

# **Merging Traffic III: When the Lady Smiles**

By Robotech\_Master

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*When the lady smiles,  
She holds me in her hand  
As a matter of fact,  
She could always let me down*

Chet Mackenzie leaned back in the seat of the classic retro skimmer bike, eyes closed, nodding along to the music blasting through the dashboard speakers, hands crossed in his lap as the handlebars guided themselves. Though they were ticking along at three quarters of the speed of sound, the hardlight aeroshell damped out the sound of the rushing wind so the music was clearly audible.

*But when the lady smiles,  
I can't resist her call  
As a matter of fact,  
I don't resist at all*

And that was the problem, wasn't it?

Chet had come across [the song](#) during his random trawls into twentieth-century media, trying to learn more about the craze that gripped his new home. It had seemed to describe his relationship with Rochelle Seaford, the woman he hardly knew but had fallen in technologically-induced love, or at least lust, with. *Nanite infections, feh. Only on Zharus can you catch an STD by frickin' smell.*

It had been that unexpected, unwanted nanite colony, and the infatuation it had caused, that had led him to give up his lucrative job as a cruise liner shuttle pilot and come all the way back to Zharus in search of a cure—or, well, if he was honest, in search of *her*. And he'd found her...and it had been bedroom at first sight. That had been a little embarrassing.

They'd gotten things straightened out, though. After a couple of quick Fuses by the snow leopard RIDEs Uncia and Nils, the nanites had been reset and they'd been able to start over, get to know each other and get the relationship started out on the right foot. Or...so they'd thought.

Except...a funny thing happened. Whenever Chet and Rochelle met and tried to talk and get to know each other, invariably they both ended up in bed again within just a few minutes.

As far as either of them could tell, it was completely consensual on both their parts—one suggested it and the other agreed, and not always the same one every time. As the song went, *As a matter of fact, I don't resist at all.* And they both had a good time out of it. The problem was, that was *all* they had. After Chet had lived with her—or at least, in the same *house* as her—for a week, he still didn't feel like he *knew* her any better than when he'd first moved in. Except possibly in the carnal sense.

Finally, he woke up one day to find Rochelle Fused with Uncia, and himself Fused with Nils, and Rochelle confronting him in annoyance. "All right, that's just enough," she said. "Chet, I'm sure you're a nice guy and all—Nils tells me so, and he ought to know. The problem is, I can't get to *know* you if I keep hopping into bed with you as soon as I meet you. It's fun and all, but we can't build a relationship on dubious

consent.”

“So what should we do, then?” Chet asked.

“I’ve consulted with the nanite docs down at Uplift General, and the researchers at Nextus Nano,” Rochelle said. “Here’s the plan. First, you move into your own apartment...”

And so he had. Nils had come with him. The snow leopard RIDE had adopted Chet as his personal companion, and Chet wasn’t exactly sorry for the company. In a lot of ways, Nils was just as much a stranger to this world as he was, given that he’d spent thirty years shut down and forgotten about in a dusty warehouse. They were learning about a lot of things together. Sometimes it wasn’t exactly clear who was the boss, but Chet was pretty laid-back about that kind of thing, and Nils was too.

The other conditions were a little weirder, though. Like, Rochelle insisted that any time they met in person, they had to be Fused. Furthermore, they had to speak through their RIDEs’ vocoders, in their RIDEs’ voices, not their own. Rochelle was very particular about that. The nanites’ imprinting, she believed, was keyed to the other person’s specific appearance, voice, and so on—so minimizing exposure was important in breaking the conditioning. It made things a little awkward, but Chet got used to it.

At the same time, Nils and Uncia used a software package that had been developed for treating post-traumatic stress disorder to try to desensitize the erotic associations from their memories of each other. Chet personally thought that was a little bit extreme, but he was willing to go along with it if Rochelle thought it would help. From what he’d found out about Rochelle from his readings, and from talking to her business partner Rhianna and their RIDEs, Rochelle seemed like a fascinating person to get to know. And he *wanted* to get to know her. He hoped they might even have a shot at a *real* relationship. But they’d have to be able to talk for more than a few minutes at a time for that.

Though they had been able to talk *some*, at any rate, under the restrictions Rochelle had imposed. They’d met several times at Signor Donizetti’s RIDEworks, where Rochelle was having Uncia’s new macro-shell built as a transformable suborbital shuttle. Donizetti himself had been there, his robust form dwarfed by the two Fused RIDEs in the room. Chet remembered their first meeting, when he’d gone over the plans in detail.

“No, look, for a bird that size you really don’t want to use that class of engine,” Chet said, pointing with Nils’s furry finger at the spec sheet. “That’s about four times bigger than you need. That engine is really meant for interplanetary shuttles, like those dragon birds that company made a few years back.” Chet still wasn’t sure exactly what it meant that those RIDE shuttles had “Integrated,” but at least he knew his engine specs, so he could stay within his comfort zone in that respect.

“But we thought we’d like to be *able* to go interplanetary, if we wanted,” Rochelle said, her speech cadences sounding a bit odd in Uncia’s voice.

