

# **Kandace and Jenni: A Beautiful Friendship**

**By Robotech\_Master**

**Author's Note:** This story follows up some of the events of "Integrates Part 15: The Task of Amontillado". Since the fate of Kandace and Jenni isn't really important to that story, I decided to break their tangent off into its own separate tale.

If you haven't read Integrates, though, don't worry; the relevant stuff is summarized in the first few paragraphs.

Morning approached at AlphaWolf's camp after an eventful day and night. It had begun with the arrival of Peaches the dragon, an Integrate sent to help deal with a nasty trojan called Amontillado that was infesting a number of RIDEs in the camp. To help allay suspicion, Peaches had helped AlphaWolf raid the camp of a gang of RIDE slavers, humans who made a business out of entrapping escaped RIDEs and reselling them at auction at a profit.

During the raid, Kandace, a battered old lynx who had been one of the first handful of RIDEs ever made, rescued a girl named Jenni Ruby. Jenni was the daughter of one of the slavers, who had kidnapped her away from her mother and was holding her prisoner. Rather than see the girl go to a lioness RIDE who gleefully saw her as an opportunity to indulge her hatred of humans, Kandace had Fused with her herself.

Then it had been time to remove the Amontillado

virus from the infected. Keeping Jenni asleep to simplify things, Kandace had assisted, as had an Integrate horse who went by Tonto (or Mike if he was being human at the time) and later turned out to be one of the Gondwanan Federated Marshals. All had gone well until the author of the virus had planted a trap and lured Tonto away so the trap sprang. It had taken down the hardlight dome over the camp and caused a great deal of chaos.

In the aftermath, Tonto had apologized to her and offered her a seat on a suborbital going to a Marshals base near Jenni's home, Aloha. Against her better judgment, Kandace had accepted.

As the time to board the sub approached, Kandace felt she could no longer justify keeping Jenni asleep since the Amontillado crisis had passed. And since it was just past dawn anyway, it was a good time to sync her waking schedule up with the outside world. She woke the girl back up.

"Good morning," Kandace said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Feels like I slept for days," Jenni said, yawning. "I'm starved, is there anything to eat?"

"Sure, let's go get what passes for breakfast around here." Kandace walked down to the stone and log cabin that served as human cafeteria, and joined the food line. "I'll warn you right now, it's not really appetizing, but it's pretty nourishing."

"That's all right," Jenni said. "It'll be better than the slaver camp, where I got fed whenever someone remembered...if I was lucky."

"Bastards," Kandace said. "Got what they deserved."

"Um..." Jenni said after a moment. "What *did* they

get?”

“Bodyjacked, all of ‘em,” Kandace said. “You could call it a vigilante sentencing to mandatory community service, I guess. After selling so many RIDEs into slavery, now they get to provide some of us with the pairs of hands we want.”

“Oh,” Jenni said thoughtfully. “Like me?”

Kandace shook their head vehemently. “Certainly not. I’m only keeping you inside right now because it’s not so safe for an unattached pair of hands to go wandering ‘round here. When we get to the sub, I can let you out.” *And not a moment too soon*, she thought wryly.

Some of that thought must have leaked through, because Jenni said, “You don’t really like me very much, do you?”

“It’s not you,” Kandace said as they joined the food line. “It’s just Fusing at all I don’t like. Been Fused with too many people through the years, and too many of those ended badly. That’s why I came out here in the first place, to get away from all that.”

“Oh,” Jenni said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to force you to do something you didn’t want to.”

“Don’t fret yourself about it,” Kandace said. “Better me be annoyed than you get your life screwed up even more. Which is what that lioness would have done and no mistake. I don’t *hate* humans, like some of those ‘round here. Just like ‘em at arm’s length, usually.”

“Oh.” Jenni digested this. “So...um...my Dad. Is three any way I could find out, um, who has him? I’d just like to...well, meet them, I guess. See what’s happened to him for myself.”

Kandace shrugged. “I could ask around. You sure you

really want to see? It might not be pretty.”

“I don’t *want* it to be pretty,” Jenni said grimly. “I just want to know that bastard is finally getting what he deserves.”

“We’re talking about your father here,” Kandace said, a little taken aback.

“Biologically only,” Jenni said. “As far as I’m concerned, we’re unrelated.”

Kandace nodded and sent inquiries around to some of her friends at camp, along with an image of the man plucked from Jenni’s memories. A few moments later, she got responses, complete with a memory clip of the man’s fate. “Oh, my.”

“What is it?” Jenni asked.

“I think your father is definitely getting what...he... deserves,” Kandace said. She played Jenni the memory of her father, equipped with fox ears and tail from a prior bodyjacking, getting scooped up by a truculent female ankylosaur named Smash.

“Oh, *wow*,” Jenni breathed. “That’s...um...I don’t even know what to call it.”

“It was a little...graphic, I’ll admit,” Kandace said.

“I think you were right, though,” Jenni said on reflection. “He *is* getting what he deserves. He’s really a *woman* now?”

“A *dinosaur* woman,” Kandace said. “Trapped inside a dinosaur’s body, giving her hands.”

“The crazy thing is, this may be the first time in his life he’s ever been *useful* to someone,” Jenni said.

“Do you want to see him—*her*—before we go?” Kandace asked. “I could see if Smash is around.”

“I think I would like that,” Jenni said. “If nothing else, I want the bastard to know I’m out of his—*her*—reach for good.” Then they got to the front of the line where they were dispensed a big bowl of steaming gluey oatmeal. “Ugh,” Jenni said as they took their first bite together. “You were right.”

“Can’t say I really like the taste or texture much myself,” Kandace admitted. “And really, I think a lot of the RIDEs around here wouldn’t say no to better cuisine. But good cooks and good food are kind of low priority here compared to other things. And it’s been years since I’ve tasted *anything*, so it’s still kind of pleasant for me.” She pondered a moment. “I think I could override your taste buds if you want. Make it taste like chocolate pudding or something instead.”

“Huh.” Jenni thought about that. “Nah. I think that would be too weird. I’m hungry enough now it doesn’t matter how awful the stuff is anyway.”

