in mind, we’d a kept a sharper eye on what he was doin’. As it is, we only jus’ now got his legal papers served on us, an’ the Diamond Gals hadn’t even started in yet. I’ve passed yer files on up to them, an’ I’m sure they’ll be glad to have ‘em. They may comm with more questions in a day ‘r two.”

“We’ll be glad to answer them, sir,” I said.

He nodded. “Good. Now as fer those reports themselves, Tin Star, I’m a-gonna put on my ol’ Bronze hat for a moment, iffen ye don’t mind?”

I nodded back. “Critique away, sir. I want to learn from any mistakes.”

“Well, not sure as I’d say ye made any real *mistakes*,” Masterson said. “Not serious ones at any rate. Did wanna go over a couple a’ decisions ye made, though.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“In partic’lar, the hacking thing. Ye know, a’course, that hacking without a warrant means the evidence don’t count fer court. A’course, fer internal stuff we’re a little less formal there, so no worries on dealin’ with the Doc.”

“Yes sir,” I said. “At the time I hacked the hospital, I wasn’t thinking about an investigation. I just wanted to know what Branch wasn’t telling me about my own case.”

Even I was surprised by what I found out.”

Masterson nodded. “And at the orphanage?”

“Well...I wasn’t exactly thinking of a criminal investigation there, either,” I said, blushing. “It was a little more...personal. In retrospect...well, I kinda forgot personal isn’t the same as important, a little bit. If I had it to do over, well...”

Masterson shrugged. “We live an’ we learn. If ye had got it legit, we coulda pressed some embezzlement charges. *Maybe*. It can be damn hard findin’ anything like ‘nuff proof t’ get a Nextus court t’ take it seriously—one drawback a’ being us is that we’re like oil an’ water to the more orderly folks hereabouts.” He turned his head and spat some virtual tobacco juice into the virtual grass before looking back at us.

“What ye did instead with NextusLeaks—well, it was effective. Jes’ be sure t’ make certain of yer proof before ye do somethin’ like that in the future. An’ most cases we’d *prefer* being able to take ‘em to court if we wanna.”

I nodded. “Point taken, sir.”

“Lessee here, what else, what else...” Masterson’s pupils flickered different colors as he looked over a display visible only to him. “Good judgment dealin’ with those hospital rent-a-cops. Sometimes intimidation’s all ye need. ‘Spite of our admittedly well-deserved rep fer the wild an’ crazy, it is best t’ avoid a scrap iffen ye can.”

“That was all on Tammy, sir,” I said. “She was the intimidator.”

“True, but *you* didn’ go all teeth an’ claws either, an’ that’s not nothin’,” Masterson said. “All in all, damn fine job fer a beginner, and good ‘nuff most vets wouldn’ be ‘shamed to have it on their record neither. Well done, Tin Star.”

I all but *glowed* with the praise. “Th...*thank* you, sir!”

Masterson turned his head to look at my partner. “Marshal Tamarind,” he said.

“Sir,” Tammy acknowledged.

“This’s a mite outside the usual course a’ things, but I got the authority an’ what’s it good fer iffen I don’t use it from time t’ time? Marshal Tamarind, since ye got yerself a fabber on board an’ all, I hereby authorize ye t’ fab a full-solid Tin Star fer *non-Provisional* Tin Star Marshal Jeanette Leroq. Congratulations, Marshal Leroq.” He offered me his hand, without any sense of irony, and I numbly put my paw-hand in his and shook before the full impact of what he’d just said hit me.

“I’m a *real* Marshal?” I gasped.

“Yer a real *cadet*, anyway,” Masterson said. “Based on what I’ve heard a’ yer progress, ye won’t be *that* fer too very long, neither. An’ speakin’ o’ which, Marshall Tamarind, ye will get with yer fellow Bronzes an’ come up with an adjusted training regimen t’ take Marshal Leroq’s ‘special needs’ into account. Since it looks like she may be gonna be a while ‘thout a cure, no point ‘n depriving us of a capable Copper in th’ meantime.”

Tamarind sat up straight to attention. “Yes, *SIR!*” she said happily. “Right away, sir!”

“Congratulations t’ both of you,” Glenn said. “Damned fine work, Tin Star, and good to see you back in the fold, Tams.”

“Good to *be* back, sir,” Tammy purred. Glenn stepped forward, and they rubbed noses happily.

Masterson started to turn to go, then stopped. “Oh, an’ Leroq...one more thing. You thought any ‘bout that odd stipend yon orphanage’s been claimin’ on yer behalf?”

“Well...just a little bit, sir,” I confessed. “I did only find out about it myself a

couple hours ago. I haven't really had time to speculate."

"Bit 'v a suspicious thing, seems t' me," Masterson said, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "Someone has that much cash t' flash, why they let ye jus' sit in the Home all these years? Why not hire a *good* parent 'r somethin'? What's their motive fer stayin' all sneaky-sneaky? It's a puzzler."