“Then you hire an interplanetary ship and latch on,” Chet said. “Or you might be able to design some kind of interplanetary engine FAST pack you could latch on in orbit for those kinds of trips. God knows you’ve got enough money for that. But 99% of the time you’re going to be flying this thing like a standard suborbital bird, and these engines are all wrong for that. They’re not power-efficient at the thrust levels you’d need for standard atmospheric flight, and they’re so big and bulky you wouldn’t be able to carry any cargo. Now you use *these* smaller engines, they’ll have exactly the power curve

you need, and you can carry at least as much cargo as that Dreamchaser of yours, possibly more.”

“Well, you’re the professional pilot,” Rochelle said. “And you’ve got a good point. We’ll redesign it to those specifications.”

And there were other things Chet could do as a professional pilot. He’d started bartering Rhianna piloting lessons in return for the use of the Dreamchaser sub. She’d been studying on her own, with the help of her skill-chipped RIDE Kaylee, but there were some things you just needed another human for.

The Dreamchaser was a great little bird. Much more responsive than the *DiCaprio*, which wallowed like a bus. Chet liked to spend afternoons pulling high-gee acrobatics over the deep Dry with Nils as his flight suit. And that was another amazing thing—Fused with Nils, he could pull twice the gees without blacking out as in the best pressure suit he’d ever used. He chuckled as he thought about it. Rhianna had come along for one afternoon of flight, but it had proven a bit much for her. “That’s the advanced class,” Chet said. “Don’t worry, we’ll work up to it.”

Chet’s thoughts turned, as they often did, back to Rochelle. He could picture her leaning down, that glorious, ridiculous mane of hair falling to her side, draped like a curtain over one arm...how much did that all weigh, anyway? Five pounds? Or no, he corrected himself, two kilos? *They use metric here, need to get in the habit of thinking in it.* It might even be more like three or four, thanks to all the nanites. Just because they were tiny didn’t mean they didn’t have weight put together.

Though on the other hand, she probably didn’t actually *feel* all that weight. Many of the nanites had flyspeck cavorite lifters—they made the hair seem to blow in the breeze even when there wasn’t one, or move in slow motion, but also took a lot of the weight off. All that hair...he still thought it was silly to have so much. But on the other hand, he also found it attractive—though he wasn’t sure just how much of that was because of the lingering aftereffects from those nanites.

Anyway, it was a nice memory to indulge in, especially since it was the only way he could see her right now. Nils had locked out the recordings of her from his implant as part of the desensitization program. And Chet had to admit, it felt like the program was working. He could appreciate Rochelle’s looks without being drawn into a feedback loop where it was impossible to think of anything else anymore.

*:All part of the service,:* Nils sent cheerfully. *:Uncia tells me Shelley’s improving too.:*

“Thank goodness for small favors,” Chet said. “I can’t wait to see her in *person* again. Maybe we’ll actually be able to get to know each other this time.”

Though, to be fair, they’d started getting to know each other already through talks in their RIDEs’ voices and text instant messaging. It felt like a return to the days of the telegraph and the hand-cranked phone, but Rochelle’s edict forbidding personal contact even extended to VR and voice comm. It was texts or nothing.

And, somewhat to Chet’s surprise, text chat was enough for them to start getting a sense of each other. Chet had learned about Rochelle’s early life as Roger, and the way he’d gotten into RIDE programming without actually having one. (Did it bother Chet that Rochelle used to be a man? Chet imagined that it might have if he’d heard about it before meeting her, but given that he had ample experience to demonstrate that she was *definitely* a woman now, the matter was largely academic.)

In return, Chet had talked about his life back on Earth, growing up amid the

rubble of the bombed-out sections of Indianapolis and getting accepted into one of the remedial schools that the Earth government had set up as part of its clean-up-the-world program. Chet had been happy to let other people *clean up* the world; he just wanted to leave it as soon as he could. And so he had.

When you got right down to it, it was remarkable how much you really *could* share with just words. But then, people had been sharing their lives through just words for hundreds of years, hadn't they? Even before the Internet, there were books. So, he and Shelley were starting to get a sense of each other's personality through their communications, and it felt like they were each people that the other could live with.

And the song played on.

*'cos I'm walking on clouds  
And she is leadin' the way*

Rochelle Seaford sat in the waiting room at Donizetti RIDEworks, her hair pulled forward into her lap where she could run her hands through it, comb it, or otherwise play with it, as she often did when she was nervous. Uncia lay on a RIDE couch nearby, head resting between her forepaws, her long fluffy tail twitching.

"So this is it, huh? Ending the dry spell?" Uncia sent over a private channel to the short-range comm receiver in Rochelle's Fuser nanos. "All is forgiven, come on home, or at least de-Fuse?"

Rochelle snorted. "You said yourself we'd both been making great progress. I think it's time we put that to the test."

"I said you were *improving*," Uncia said. "You can't tell how much until you test it."

"So, we're *going* to test it," Rochelle said. "If we can live and work together, then we make full use of the 'Tiresias' mod we cooked up for Maxima. If not, we go our separate ways, no harm, no foul. We can't keep putting off finishing the ship. Not with the project Zane's working on coming up." There wasn't any good way to put DINcom in someone's head without implants yet, and Rochelle had yet to nerve herself up to install any, so for now she avoided mentioning classified information over the link.

"What *is* it with you and Chet, anyway?" Uncia asked. "How can you even know if you feel anything for him with all that interference from my nanos?"