“Suit yourself.” They spent the next few minutes eating in silence, finally taking an empty bowl back up for cleaning.

“Well, at least I’m not hungry anymore,” Jenni said.

“Mm.” Kandace looked around the camp, searching for a particular transponder. “Oh, there Smash is. Looks like they’re having breakfast, too. Lucky we caught her. She spends most of her time outside of camp, smashing rocks with her tail.”

“For building materials?” Jenni asked, glancing at the stones used in the cabin construction.

“Nah, she just really likes smashing rocks,” Kandace said. “She’s not exactly a genius, but her heart’s in the

right place.”

They walked over to the big humanoid dino. She was standing at the end of a picnic table that wouldn't support her weight, spooning oatmeal from a big bowl into her maw.

“Eat up! Yummy yummy!” Smash said happily between bites. “Gotta keep you all fueled up! We got a big day of breaking rocks ahead of us!”

“Oh, my,” Jenni said, as she was confronted with the full spectacle of a humanoid spiky dino stuffing her face..

Kandace chuckled. “Yummy yummy. Well, I guess if you don't know what it *ought* to taste like.” Then she raised her voice. “Yo, Smash!”

The dino looked up from her breakfast. “Hi, little kitty! What you want?”

“My hands wondered if she could talk to yours,” Kandace said. “Yours used to be mine's Dad.”

Smash looked suspiciously at her. “You're not gonna try to talk me into letting her go, are you?”

“No,” Jenni said. “I'm glad you have her, and I hope you'll keep her *forever*. I just wanted to see her one last time before I leave camp.”

Smash considered that. “Well...all right.” She opened her mighty jaws wide, exposing a second face within—still recognizably human, but with a reptilian—saurian—cast. It was also spattered with oatmeal. Smash wasn't terribly accurate with her spoon.

After a moment, Kandace retracted her own helmet-head, exposing Jenni's lynx-eared head so she could speak to her father face to face. “Hello, ‘Dad.’”

“Jenni!” her father said in a slightly raspy female

voice. “Get me out of here!”

“Sorry, Dad, that’s a no can do,” Jenni said cheerfully. “And after you *kidnapped* me and locked me in a shed for weeks, I wouldn’t even if I could.”

“It was for your own protection!” the dino-woman insisted. “The other guys in camp might have—”

“Yeah, so that’s why the lock was on the *outside* of the door?” Jenni asked. “Nice try.” She shrugged. “Anyway, I’m going home to Mom now. Just wanted to see what had happened to you before I left. And now I have. So, bye, Dad. Hope you enjoy yourself. I’ll remember you to Mom.”

“No, wait, I—” Smash closed her jaw again, cutting the woman off.

“Thanks for that,” Jenni told Smash. “I hope you enjoy her for a long, long time.”

“I will,” Smash said happily.

Kandace sealed her own head back over Jenni’s.

“Ready to go?”

“Yeah, let’s.”

Once outside the camp, Kandace de-Fused from around Jenni for the first time, gathering herself back into the angular generic hoverbike form that marked her as a first-generation RIDE. “Wow!” Jenni said, looking down at the cycle that had suddenly appeared underneath her.

“You’re a neat old bike!”

“Thanks,” Kandace said, a touch dryly. She could, she thought, have done without the “old”. But she settled for kicking in the lifters and setting off for the sub’s coordinates at a good pace.

Jenni glanced behind herself at the bob tail poking

out a hole in her slacks, and then peered at her face in the mirror, observing her newly-feline nose and ears for the first time. “Ooh! I’ve got a kitty face!”

“Glad you like it,” Kandace said. “Not all of my riders have.” She sighed at the memories. “It’s the drawback of being a prototype. Not everything works quite the same as the later models.”

Jenni twitched her new ears experimentally, and wrinkled her nose. “I *do* like it. It’s purrrrrfect!”

“Well, good. Oh, there’s our ride.” They came over a small rise and approached the suborbital in Marshals livery, guarded by fused RIDERs in the traditional dusters and hats at four corners of a rectangle around it.

As they pulled in and headed for the open ramp, the guards moved in behind them. None of them was Tonto, Kandace was mildly relieved to see. Apparently he was already aboard, keeping to his word that she wouldn’t have to encounter him again. Of course, she’d still be on the same suborbital with him, which was too close in her opinion, but she supposed it couldn’t be helped. He *was* going to shave days off their trip.

They pulled aboard, and Kandace changed back to Walker mode out from under Jenni. Jenni grinned at her and reached down to pet her. Despite herself, Kandace couldn’t help purring. It *did* feel good to be stroked, and since the person doing it wasn’t objectionable in and of herself, she supposed she was entitled to enjoy it. They took seats near a porthole where one of the Marshals directed them. They didn’t have long to wait before the suborbital shot skyward.

The flight seemed interminable to Kandace, though it



really only took about half an hour. It was the company. Kandace never did see either the prisoners or Tonto—they were in a different section—but she still knew they were around. Rationally she didn't have any reason to expect anything to happen, but loose cannons like that Integrate were like lightning rods for trouble. She just hoped she and Jenni could be clear before it struck again.

And again, Jenni picked up on Candace's mood. "Is something wrong?" she asked. "Don't like flying?"

"No, it's not that. It's..." Kandace groped for an explanation that wouldn't involve the business she'd kept Jenni asleep for over the last couple of days. "I just don't like some of the other people on the ship," she said, which sounded lame even to her own ears. "Not any of the ones in this compartment," she added as Jenni looked around curiously. "Just...other ones I know are flying with us."

"Oh." Jenni shrugged. "You don't even want to be on the same sub with them? It makes you that nervous?"

"I dislike them a lot." Kandace shook her head and tried to banish her troubled feelings. "Check the view out that window. That's all of Gondwana spread out below us. Don't get to see that very often."

"Yeah..." They looked out the porthole together at the continent beneath them. "Pretty," Jenni reflected. "And look—there's the elevator." She pointed at the silvery thread glittering in space off to their port side.

"That's where we're headed after we land," Kandace said. "Well, not the elevator itself, but the city near it."

"I know," Jenni said. "That's where I'm from, remember?"