I nodded. "It had kinda crossed my mind to wonder that, too." I shook my head. "I thought I'd got over a long time ago wondering why my folks didn't want me. Now I've got it all over again, worse than before."

Masterson nodded. "Ye want any Marshals help lookin' into it?"

I thought about that, then shook my head. "Not yet. Not 'less it turns into something the Marshals *should* know about. I wanna try my own resources first."

"Mm. Good pet project for a new Marshal, I think," Masterson approved. "Jes' remember t' call us if ye get in too deep. Meanwhile, assumin' the installment due start a' next month comes to us 'stead of the Home, we'll deduct training expenses an' hold the rest in escrow fer ye. Far's we're concerned, it's yer money, an' we'll be happy t' help ye find ways a' spendin' it that'll help keep ye safer in the field."

I nodded. "Thank you, sir."

"Yer more'n welcome, Tin Star. I guess that jes' 'bout wraps up—huh?" We all four turned to stare at a display panel that had just popped up in our VR, adorned with the flashing red border of a Marshals Emergency All-Call.

"Attention all Marshals," the dispatcher said. "This is not a drill. Repeat, this is *not* a drill. Ten minutes ago, Uplift was reported under attack by Fritz's 'Integrates Ascendant' faction." The screen showed shaky footage of damage and devastation—domes going down, buildings smoking, scattered exchanges of gunfire, and Integrates flying around. "All Marshals with no superseding assignments are hereby ordered to report to the nearest Marshals transport facility to go to their aid. We'll pass along any further information as we get it. That is all." The panel winked out.

"Well," Masterson said. "Looks like you two have yer first assignment. Better hop to it."

I saluted as best I could with a kitty paw and kitty face. "Yessir! Thank you, sir!"

"Good luck, Tin Star, Silver Star," Masterson said, returning the salute. "Come back safe, 'cuz God knows we need every last one o' ye." He and Glenn winked out of the VR, and a moment later so did we.

It was crazy, falling back into the real world like that. All around us the sky was still lazy blue, kids were still running and playing in the nearby park—and a few K of clicks away, another polity was fighting for its very life.

"You ready there, pard?" Tammy asked.

"Just about. There's one more thing I need to do before we expose ourselves to Inties." I reached a paw-hand up to my collar to fumble at the nano syringe, finally managing to get it unclipped and clenched in my stubby claw-fingers. I held it to my other wrist and mashed the button with my thumb. The syringe found my vein, then hissed as it flushed its load of nanobots into it. "What should I do with my disposable?"

A drawer in Tammy's dashboard popped open, empty. "Put it in there. I'll feed it to my fabber."

"Thanks." I dropped it in, and the drawer closed.

"Oh, and that reminds me." A moment later the drawer opened again, with something else in it—but not the syringe this time.

“Oh...” I reached up to my collar again, managing to detach the Provisional Tin Star without too much trouble. I reached in and put it into the drawer, and compared it to the other star sitting right next to it—the one that was solid tin through and through, rather than half-hollow. (Of course, it actually wasn’t *solid* tin—it was all quantum circuitry and sarium and stuff, since it was also our recorder, locator, and backup comm. But it didn’t have half a hole through it, either!)

Tammy chuckled. “I wish I could stick it on ya myself, but there’s not a handy hardlight telepresence rig around anywhere, so...”

“I think I can get it,” I said, closing my fingers over the new badge and lifting it out. It felt nice and cool in my fingers, and noticeably heavier than the one I’d just put in the drawer. I latched it onto my collar with a satisfying click. “There. All nice and official.”

“Welcome to the Marshals, Full Tin Star Jeanette Leroq,” Tamarind said proudly. “Wear it with honor.”

“Hey, now don’t get all weepy on me.” I grinned. “It’s just Tin. I need to make at least Copper before you start bawling.”

“Well, then let’s see about making a start on that,” Tamarind said. “The aerodrome’s this way.” She pulled out of the park and onto the street.

I blinked. “We’re really going to go help out in Uplift? But I’m just a Tin—”

“That was an *All Call*, pard,” Tamarind said. “They need *all* of us. And hey, who knows—maybe we’ll run into your hacking idol again and be able to *talk* to her this time. Stranger things have happened.”

“Um.” I thought about that for a moment. I was a little dubious about how good I would be in the middle of this kind of crisis. I was still just a lowly *Tin*, after all. But on the other hand, I would be surrounded by a Silver the size of a truck. And I’d *already* been Amontilladoed. What was the worst that could happen?

I relaxed onto Tammy’s cab seat. “All right, pard. I trust you.” I grinned. “Take us into danger.”

“Danger, *hoooo!*” Tammy yelled cheerfully. And so we drove toward the Marshals’ aerodrome—and into our future, together.

THE END