"It's not *about* 'feeling anything for him,'" Rochelle said. "It's about working together. He's got a nice body, he's good in the sack, *and* he's a pilot. Not just *any* pilot, but jumpdrive rated. If we can get along, fine. If we grow feelings for each other later, fine. If we don't, also fine."

"You really do take after Rufia, don't you?" Uncia said. "If it moves, sleep with it?"

"Well, I'd like to think I'm a *little* more genteel than dear Rufia," Rochelle said.

"You don't belch as much, I'll give you that," Uncia said.

"And as for sleeping around, why not?" Rochelle shrugged. "Being a woman's still new enough that it has a lot of novelty for me. And we've got perfect birth control, we've cured all forms of VD...and it's fun."

"It *is* fun," Uncia admitted. "I'll give you *that*, too. But you did pretty much just meet the guy."

"I've talked a lot more with him than any of the people Rufia set me up with at a

bar,” Rochelle said. “Anyway, *you’re* the one whose Fuser nanites went all ‘Love Potion Number 9’ on us.”

“I know, I know, don’t remind me,” Uncia groaned, sending an eyeroll emote.

“So how far off is he?” Rochelle asked.

“He’ll be here in about five minutes,” Uncia said. “I’ll give you a thirty-second warning so you can be sure to look all supermodelly when he makes his entrance.”

“Thanks, Un-hon, but ix-nay on the supermodelly,” Rochelle said. “I’m trying *not* to break his little brain, remember? We can’t get to know each other that way.”

“Probably a good plan,” Uncia agreed.

Chet and Nils walked Fused into the Donizetti waiting room, and stopped short. She was there, un-Fused! Rochelle sat in one of the waiting room seats, while Uncia lay sprawled out on a RIDE couch nearby. Rochelle clearly had her nanites dialed way back. Her hair—jet black at the moment—was gathered up in a long tail or braid behind her. Her posture was ordinary, even demure—a far cry from the “swirly girl and her girly swirl” he’d met that day in the park. And she was regarding him with curiosity rather than desire.

Of course, the nanites weren’t *completely* absent. Her hair and makeup were still CGI-perfect, and she was surrounded by a bit of a Raphaelite glow effect from their light diffusion. Chet suspected she’d probably just forgotten to turn that effect off. But it was definitely closer to plain-vanilla human than Chet had ever seen her before. He found he rather liked it.

:*Uncia says we’re go for a de-Fuse, if we want:* Nils sent. :*Ready for a face-to-face?:*

:*Let’s give it a shot:* Chet agreed. A moment later, Nils peeled away, leaving him standing there in his jeans and flight jacket. “Uh...hey,” Chet said.

Rochelle nodded. “Hey, good to see you again. How’ve you been?”

“Eh...okay, I guess.” Chet shrugged. “You know, same old same old.” He glanced at Rochelle and raised an eyebrow. “So I guess we’re good for personal contact again?”

“Apparently. You’re not feeling any sudden urges to ravish me, are you?”

Chet grinned. “Not any *sudden* urges. I do remember we had a lot of fun that way, and I wouldn’t say no if you offered, but I don’t feel like I need to press the issue.”

Rochelle chuckled. “Same here. But we’ll have to see how we feel about it in half an hour or so.”

Chet nodded, then grimaced. “The stupid thing is, I still don’t know whether the fact I *am* still attracted to you is real, or just a holdover from the nanites.”

“Again, same here.” Rochelle sighed. “But there comes a point where we just have to shrug and ask ourselves if we can just deal with it as it is. Hell, as many people fall in love naturally and then end up getting divorced, apparently even ‘real’ love isn’t always real enough.”

“Guess you’ve got a point there.” Chet glanced toward the doors to the rideworks’ inner workings. “So, you said to show up with my wings on. That’s it? You had *Signor* Donizetti go ahead and slap it together?”

“She did indeed, young man!” The short Italian with the hearty voice grinned crookedly as he stepped through the door. “And she is every centimeter the *belissima* beauty she looked on the drafting board. Come along and take a look.”

Donizetti led the two humans and RIDEs through the RIDEworks corridors, past

the smaller bays where human-sized RIDEs went through their paces, toward the larger hangar complex at the other end where giant RIDEs were made. “The industrial fab assembler just finished work a couple of hours ago. No one has been inside since it came together. I thought I would save that honor for you.”

“Ah, that new RIDE smell,” Uncia smirked. “Maybe we shoulda asked Rhi and Kay to be here for this.”

“I did, actually.” Rochelle grinned. “I could tell Rhi was *very* tempted, but she said she didn’t want to intrude on our moment. But she’s going to want to hear *all about it* later.”

Chet followed along behind her, hand resting idly on Nils’s head as he watched Rochelle walk. There was no sashay in her step this time; she simply put one foot in front of the other and moved forward like an ordinary human being. It was strange to see her this way. Of course, she still looked just as sexy from the rear view in general, and Chet kept remembering times from the bedroom when he’d watched her walking toward him...