"Yeah." Kandace nodded. "Anyway, it'll take us a few

hours to get there from where we're landing—a Marshals base in the desert.”

“I see.” Jenni thought about that for a moment. “If we're taking a Marshal sub from AlphaWolf's camp...then the Marshals must know where AlphaWolf is? Why aren't they, like, raiding it and rescuing all the people?”

“It's kind of complicated,” Kandace said. “Alpha isn't really quite as bad as people make him out to be.”

“I guess I'll have to take your word for that,” Jenni said dubiously.

“He busted up your slaver camp and let me take you home, didn't he?” Kandace pointed out.

“Okay, there is that,” Jenni admitted.

The flight eventually landed, and Kandace and Jenni left the sub before everyone else. Ignoring the dark looks some of the Marshals and other folks hanging around the airfield gave her—apparently non-Integrates weren't terribly welcome in this place—she elected to set out for Aloha right away, switching over to skimmer form so Jenni could climb on. She projected a hardlight helmet onto Jenni's head, causing the girl to squeal with startled delight, and they were off.

Once they were away from the base, deep into the flat, boundless desert, Kandace was free to pour on the speed. “Whee!” Jenni whooped as the desert flew by. “You're really *fast!*”

Despite herself, Kandace chuckled. “About average speed these days, really. But not so bad for an 'old' bike, huh?”

“How long 'til we get there?” Jenni asked.

“At this speed, maybe five or six hours,” Kandace said. “But we should start hitting settlements in three or four. I’ve got water in a canteen if you get thirsty, and some ration bars in a storage compartment that are only...er... thirteen years old. They *should* still be good, though.”

“Maybe we’d better just save those for emergencies,” Jenni said.

“Good plan.” Kandace zoomed along in silence for a while. “If you’re bored, I have a decent collection of 20th-21st century media on board. Feel like some music?”

Jenni shrugged. “Sure. Whatever is fine.”

Kandace spun up a Beatles album, and Jenny nodded along. “My first partner liked the Beatles,” Kandace reflected. “This was back before the Steaders made twencen the unholy fad from hell it is today. Haven’t really listened to it in a while. Reminds me of her.”

“You miss her?” Jenni asked.

“I kind of miss the days more than I do her,” Kandace said. “Haven’t really thought about her in a while.” Her panel lights rippled in a shrug emoticon. “Doubt she thinks much about me, either, if she’s even still alive. Was just an army partnership. Matter of assignment. We got on, but we weren’t bosom pals.”

“That’s kind of sad,” Jenni said. “I know I’ve only Fused the once, but being that close to someone else...it should be something worth remembering.”

“To you it is, *because* you haven’t done it that much,” Kandace said. “When you do it day in and day out, it’s just another thing. And when you’ve done it *forever*, it’s just annoying.”

“Oh,” Jenni said. “Sorry.”

“Eh. You don’t have anything to be sorry about,” Kandace said. “You are what you are. At least Fusing with you isn’t a big dominance fight every time, like my *last* so-called ‘partner.’ Yeesh. That’s what kind of made me give it up for good, or so I thought.”

“That sounds horrible,” Jenni said. “As far as I’m concerned, if we’re Fused I’m a guest in your body and I’ll act that way.”

“As far as *she* was concerned, I was just a piece of equipment she’d bought surplus,” Kandace said. “That was when I realized my place was out in the desert, away from human assholes. Um, present company excepted, of course.”

Jenni smiled. “No, it’s okay. I understand. You should spend some time in Aloha, though. Or Uplift, from what I’ve heard. People mostly treat RIDEs right there.”

“Been to Uplift a little bit lately, though didn’t see much of it.” Kandace flickered the shrug again. “I guess I might just hang around Aloha a little after I drop you off. Been years since I spent much time in town.”

“I could show you all the best places!” Jenni offered. “Boy, I’ll bet Mom will be surprised at the ‘new me.’”

“I’ll bet she will,” Kandace agreed. She thought about her own recent unlikely family reunion. Kaylee had been doing really well for herself, and she’d talked so proudly about Katie’s last stand against Tocsin. It had been good to see her, especially since the last time had been after she’d been shut down and tossed in the Shed as spare parts.

“Do you think we can call her?” Jenni asked. “Let her know we’re on our way?”

“Still too much interference this far in the desert, and

I don't have a comm laser capable of punching through to the sats," Kandace said. "When we hit the settlements in a couple hours we can piggyback on their landlines."

Jenni nodded. "Guess I should have done it before we left."

"If you've been gone for weeks already, a few hours won't make much difference either way," Kandace pointed out.

"Yeah, I guess. But it must have driven Mom crazy," Jenni said. "I really want to let her know I'm all right as soon as I can. Please hurry up and get there."

"We'll be there as soon as we can. Can't get there any sooner," Kandace said. Still, she did manage to squeeze a few dozen more kph out of her old lifters for Jenni's sake.

Over the next couple of hours, Jenni listened to more Beatles albums, working her way through the first few volumes of the collection. She leaned back in the seat with her eyes closed, trying to doze, but her biometrics showed she was growing increasingly anxious. At last the desert began to sprout small hardlight-domed houses. Jenni regarded them excitedly. "Can we stop?"

"Not quite yet, hon," Kandace said. "Single houses this far out belong to people who don't like company. There'll be a little township further on where they can go for groceries or companionship when they do want it. We'll stop there when we find it. Oh, that must be it there."

She popped up a three-dimensional wireframe of a small cluster of buildings just ahead. There were only about three or four structures under a small hardlight dome—a greasy spoon, a convenience store that was little

more than a candy bar counter and a fabber with RIDEsafe chargers outside, and a small apartment building where the people who ran them could live.

“Great, let’s go there!”

“Already on the way. I need to charge up the ol’ batteries for the rest of the trip in anyway.” Kandace pulled up to the charger, then opened a comm terminal through its uplink. “Okay, dial it.”

Jenni punched the code in without hesitation. But instead of an answer, it simply rang into a message drop. “Mom?” Jenni said, puzzled. “I got free from Dad. I’m on my way home with a friend. Why aren’t you picking up?” She waited for several moments. “Mom?” But there was no answer.

She broke the connection, frowning. “I don’t get it. Where’s Mom?”

“We’ll find out for sure when we get there,” Kandace said philosophically. “I’m about fully charged. Go take a pit stop and we’ll be on our way.”

“Right.” Jenni ran in to the restrooms, then came back out again a few minutes later. “Let’s go.”

They sped on in silence. Kandace judged from Jenni’s worried face that more music probably wouldn’t be well-received just now. Kandace put on as much speed as she safely could, since she was starting to get her own worried feelings. Fortunately, it wasn’t too much longer before the famous natural archway came into view. Jenni sighed in relief as they passed below it. “Home at last.”

A few minutes later, they were in Aloha proper, heading for the suburb of town where Jenni and her Mom had lived. Though she should have been relaxed and

relieved, Jenni seemed to get more worried and tense the closer they came to her old home. When they finally arrived, it was almost anticlimactic. Kandace pulled up in the driveway outside the cheerily domestic little home, and Jenni dismounted and ran up the sidewalk to enter her keycode on the doorcomm. Kandace flipped back into Walker form and padded up behind her.

Jenni stopped in confusion. “What? My code isn’t working.” She stepped across to the front window and cupped her hands around her face to peer inside. “I...I don’t understand. It’s *empty*.”

“Jenni? Jenni Ruby, is that you?” The older woman’s voice came from behind them. They turned to see an older lady had just come out of the house next door.

“Mrs. Leary!” Jenni said, relieved. “What’s going on? Where’s my Mom?”

Mrs. Leary looked from Jenni’s newly feline face to Kandace next to her. “I think you’d better come inside, dears. Both of you.”

Jenni settled herself gratefully on the patterned sofa. Mrs. Leary furnished her house in Early Chintz, but it sort of fit her personality. Kandace sat nearby, plugged into a RIDEsafe power socket. Mrs. Leary brought out a plate of homemade brownies, which Jenni accepted gratefully.

“It’s so *good* to see you again, dear. What happened? Your mother was quite beside herself with worry.”

“Well, my so-called father kidnapped me out to his gang’s camp in the badlands,” Jenni said. “But I guess you already knew that part.”

Mrs. Leary nodded. “Your mother appealed to every

possible authority, but no one was willing or able to help. Even the Marshals said that the camp was too far into the badlands and too well-protected, though I believe she was gradually wearing them down.”

“Well, the camp got raided by some, ah, *concerned citizens*,” Jenni said. “They rescued me.” She smiled at Kandace. “And a friend brought me home.”

“That’s wonderful, dear,” Mrs. Leary said. “Now, as for your mother...well, I’m afraid that some *associates* of your father were not pleased by the attention she was focusing on them, and attempted to convince her to see reason. By smashing the windows of her house.” She shrugged. “Combined with her lack of progress with the authorities, I fear they did succeed in scaring her off. Three weeks ago, your mother sold the house to a real-estate broker and moved back up to Toptown.”

“Oh...” Jenni said. “Do you have a comm code for her up there?”

“As far as I know, she kept the same one she’d always had,” Mrs. Leary said.

“But I called it and just got a message drop,” Jenni said.

“Perhaps she was out?” Mrs. Leary suggested. “I don’t know. We haven’t really kept in touch. Perhaps you should seek her there yourselves. I can give you her address.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Leary,” Jenni said gratefully. “I *really* appreciate it.

“Not at all, dear. I do hope you find her. Please let me know how it turns out.”

They excused themselves soon after that, and Kandace



converted back to the skimmer bike. “So we’re going to Toptown?” Kandace asked. “All the way to the top of the Alohan Elevator?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Jenni said. “You could just drop me off at the elevator. I could get the rest of the way on my own.”

“Not ‘til I know for sure you’ve found your mother,” Kandace said firmly. “I don’t like to think of you all alone without any friends up there. And I don’t exactly have anything else I need to be doing so I might as well tag along.”

“Guess we’re taking an elevator ride, then,” Jenni said.

“Do you have money for tickets?”

“I have a few hundred *mu* in a cash account,” Jenni said. “It should be enough.” They turned onto the main road that led toward the city of Touchdown that hosted the elevator at the bottom, taking the bridge across the bay and heading for the highway exit.

“I do have to admit, I’ve never been on a space elevator,” Kandace said.

“It’s an all-day trip, and there’s only so much looking out the windows you can do,” Jenni reflected. “Plenty of time for worrying.”

“Or talking, or napping, or watching media,” Kandace said. “No need to borrow trouble when we can’t change anything by worrying. Let’s just get there and be on our way, and worry about what happens next when it happens.”

After a few more hours of driving, and more Beatles music, they came to the immense tunnels that led into the

heart of the mountain where the elevator began. After navigating a maze of tunnels and exits, they paid for a 1 human/1 RIDE ticket and filed into one of the elevator cars—basically a miniature short-stay hotel in and of itself. There was a bar and lounge area downstairs with a massive transparent aluminum viewport positioned for the best view of the planet, and a number of private galleries on two levels with a spiral staircase providing access to the upper floor. Jenni and Kandace took one of the upstairs rooms and settled in, gazing out the window and waiting for the ride to begin.

After everyone had loaded up, the ‘vator car started to move. The lifter gravity adjustment was seamless, so the only way they were aware they were moving at all was seeing motion out the viewport.

“C’mere and look at this,” Jenni said, standing at the window. Kandace padded over and placed her forepaws on the sill to peer down and watch the buildings receding below them. “We’ll speed up in a few minutes, when we’re farther away from the city. But even then it’ll still take half a day to get to Toptown.”

“So there really is a whole city at the top of the elevator?” Kandace said.

“A town, anyway,” Jenni said. “Mostly transient housing for ship crews and support staff who don’t go down to the surface. There are also a few observatories and scientific outposts, and some places for tourists—though it’s mostly somewhere the cruise ship passengers stop on their way to somewhere else. Also, it’s technically not at the *top* top. Just the top of the main structure, geostationary orbit. The tether cable and counterweight go

much farther out, but ordinary people aren't allowed out there. Just rich people."