*Argh! No!* Chet tried to force the images out of his head. *I can’t keep thinking about her like that. It’s demeaning. Objectifying. She’s a person, worthy of respect for a lot more than just her physical attractiveness...no matter how physically attractive she is.*

Chet sighed. Maybe he still had a ways to go yet in the treatment. Or maybe it was just the evolutionary imperative to breed that he’d inherited just the same as every other guy. Either way, he resolved to go the extra mile to behave himself. He was going to be the perfect gentleman if he had to shoot himself, dammit!

Donizetti placed his palm on a biometric scan plate next to the final door, then ushered them through as it slid open. “And there she is: the *Uncia Maxima*.”

A gleaming white flying wing shuttle stood before them in the hangar. It was slightly larger than Rhianna’s Dreamchaser, and of the same general design, but the shape was subtly different. The curves and bulges were in different places, probably to accommodate the transformation machinery. “Ooooh!” Uncia squealed. “I can’t *wait* to put her on!”

“*Can* we fly her now?” Chet asked. “You don’t need to do, like, wind tunnel tests or whatever?”

“Most of the necessary diagnostics have been done,” Donizetti said. “This is not some experimental plane made from untested and unproven technology. Well, not *much* untested and unproven technology. But fundamentally, she is no different from the suborbitals and RIDEs we have made already—and she is fully flight-ready.”

“And you got the ‘T’ system in there, too?” Rochelle said.

“Indeed.” Donizetti nodded. “It was not so hard at all. In fact, I can see some possible applications for it in smaller shells as well...but we can discuss that later. For now...let’s go aboard, shall we?” He manipulated a small hand-held remote, and a hatch in the side of the ship swung open, extending stairs down to the hangar floor.

Rochelle grinned at Uncia. “After you, Un-hon!”

“Yay!” the leopardess squealed, bounding up the stairs. Rochelle followed, then Chet, then Nils. *Signor* Donizetti brought up the rear.

“Not so different from the ‘chaser, is it?” Chet said, looking around. There was a cargo area in the back, with spaces for fitting modules for cargo storage, passenger seats, or other equipment. Just ahead of that was a small utility area with heads,

compact gee-optional shower, sleep sacks, and kitchenette with micro-fabber. Then in front was the flight deck, with variable-config seats for either humans or Fused RIDEs and a couple of fold-out seats for two more passengers.

Chet ran a hand over the flight instrument boards. “Oh wow. I always wondered what a sports flier shuttle would look like. I’ll bet this will be amazing to fly.”

Rochelle sat down in one of the pilot seats. “So how does the Fuse work, exactly?”

“You’ll have to be Fused up with your RIDEs already, of course,” Donizetti reminded her. “Then when you trigger it, the flight couch lowers while a Fuse capsule rises up from the floor to seal over it. You can operate Fused in any mode—Fuser, Walker, or suborbital.”

“Sweet!” Uncia said, tail swishing. “I can’t wait to try it!”

Rochelle grinned at Chet. “Want to go ahead and take ‘er up, swing around the planet a few times? I’ll put in a call and get an orbital permit.”

“Do I *ever!* Shelley, I could kiss you!” Chet felt his cheeks heat as what he’d just said caught up to him. “Uh, I mean, in an enthusiastic, platonic kind of way...”

Rochelle giggled. “We might just have to see about joining the Zero Gee Club while we’re up there. But no promises.”

Chet felt his heart start to beat faster at the sound of that giggle. *It’s just nanite programming. Really.* But...when you got right down to it, did he really care? Meh... he’d table that for later. “Uh...Nils and I will just start doing the pre-flights, then...”  
*Yeah, that seems safe enough.*

A few minutes later, Donizetti had left to monitor the flight from the ground, and Rochelle watched through Uncia’s Fuser form’s optics as the likewise-Fused Chet and Nils tapped buttons on the control board to power the ship up. It had the very latest in omni-configurable hardlight panel tech, capable of simulating everything from analog gauges to *Star Trek* touchscreen tech, though Chet was using it in a basic no-frills configuration arranged for usability rather than fancy looks. He could have flown it completely by VR from Fuse space, but regs said subs had to have physical controls for unaugmented crew, so just as well to try them out. There were also *real* physical backup controls underneath, in case the hardlight failed.

*:So what do you think?:* Uncia purred across their link.

*:Well, I still think he’s perfectly dreamy,:* Rochelle admitted. *:And like him, I don’t know how much of that’s real and how much is residual imprinting. But unlike him, I don’t particularly care.:*

*:Uh-huh. You okay with this or think we should work on that treatment some more?:*

*:Oh, I’m not about to jump his bones without warning, or plan a wedding or anything.:* Rochelle smirked. *:I think we can see where it goes from here.:*

*:Looks like where it’s going is straight up to space!:* Uncia said gleefully. *:I can’t believe it...I’m gonna get to try out my new giant body at last!:*

*:Not just yours, if you don’t mind sharing...:* Rochelle reminded her.

*:Well, we’ll see about that. But it’s mine first!:*

“Okay, I think we’re just about ready to light this candle,” Chet said. “You want to take us up, Uncia? It being your new bod and all.”

“Meh...I want the first flight to be perfect, so I’ll let the professional handle it. But I’ll be watching you for pointers!”



“Fair enough.” Chet pushed the throttle forward, and the deep rumble of the lifters powering up vibrated through the ship. Sunlight flooded into the flight deck as the ship moved out of the hangar onto the RIDE factory’s short-takeoff runway. “Oooh, this is gonna be fun!”