"Why would your Mom move up to a place like that?" Kandace asked.

"Maybe she guessed Dad's gang wouldn't feel like taking a half-day trip just to harass her." Jenni shrugged. "She did used to live up there, you know, before she met Dad. She was a spaceliner stewardess. He was an allegedly handsome stevedore. Apparently they fell in lust." She shrugged. "Maybe Dad was a different person back then. Who knows."

Kandace started to get the first minor premonitions of doom at that point. But she thrust them aside. Surely a mother wouldn't abandon her daughter...right?

After they'd been underway for a while, Kandace and Jenni went downstairs to the lounge so Jenni could have some *good* food for lunch. They didn't mix much with the other passengers, a random collection of people traveling alone or with RIDEs. They did spend a little time taking in the view from the large panoramic viewport, but they'd already gotten to the point where the view didn't change much from moment to moment. After a while, they returned to the room.

Kandace watched Jenni boredly fiddle with the room's comm for a while, then sighed. "C'mere, kid. Let's Fuse up. I wanna show you something."

Jenni blinked. "I thought you didn't like Fusing?"

"What can I say? You're growing on me." Kandace padded over to her, and split apart and reassembled herself around the girl.

Jenni looked down at her once-again furry body.

“You’re really *neat*, Kandace.”

“Thank you,” Kandace said. “I appreciate that. But wait’ll you see *this*.” She moved their body over to lie down on the bed, then pulled Jenni into her virtual reality space. She found herself in a forest next to a real life lynx. As in the real world, it was fall here; the trees were a riot of autumnal color, and the ground was carpeted with fallen leaves.

“Wow!” Jenni said. “It seems so real!”

“It *virtually* is,” Kandace said. “It’s a little piece of the place where I was born. I carry it with me to remind me of home.” A little sadness crept into her voice at the end of her statement.

Jenni rested a hand on Kandace’s shoulder. “I get the feeling the memories are about all you have left of it.”

Kandace nodded. “Yeah, kid. Sometimes the old saying is really true. You can’t go home again.”

“Oh,” Jenni said. She looked thoughtful.

“Um...that doesn’t mean *this* is one of those times, for *you*,” Kandace hastened to add. “I’m sure your Mom is right up there waiting for you.”

“I see what you’re trying to do there,” Jenni said with a little smile. “Thanks.”

“Anyway, with RIDEs, carrying a little piece of home in our hearts is kinda literal,” Kandace said. “This place is an exact digital copy of the sector on the mainframe where I was first booted up. Right here in this very clearing, in fact.” She shook her head in a feline shrug. “Who knows if it’s even still there on the old ‘frame?’” She looked around for a moment, then was moved to admit, “But at least some of the *people* from back then are still around.

Recently found out I have a sister and a niece in Uplift.”

Jenni blinked. “RIDEs...have *family*?”

“We *think* we do,” Kandace said, a little defensively. “All of us activated in the same batch are brothers and sisters.”

“That sounds right,” Jenni agreed. “But how can you have a *niece*?”

“My sister had kittens,” Kandace said. “It’s complicated.”

“Huh.” Jenni accepted that. “So...um...if your sister could have kids, does that mean you...have a Mom?”

It was Kandace’s turn to blink. “Well...sort of...maybe not the same way you mean, but...kind of...yes,” she admitted. “I was one of the first batch of RIDEs ever made, and...well, to us Dr. Avilia Patil *was* our mother. But I haven’t seen her in more than thirty years. *No one’s* seen her in almost thirty.” Kandace hadn’t thought about Dr. Patil in a long time. Which was kind of sad, now that she came to think about it.

“Is she still alive?” Jenni asked.

“As far as anyone knows. She’s just...withdrawn from public life. Hasn’t been seen in forever. No one knows what she’s doing.”

“When’s the last time you wrote to her?” Jenni asked.

Kandace blinked. “*Wrote* to her?”

“Even if she’s disappeared, she’s got to have a working mail drop, right?” Jenni said. “Everybody’s got one.”

“I...don’t know if I *ever* wrote to her,” Kandace said. “She had so many ‘children,’ was so busy all the time, it felt like we shouldn’t bother her, she was always off doing something important.”

“Well, she’s probably not that busy *now*, is she?” Jenni pointed out. “But if all of her kids still *feel* like she is, who knows if *any* of them write her? But you *should*. I can’t imagine any Mom wouldn’t want to hear about how her kids are doing.”

“Huh.” Kandace considered that for a moment. “I’ll think about it. Not sure if I have anything to say she’d really care about hearing.”

“Well, you could say that you’re *alive*, for one thing,” Jenni said. “And so are your sister and her daughter—your mother’s granddaughter. Talk about old times, tell her about new times. It’s what I’d do with *my* Mom.”

“I’ll think about it,” Kandace said again. “Right now, why don’tcha go poke around in my forest some? There’s nothing here that can hurt you, and it might be a more fun thing to do than just sit around fidgeting.”

“Will you come, too?” Jenni asked. “You could show me around.”

Kandace considered that. She had just been going to doze in the virtual sunlight, but she could do that any time, couldn’t she?

“Sure, why not?” Kandace said. “C’mon, I’ll show you the sights.” She padded off into the forest, her paws crunching on dry autumn leaves.

A few hours later, they returned to the real world and went downstairs for dinner, staying Fused by silent agreement. Kandace had to admit, the lasagna the lounge served tasted a *lot* better than the oatmeal at camp that morning.

Jenni giggled a little as she ate for them. “This is a

little tricky. It's like eating with prosthetic lips."

"Would you like me to do it for you?" Kandace asked. "I have plenty of experience."

"No, thanks," Jenni said. "It's actually a lot of fun."

"Suit yourself." But Kandace was actually rather pleased. The girl had a *good* attitude. Kandace was a little startled to realize that maybe Fusing again wasn't so bad after all, and she was halfway starting to think of Jenni as a possible new partner already. *Don't be silly, girl*, she told herself. *You told Kaylee you were better off alone. Nothing's changed since then...has it?*

But on the other hand, now that she *was* Fused she was starting to remember some of the nicer things about being with a human. Sometimes those things had their cost—it hurt so much to *lose* a human—but you couldn't have the good without the bad. Was the good *worth* the bad? She hadn't thought so when she'd been with Kaylee back in Uplift, especially after seeing what Amontillado could do to RIDE and rider both. But it seemed that her memories of the joys of that closeness had been muted—and now they were coming back.