“I can’t say I ever thought I’d be doing much in the way of flight duty,” Nils said. “But I’ve got to admit, it *is* kind of fun.”

“Just hold that thought, buddy. Here we *go!*” The G-forces pushed them back in their seat as the *Maxima* streaked down the runway and arced up into the air.

Rochelle gasped as the force of the takeoff pushed the air out of her lungs. “Wow! Are you playing with the gravitics? I don’t remember the Dreamchaser having this much power.”

“You’ve got about 30% more power in the engines, and only about 20% more mass. So there’s a bit more pick-up.” Chet gave the control yoke a nudge, then tapped a button on the control board and let go. “Course locked in. We’re clear straight through to orbit.”

“Awesome.” Rochelle grinned under Uncia’s helmet. “No more having to borrow Rhi’s sub all the time.”

“So when do I get to Fuse it?” Uncia asked.

“We could do some of that in orbit,” Chet suggested. “We should have plenty of time to play around like that. It’d be good to see if we leak any atmosphere during the mode-shift, anyway.”

“Maybe after that we can come down in the Dry and do some roaming around in the desert,” Rochelle said. “Try out Walker mode where there’s ground to walk on.”

Chet nodded. “Seems like a waste to bring this baby down to the ground, but I guess that’s part of what she’s made for.”

“You guys are kind of getting ahead of yourselves,” Nils put in. “Let’s enjoy the here and now first?”

Chet chuckled. “Good idea.”

The sky visible through the flight deck viewports gradually darkened to indigo, then to deep black. A soft chime sounded, and Chet glanced at the panel. “Well, that’s that. Welcome to orbit; hope you like the view.”

Rochelle and Uncia unstrapped from the seat and moved up to the window. “It’s great!” Uncia squealed. “Of course, we’ve seen it before from the Dreamchaser...but it looks different somehow from your own ship.”

Rochelle grinned. She had to admit, Uncia was right. Looking at the blues and tans of the Dry Ocean spread out beneath them had a certain extra spice to it with the knowledge that they were aboard their own ship. Of course, technically the Dreamchaser was partly Rochelle’s ship, too. And she couldn’t even say she wasn’t going to share *this* one with anyone, either. But still...

“Okay, enough rubbernecking,” Rochelle decided. “Let’s give the ship a good going-over now that we’re alone. And who knows...we might just try out some of the...amenities, mmm? I understand the sleep sacks zip together...”

“Uh...” Chet said. “I mean, sure! Let’s see what we have on board.”

“Heeey,” Uncia protested. “What about, y’know, Fusing?”

“We’ll have time for that later,” Rochelle promised. “We’ve got all the time around the world.”

Autopilot set, Chet and Nils followed Rochelle and Uncia to the utility area further back in the shuttle. Rochelle de-Fused into Uncia's Minima shell, leaving the larger body magnetically clamped to the floor, then opened the viewport in the roof. Cutting the artificial gravity, Rochelle pushed off and drifted up to the viewport. Her hair spread out and drifted along behind her like a comet's tail, the momentum bringing it swirling up around her as she stopped. She ran a hand through it and it pulled back into a more orderly ponytail. Then she glanced over her shoulder. "Hey, you coming?"

"Just a sec." Chet de-Fused from Nils and pushed off to follow her up. The shuttle had flipped over so they had a good view of the Dry Ocean passing beneath them as they orbited eastward. He glanced over at Rochelle as she peered out the window. The mini-shell she wore fit her like a catsuit...which, Chet supposed, it literally *was*.

She retracted the helmet, and favored him with a mischevous grin. "So...here we are, outer space, nobody else around for thousands of clicks...so how 'bout it? Wanna join the 'Zero G Club' for real?"

Chet grinned back at her, some smart-ass retort on the tip of his tongue...then he stopped and considered it. "You know...actually, given that this is our first flight in an untested vehicle, and we only just got to meet each other 'in the flesh' again...I think this really isn't the best time."

"Great!" Rochelle said. "That's just what I hoped you'd say."

Chet blinked. "Uh...what? You're *happy* I don't want to sleep with you?"

"It means the program's working!" Rochelle said. "We can make up our *own* minds now. You know what? This *totally* calls for some celebration sex!"

"Uh..."

Rochelle giggled. "Just kidding. But you should have seen the look on your face just now..."

"Very funny." Chet glanced out the viewport, just for somewhere else to look than at Rochelle's smirk. They'd just passed over Gondwana's west coast and were drifting across the sea toward Rodinia. It felt a little weird to be orbiting retrograde, but Rochelle had wanted a good view of the desert—and it made sense that if something did go wrong with the engines on launch, they didn't want to have to worry about staying afloat when they came down.

When you got right down to it, it was more strange to be orbiting at all. Chet hadn't done a lot of that in his pilot job, at least not in his shuttle. They'd all been trips up and back from the cruise liner. There hadn't been many opportunities to just cruise around. "Peaceful up here, isn't it?"

Then there was a loud THUMP and the lights went out.

"What the hell?" Uncia said. "You just had to invoke Murphy, didn't you?"

"That's not good. Better Fuse back up." Chet pushed off from the viewport and drifted back down to Nils. Rochelle and Uncia rejoined their larger body a moment later.

"What happened? Did something go wrong with the power systems?" Rochelle asked.

"Checking...I'm reading power fluctuations, and...something's plugged into the external charging port. Hey—our airlock is opening. The fuck?" Even as she spoke, Uncia popped open the storage compartments on her sides where she kept a pair of pulse pistols. "You packing?" she asked as Nils and Chet Fused back up.

"Never thought I'd need to in peacetime," Nils said.

“Then here, use this.” She floated one of the pistols over to him, and he caught it.  
“Right.” *:Just let me handle this, buddy, I’ve got experience.:*

*:Hey, no problem,:* Chet sent back. *:I won’t joggle your arm.:* He felt his pulse quickening, pounding in his ears, though he couldn’t be sure if it was a real sensation or just the effect of biofeedback from the Fuse. Either way, he knew this was serious. There was a reason the cruise ships tended to steer clear of Kepler. If someone had the chops to board you in outer space, they were probably scary dangerous.

Uncia and Nils took up positions to either side of the airlock hatch. The light on the access plate changed from green to red, indicating hard vacuum on the other side. It changed to amber, showing that air was flooding back into the lock from their charge tanks, then back to green as pressure equalized. This was it. Any second now, that hatch would open, and—

WHUMP! Before Chet could even comprehend what was going on, the light panels behind him and Nils and Rochelle/Uncia *exploded*. The blasts didn’t cut through the RIDEs’ armor plating, but they did throw the two of them together in the zero-G environment. They were still trying to disentangle themselves when the hatch opened and a powerful foot lashed out, slamming them backward against the opposite wall.

“Now don’t you no-hopers make me put on my boxing gloves. Bloody cliché, they are, aren’t they? Think you can stand up to me an’ my mates, you’ve got Buckley’s chance.” Chet lifted his and Nils’s head to find a kangaroo Integrate floating just inside the airlock, covering them with an outstretched forepaw that had a glow surrounding his fist. “Why don’t you be sports and chuck those gats over here, eh? When you can get yourselves unwrapped, anyway.”

“You’ve got *no* idea who you’re messing with,” Rochelle growled. But she gave the pistol a shove in the kangaroo’s direction anyway. Nils hadn’t managed to hold onto his; it was drifting by the airlock door just behind the kangaroo’s right ear.

“Rochelle, *nee* Roger, Seaford. Co-owner of the FreeRIDERS garage, co-inventor of DINsec, bloody great annoyance it is,” the kangaroo continued in his broad Australian accent. “And her boy-toy of the moment. Eh, I think I’ve got some pretty good oil who you are.”

“Then you know you’re not gonna get away with this!” Uncia put in.

“How did you even get in here? We’ve *got* the latest DINsec, I made sure of it,” Rochelle said. Uncia finally got disentangled from Chet, and pushed off to get a couple of meters’ separation.

The kangaroo snorted. “And it magically makes everything all safe? You bloody great wankers think that’s the fair dinkum?” He shook his head, long ears flopping. “It keeps the script kiddies from wiggling their magic fingers, too right, but exploits, back doors, and all the rest still work as well for Intie hackers as for any other blokes. And this great bird of yours ain’t got the latest patches.”

“What do you *want*?” Chet asked.

“Want? Oh, just this ship, pretty much,” the kangaroo said. He glanced over his shoulder. “C’mon aboard, Lambchop. We’re all good here.”

“Don’t *call* me that,” the bighorn sheep Integrate growled as he drifted in from the airlock just behind the kangaroo. “My *name* is Ramulus.”

“Like the Transformer toy?” Uncia put in, giggling. “Really?”

“He’ll always be ‘Lambchop’ to me,” the kangaroo said breezily.

“At least *I’m* not named *Skippy*,” Ramulus retorted, drifting to the corridor

forward to the flight deck and pulling himself through.

“Hey! I’ll ‘ave you know Skippy is a fine name for a ‘roo,” the kangaroo protested. “Got lots of fine tradition behind it.”

“Wasn’t the original Skippy a *girl* kangaroo?” Uncia said.

“It’s a unisex name,” Skippy insisted. “But we’re drifting. See, the problem we have with you stickybeaks is that the bloody *banks* have bloody great security. With DINsec, even we ace hackers can’t pull cash out. Which means our Enclaves don’t have an easy way to get our tucker anymore.”

“I thought the Council was helping support all Enclaves now,” Rochelle said.

Chet glanced back at the viewport. “Not *all* of them. You guys are from Rodinia, aren’t you?”

“Deadset, mate,” Skippy said. “You’re smarter than you look. So this bloody grouse beast is coming back with us to New Botany Bay. Maybe we can’t sell it as-is, but we can strip it for parts that’ll see us fit for donkey’s years.”

“You are *not* going to strip my new body,” Uncia growled.

“Uh-uh, wouldn’t try anything if I were you.” Skippy held up a cylindrical detonator with a big red button on top. “Not while we’ve got the Detonant hooked into your bird.”

“The what?” Nils said. “You know, that’s just a hardlight projection you’re holding.”

“True blue, mate. Don’t even need it, with me DIN, but it makes a great visual aid.” Skippy let it vanish. “The Detonant’s a ripper new bit o’ Intie-tech just out. Ya know ‘bout the discharge effect when you hook two S-batts together, right? Well, this can blow ‘em up instead.”