Catching the edge of those surface thoughts, Jenni smiled. "I like you, too. And if you wanted...well, I guess we should see about finding my Mom first."

"Right," Kandace said gruffly. It *was* pretty premature to be making long-term plans, after all.

After dinner, they stayed in the lounge a bit longer, admiring the greater curvature of the globe beneath them, then returned to their room and to VR, where Kandace cued up one of the old vids she had in storage. In keeping with the Beatles theme, it was *A Hard Day's Night*. Jenni

giggled at the antics of the Fab Four, and she enjoyed it so much that Kandace immediately followed up with *Help!*

By the time it was over, Jenni felt like a nap and dropped off, still in Fuse. Kandace chuckled, tucking her into a virtual bed. She considered de-Fusing and putting her in the real bed, but decided against it.

There was a certain joy in carrying a sleeping rider within herself—especially when the rider had willingly put herself there, rather than Kandace keeping her under to spare her unpleasantness. The feeling of trust was... fulfilling. It was sort of like being a mother herself, she supposed. Only in reverse.

For the next couple of hours, while Jenni dozed, Kandace puttered around inside her head, reviewing old memories and reliving some of the better moments of her past lives that she hadn't let herself go back to in some time. To her surprise, there were more of them than she had thought, even from her time with her last partner—the one who had finally driven her to break her tethers for good and flee to the desert.

And she discovered why this was. A whole host of memories had suppression codes on them, so that she wouldn't remember them unless she intentionally went looking for them. The codes had been placed by Kandace herself, and apparently the actual placing of the codes had been one of the memories she had also suppressed.

She considered this bemusedly. Things had gotten so much worse toward the end of her last partnership. It seemed she had been so disgusted, felt so ill-used, that she had buried whatever memories might make her more likely to consider Fusing again. She wondered how many



of the inhabitants of AlphaWolf's camp might have done something similar.

After thinking about it for only a few moments, Kandace lifted all her suppression orders. It was pretty clearly time, and on the whole it wasn't healthy to have parts of herself tied off like that. As the suppression faded, Kandace felt better—more like *herself* than she'd felt in a long time. And when she checked her feelings on the matter again, she found she had no objections to remaining fused with Jenni at all.

As she finished, the recording announcing one hour until final docking played over the cabin intercom. Kandace nodded to it. Whatever was going to become of the two of them, she supposed she'd find out soon. Letting Jenni sleep, she headed downstairs to await the docking with the others.

“Wake up, sleepyhead, we're here,” Kandace said, gently pulling Jenni out of sleep as they stepped out through the airlock into the arrival lounge. Above them, the ceiling was transparent, offering a crystal clear view of the stars not possible from the planet's surface.

Jenni yawned. “Yeah. Welcome to the roof of the tallest skyscraper on Zharus. Well, except for the other one. But the base of the other one is twenty meters higher above sea level, so technically ours is twenty meters taller.”

Kandace looked up. “That's not a hardlight dome, is it?”

Jenni shook her head. “Goodness no. They wouldn't want everything to poof out into space at the first power failure. It's two-meter-thick transparent aluminum. They

do use hardlight for hatches, like where they poke telescopes through, but there's always an aluminum backup. And a hardlight backup to the aluminum, too."

"You know a lot about this place," Kandace said.

"Mom would talk about it all the time. And she took me up here a few times. I read up on it." She shrugged. "And I guess I'm kinda proud of anything Aloha's a part of."

They passed through customs and headed out onto the streets. Toptown was laid out in an orderly grid formation, bounded by the circular edge of the platform. The street lights were dim, providing just enough illumination to see by. "Is it always this dark up here?"

"No, there's a day cycle and a night cycle," Jenni said. "And a couple of times per month the town goes completely black for a few hours 'cept for emergency safety lighting. Makes the astronomers happy."

"So this address Mrs. Leary gave us..." Kandace said.

"That's in Residence Sector. That-away." She pointed to the southeast.

"Right. Off we go, then!" Kandace kicked in her lifters to raise her Fuser form into the air, and moved into the skimmer late to head off up the street.

"Whee!" Jenni said. "Hey, I didn't know you could do that. We're flying!"

"Skimming, anyway," Kandace said. "It's not as fast, but we can't go that fast in here anyway, so not a lot of point swapping."

"Huh," Jenni said.

"What?" Kandace asked, picking up a trace of puzzlement from her.

“Just a little funny...this morning you were all, ‘I don’t like Fusing.’ But now you’d rather stay this way than switch back.”

“I didn’t say I’d *rather*, just there wasn’t much point...” Kandace said. “But...yeah, guess I see what you mean.” She chuckled. “Being with you has just been reminding me of some good times I’d forgotten about is all. And you’re not annoying to Fuse with. All in all, I guess I don’t mind Fusing with you as long as you don’t mind Fusing with me.”

“Well, it’s nice to know that if we don’t find my Mom, I could always go back to AlphaWolf’s camp as your new permanent hands,” Jenni joked. But Kandace sensed the worry underlying the humor.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure we’ll find her,” Kandace said. But it was hard for her to conceal her own worries on the matter.

Finally they turned into the street where her apartment block was located. They hovered up to the entrance, then set down and walked inside to examine the apartment comms. But instead of Jenni’s mother, the apartment number Mrs. Leary had given them listed another name: Shauna Kopek. And none of the other apartments listed Jenni’s mother’s name either.

“Oh, great,” Jenni muttered. “Another dead end.” She reached out and rang Shauna Kopek’s buzzer anyway.

After a few moments, a woman replied, “Hello?”

“Uh, hi, Miss Kopek,” Jenni said. “I’m trying to find Leandra Ruby. They gave me the address for your apartment.”

“She doesn’t live here anymore,” Shauna said. “I just

moved in last week.”

“Do you know where she went?” Jenni asked hopefully.

“No, place was empty when I moved in,” she said.

“Sorry.”

“Okay, thanks anyway.”

Jenni sighed. “Now what?”

“Is there anything like a transient registration bureau here, where people record their comings and goings?”

Kandace asked. “I’d think somewhere like this would want to keep track, just so they can figure out when someone’s been blown out into space or something.”

Jenni blinked. “Huh. I think there might be. We can go down to the town hall and check.”

“Beats hanging around here moping.” Kandace lifted them into the air again and headed up the street in another direction.

“I don’t understand,” Jenni said. “Why would Mom just give up and move away like this?”

“We don’t know that she’s given up,” Kandace pointed out. “Maybe she’s just trying something different. We don’t know what she was thinking.”

“She let some hired thugs scare her off,” Jenni moped. “That’s what she was thinking.”

“Maybe we’ll find a clue at the town hall.” It didn’t take them long to reach the place. Unlike a lot of the buildings down on Zharus, it was built more functional than stylish—a simple metal and glass three-story structure with clearly marked out departments. It was almost like you’d expect to see in Nextus, and reminded Kandace a little of home. She supposed that when you

were out in deep space, the decorative curlicues just didn't matter that much compared to things like airtight emergency seals.

It didn't take them long to find the arrivals and departures listings, and when they looked up Leandra Hathcock there was actually a listing for her. But to Jenni's consternation, it showed she had signed onto the interstellar starliner *Spirit of St. Louis* as a stewardess on a round trip flight to Earth, that had departed the system four days ago and wouldn't be back for nearly two Zharusian years.

"Well, that's that, then." Jenni shook her head, and Kandace felt the sudden thickness in Jenni's throat as a lump in her own. "She's given up on me and gone on with her life. I don't...what do...oh, Kandace, *what am I going to do?*" she sobbed.

Kandace purred gently, then pulled them both into virtual space so she could put her arms around the girl and hold her while she cried. "There, there, now," Kandace said. "Whatever happens, it's going to be *all right*, I promise."

"I just don't *understand*," Jenni said after she could talk again. "I thought she loved me. Why would she abandon me?"

"There's got to be more to it than this," Kandace said firmly. "Some reason that we're not seeing. Jenni, is there anywhere your mother might have left you a message? Just on the off chance you might get free and be able to check it?"

Jenni blinked through her tears. "My mail. I never have gotten around to checking my mail." Kandace opened

a comm panel in the air and passed it over, and Jenni tapped on it to log in. “Make money fast...enlarge your whatever-it-is-you-have...heir to the throne of Cape Nord, help me transfer my money out...” She blinked. “Wait... what’s this?”

The face of an older woman with a strong resemblance to Jenni appeared on the screen. “Mom...” Jenni gasped. Leandra Ruby looked more than a little tired and haggard, not to mention depressed.

“Jenni,” she said. “If you’re seeing this, it means you’ve probably escaped on your own from your father, and I’m not there for you. I’m sorry about that. I’ve tried everything I could imagine, exhausted every avenue, and nothing works. And I just don’t have the money it would take to hire anyone to come rescue you. Yet.

“But I’ve been looking into a way I might be able to get some. It’ll just take time. It’s called organ arbitrage.” She sighed. “On Earth, people pay money for replacement organs. A *lot* of money. They don’t have the advanced medical nanotech Zharus does, but they can make cyber parts really cheaply. On Zharus, they don’t have a lot of Earth cybertech, but they can regrow organs really cheaply. And I’ve just been offered my old job on an Earth/Zharus starliner—a free ride to Earth and back.

“So I’m leaving tomorrow to go sell my liver, kidneys, heart, lungs...I should get a pretty good price for them, and get cyber parts that will last me for the trip back. Then when I get back, I’ll sell the cyber parts to collectors and researchers and get my own parts regrown. With that plus what I can save from my salary, I should have enough left over to hire a mercenary company to come get you.”

Jenni's mother sighed. "I realize there's a chance someone else will decide to save you after all, but I just can't hang my hopes on that. The sooner I get the money to help you, the sooner I can get you back myself. I hope you're...still alive when I get back.

"I love you, Jenni. I love you *so much*..." The recording ended as she started to cry.

"I love you too, Mom..." Jenni whispered, staring at the empty panel. They sat there in awkward silence for a moment, then Jenni shook her head slowly. "I wish I'd checked my mail *first*. Would have saved us a trip up here."

"I'm not sorry we came," Kandace said. "I've enjoyed the trip...and the company." She gave Jenni one last hug before returning them both to their real-world bodies and walking out of the town hall building.

"So...her ship only left four days ago. Is there any way we can call her back?" Kandace asked.

"They're in subspace by now, on the way to Wednesday. We can send a message on the next FTL boat to go that way," Jenni said. "Might take a few stops to catch up with her. Or if we had the moolah we could send a telegram via one of the weekly fast-FTL comm drone dispatches and beat them there, but that costs a fortune."

Kandace thought back to the list of Aloha contacts Tonto had insisted on giving her—including a few with the surname of Munn, the wealthy venture capitalists who had founded the polity in the first place. After her experience with Tonto, she hadn't *planned* to call on them for anything—but this was clearly an emergency. "I think I know some people who can find the money for that, don't

worry.”

“But...either way, it wouldn’t do much *good*,” Jenni moaned. “I’ve read up on those FTL liner contracts—back when I thought I might want to try following in my Mom’s footsteps. They’re pretty ironclad. She couldn’t just change her mind in mid-flight without a pretty substantial penalty—and then she still wouldn’t have any way to get back.”

“What was it you said to me? ‘You could tell her you’re alive?’” Kandace pointed out. “And for that matter, not to sell her organs.” She shrugged. “Maybe the people I know could help with return fare, too.”

“That would be nice,” Jenni said. She sighed. “But it still leaves the question of what to do with myself until she gets back. I don’t really want to go to an orphanage, and I don’t have any other relatives to go live with. I don’t suppose you *could* use a handy pair of hands?”

Kandace chuckled. “No, I don’t need a pair of hands.”

Jenni sighed. “Oh.” Her mood grew bleaker.