“Bullshit,” Rochelle said. “I’d have heard of something like that.”

“You’re hearing about it now, ain’t you? You’ve already seen what it does with the dinky S-batts behind your lighting plates. We can go bigger if we have to. So. I want the two of *you* to head out the airlock with me an’ back to our ship.” He nodded to Uncia and Rochelle. “Can’t have you thinkin’ it’s a good idea to Fuse with this monster, can we? As for you, we’ll keep you aboard here where you can’t get up to any mischief with your friends.”

:*What do we do?:* Nils sent across to Uncia. :*They’ve got the drop on us.:*

:*We play along, for now,:* Rochelle said. :*Maybe we can turn the tables down the road.:* Aloud, she said, “All right, you’ve got us. But if I can make a suggestion, instead of stripping the ship, maybe you could ransom her to us? We’ve still got a big chunk of money left...”

“I think we could work something out,” Skippy said. “For now, out the airlock, and no getting fancy. Lambchop, you ready here?”

“I *said* don’t call me that.” The sheep drifted back into view. “Flight deck secured and course laid in to keep pace with the *Dundee VII*. I’ll cover this one.”

“Too right. Come on, Sheila.”

Chet groaned inwardly as he watched Rochelle and Uncia follow the kangaroo out the airlock. *Well, this trip sure went downhill in a hurry.*

Rochelle drifted toward the ship located “below” the *Maxima*, a few hundred meters further out from the planet. It had the hazy outlines that betrayed a cloaking field run on low power. It would be entirely invisible from more than a few clicks away.

“So that’s the *Dundee VII*,” Rochelle said. It had the trademark curves of a Camelot Shipyards design. Not a surprise; until fairly recently, they’d sold ships to pretty much any Integrate who wanted them, without too much scrutiny on what Enclave they were from.

“Too right!” Skippy said cheerfully. “Pride of New Botany Bay, she is. And really good at bringing home the bacon. In.” He nodded to an airlock in the side, following the Fuser at a safe distance.

:*What do you think, should we try to take him?*: Uncia asked.

:*Negative.*: Rochelle shook her head. :*Not when he can blow up the ship with a thought.*: They drifted into the airlock, with Skippy right behind them. The hatch sealed and the lock repressurized. “So what now?”

“We de-orbit, make straight for New Botany Bay,” Skippy said. “Me mate up front will pilot us both down. Come along, we’ll go up front to meet him.”

“We don’t exactly have a choice, do we?” Uncia said.

“Fraid not. After you...”

As they walked, they felt the minor shifts in gravity that came about when a ship engaged its engines. “Looks like we’re starting down already. My mate doesn’t waste any time.”

The bridge wasn’t too far along the corridor. The ship bore some resemblance to the Clementine in terms of size and general style, so Rochelle knew what to expect when the door opened to reveal the bridge. Though it was built to be staffed by a crew of up to a half-dozen, Camelot’s automation meant that just one person could run it at need. That person was currently sitting in the captain’s chair, back to them.

“Here we are, then!” Skippy announced. “Hey, wait a tic...what’s going on here?” The main screen was displaying their course, a curving dotted line superimposed over the continent of Rodinia, ending in a point at the tip of Rodinia’s furthest west peninsula. “That’s the wrong bloody end of the continent!”

“Oh, there’s been a change in plans,” a smooth voice said from the captain’s chair.

Rochelle felt Uncia’s hackles rise, and she knew why, because that voice was just as familiar to her. So she knew what to expect when the captain’s chair swiveled to reveal a lynx Integrate dressed in a hardlight saffron robe. “Hello, Reggie,” Rochelle said.

“What do you mean, a change in plans? There’s been no bloody change in plans, I’m the one in charge here!” Skippy said.

A bright beam of light emanated from Reggie’s palm, slamming Skippy back against the bulkhead and singing his fur. “That’s the change in plans,” Reggie said. “Hello, Aunt Uncia, Aunt Rochelle. Appa will be quite pleased to meet you.”

As soon as Skippy and Rochelle left, Ramulus turned to Nils and Chet. “I don’t want any trouble out of you. I’d just as soon live and let live, but needs must when the devil drives.”

“Hey, we’re cool,” Chet said. “You don’t want trouble out of us, we don’t want trouble out of you either.”

“So here’s what I want,” the sheep said. “You de-Fuse. The RIDE powers down. The human...well, just sit there and don’t bug me while I’m working. Far as I’m concerned, you’re expendable.”

“All right, fine. Give me a sec.”

:*Are you sure about this, Chet? I don't like leaving you unprotected.*:

:*That's probably the point. This guy seems so confident in "Intie supremacy" there's nothing a measly old human could do to stop him.*: He slowly smiled. :*I'll just have to prove him wrong.*:

A minute later, Nils was folded up into his sleep mode, and Chet sat on one of the fold-out seats in the back of the flight deck while Ramulus prepared the *Maxima* shuttle for re-entry. “So...what's the deal with this ‘Detonant’ thing?” Chet asked. He kept his tone level and forced himself to relax, crossing his hands behind his head, trying to give the impression of just having been along for the ride with no real attachment to Rochelle. If they wanted to think of him as just their boy toy, fine with him. Might make them underestimate him all the more.