“But what I *could* use is a *partner*,” Kandace said, savoring the fierce spike of joy that came from Jenni a moment later.

“Seriously?” Jenni asked. “You mean it?”

“I do,” Kandace said. “Even *after* your Mom gets back. I’ve been living alone long enough, and carrying you around has shown me that it might just be time to give this living-with-a-human thing another try. If you want me, that is.”

Jenni hugged themselves. “Oh, I do! I *really* do! I wanted to ask if you could stay with me, or I could stay with you, but I couldn’t figure out how.”

“Well, you won’t have to worry about that,” Kandace



said. She chuckled. “You’ve got yourself a new pet lynx.”

“Oh, no no,” Jenni said. “As far as *I’m* concerned, *you’ve* got yourself a new pet *human*.” She grinned.

“You’re the sensible one here. Stands to reason you should be in charge. *In loco parentis*.”

Kandace snorted. “Inside a crazy parent? That’s about right.”

Jenni giggled. “Honestly, I’d be happy to be nothing more than your hands all the time if it meant I could stay with you.”

“Thanks, but *that* won’t be necessary.” Kandace smiled. “You can have your own life, too. We’ll just share.”

“Works for me...partner.” Jenni grinned. “So...want to head back down to Aloha, or take in the sights a while?”

“I think we can spare the time to look around before another 15-hour ride,” Kandace said.

“Oh, it goes faster on the way down, with gravity to help it,” Jenni said. “But c’mon, let’s go check out the observatory. You can see some of the outer planets from there...” The two new partners headed off, each happy in the presence of the other.

## **Epilogue**

The setting was an Aloha beach, with the silver thread of the tower in the background. Jenni stood facing the comm pickup, wearing a swimsuit. “Uh, hi, Mom,” she said. “You know how it’s always right after you give up and stop waiting for the bus that it zooms right by and you miss it? Well, it was kinda like that with you and me.

“A couple days after you left on your liner, Dad’s camp

got busted up by AlphaWolf's pack. They captured all the RIDE slavers, but I ended up with a new friend who brought me home—and gave me these neat ears, and this nose, and this tail!" She turned her back to the camera and wiggled her little furry nub back and forth, then turned back around. "C'mere, Kandi."

Kandace padded into the picture in lynx form, and sat on her haunches next to Jenni. "Hello, Mrs. Ruby."

"This is Kandace. I guess you might have figured she's a RIDE. But she's a very nice one, and she's going to be taking care of me 'til you get back. She's also found a way you might be able to get back early, thanks to some friends who like doing favors. I've attached the details if you want to take advantage. But you don't need to rush on my account—I'm perfectly all right. So if you wanna treat this as a two-year working vacation, I'm fine with that.

"Anyway, I'm going to be writing you every week, at least 'til I hear from you. Probably just text 'cuz that's less expensive than even low-rez vid, but I thought you'd want to see and hear I'm doing okay now. If you do end up at Earth before you get back, you don't have to sell your organs! Unless you want to, I guess.

"I love you, Mom. I'll see you when I see you." The picture blinked out, then blinked back on with Jenni in a slightly different position. "Oh, P.S. I've appended some images and stuff of what Dad looks like now. Her new owner is very happy with her. Enjoy them!"

In the privacy of her virtual forest, while Jenni slept, Kandace sat at a desk in her Fuser shape and chewed on the stump of a pencil as she stared at the blank piece of

paper in front of her. She'd promised Jenni she would write this letter, but it was hard to figure out what to say. It still felt like an imposition, as if she was disturbing the privacy of this woman who had been *everything* to her and her siblings.

But when she reached back to those memories, she could never remember a time when Dr. Patil had been anything less than delighted to see from her. And suddenly Kandace felt a great wave of shame that she had let thirty years go by without ever once sitting down to let her mother know how she'd been doing. Sure, there was no guarantee that the letter would even reach her. But it could *never* reach her if she never sent it. And so far she never had.

So Kandace touched pencil to paper. "Dear Dr. Patil," she wrote. Then she scratched that out, and wrote instead, "Dear Mom."

"I don't know if you remember me," Kandace wrote, "but I'm one of your LNX-LMA-001As. Kandace, or Kandi. I'm sorry I never wrote to you before. I guess all these years I just kept on thinking that you were too busy to want to hear from any of us. But a new friend gave me the kick in the tail I deserved, and here I am.

"I don't know if this letter will reach you. I don't know if you're even still alive. But I *want* you to be. I only just realized how much I really miss you.

"A lot's happened to me in the last thirty years. Too much to write about here, just now. But I've come through it all intact, more or less. I ended up in AlphaWolf's camp for a while, then went to Uplift to help put a garage back together—and guess who I met? Kaylee! She's not in the

Shed anymore. She's got a really wonderful new partner, a RIDE mechanic named Rhianna Stonegate who's fixed her up as good as new. And her daughter Katie is there, too, though I didn't meet her—you may have heard on the news that Uplift granted her citizenship. You should be very proud.

"I've got a new partner now too, a teenage girl named Jenni who I'm taking care of until *her* mother gets back. Long story. We're in Aloha right now, though we may go somewhere else. The comm code on this letter will always reach me, though, if you want to reply or anything. I've attached a picture of Jenni and me together on the beach.

"I miss the old days, and I *really* miss you. I know that if you are out there, you're probably not wanting people to know it, so I guess I shouldn't be disappointed if I don't hear back. But I hope I do."

Kandace chewed on the pencil for a moment longer, considering. Then she added, "Wherever you are, I hope you're not too sad about how messed up the world still is for RIDEs. It'll get better, if we all do our best to make it. I've had some friends show me that recently too.

"I love you very much."

She signed it, "Your daughter, Kandace" and then sent it to Dr. Patil's old lifetime comm code. Then she waited breathlessly. Minutes passed, but no response arrived.

Kandace nodded. It was probably too much to expect an instant reply. The good news was, it hadn't bounced either. That meant the comm code *was* still valid—though after thirty years, who knew how often it was checked?

Nonetheless, Kandace felt better for having sent it. Her task accomplished, she curled up to join her partner in

sleep, and to dream of happier times.