The sheep grunted. “Don't know. Don't care. It works, that's enough for me.”

“So you just...send a signal and boom, it reroutes the batteries somehow and they go ‘splody?’”

Ramulus shrugged. “Far's I know. Skippy's the one who actually does it. Cheeky little git won't trust anyone else with the frequency.”

“Where'd you get it?”

The sheep just grunted, turning his attention to the control panel again.

*Crud. No joy there.* Chet glanced at the board in front of Ramulus, and noticed that a particular indicator light was on. Suddenly, he had an idea. “Right. Uh...I need to use the head. You don't mind?”

“Don't fall in. Or no, better yet, *do* fall in. Save me some trouble later.”

*Riiiiight.*

“What the...Appa? You never said you were with *that* loonie,” Skippy said. It looked like his pride was more injured than anything else.

“Didn't I? Must have slipped my mind.” Reggie rose from the seat, advancing toward them. “Regardless, he's taken an interest in the FreeRIDers, and this seemed like the best chance for him to get his hands on some.” He pointed his hand at Uncia now, and her radio receiver started making an odd buzzing noise.

:*He's trying to force-Integrate us!*: Uncia said. :*...yeah, good luck with that.*:

Reggie's expression of triumph changed to a grimace of frustration. “What...? Why isn't it *working*?”

Rochelle chuckled. “Your Grandma Patil finally worked out how to fix that little design flaw. Uncia and Kaylee got two of the first prototypes, and they're rolling them out to everyone else as fast as possible.”

“Damn. I *knew* we should have Integrated you all when I had the chance.” Reggie growled. “Oh well, Appa will figure something out.”

“No way am I letting you deliver *anything* to that nutter,” Skippy said. “I'll...I'll blow the *Maxima* up before I let Appa have it.”

“Oh, go ahead,” Reggie said. “It would be a nice bonus, but we really just care about *them*, and what's inside their heads.” He nodded toward Uncia and Rochelle. “You know what? Why don't you just go ahead and take the *Maxima* and its other passenger on to New Botany Bay with Appa's compliments? Ram and I will send this ship back to you once we've delivered the cargo.”

Skippy stared. “Ram? He's in on this, too?”

“This just gets better and better,” Uncia deadpanned.

Skippy’s voice came to Rochelle and Uncia over a private comm channel. *:Right. Shield your optics now.:*

As they closed their eyes, there was a blinding flash, and a yowl of surprise and pain from Reggie. Then Skippy was pulling them backward through the hatch. “Thinks he can come the raw prawn with me? He’s come a gutser and no mistake,” Skippy muttered, slamming it closed behind them and melting the wheel with a blast from his palm. “This is a New Botany Bay ship, and I know all her secrets.”

“Yeah? So what’re you gonna do about your ‘mate’ back there?”

“He ain’t my bloomin’ *mate*. Not really. He’s a bloody offsider. Hired him as experienced space crew for the job.” Skippy shook his head. “How was I supposed to know he had kangaroos loose in the top paddock?”

“Clearly, New Botany Bay needs to do better background checks on its contractors,” Rochelle mused.

“So what now?” Uncia said. There was a loud banging from the hatchway behind them.

“London to a brick we can shut the whole thing down from the engine room. Come on, that hatch won’t hold for long.”

As they ran through the corridor past bulkhead after bulkhead, Rochelle spoke up. “So why are you doing this? You could just hand us over to him and take the ship. That’d get rid of us *and* turn you a tidy profit.”

Skippy shook his head. “Bloody hell, you think that’s all we’re in it for? The moolah? We’re not that way. We might not like ya, but we never planned to off ya, or put you in the hands of them ‘at would. We figured we could get a little ransom for the bird, maybe, and make you out to look like a dinky-di bunch of no-hopers. But nothing more than that, and that’s true blue.”

They passed through one last hatch and into the engineering section. It had a couple of monitoring stations, but as with most ships this size, was largely automated. Skippy slid onto a bench and brought up a virtual keyboard. “Now let’s see what we can mess up here...” The screen just flashed red. “What...? No! No, you bloody well *don’t!* This is *my bloody ship!* You can’t lock me out of *my own bloody ship!*” He entered more commands, frowned. “No, that’s no good...”

“Hold on, let me at it. Maybe I can help—” Rochelle moved forward, but was stopped cold by Skippy’s glare.

“No you can’t. This is point of bloomin’ *honor*, this is. I ain’t going to be bested on my own bloody ship!”

“All right. Well, we’ll just be over here, trying to buy you more time when bobcat boy shows up,” Rochelle said.

Uncia sounded concerned. *:Uh...how we gonna do that? He’s got that cannon... we aren’t even armed.:*

*:Well, first we de-Fuse to the Minima shell,:* Rochelle replied.

*:We what? But that thing doesn’t have any armor at all!:*

*:No, but it’s the closest to an Integrate we can look.:* Rochelle smirked. *:See, Reggie’s basically an adolescent. A teenager. Sooo...crank those nanite factories to the max, and let’s get distracting!:*

*:Eww. Isn’t that, y’know, like incest or something?:*

*:Uncia, you might call Kaylee ‘great grandma,’ but you’re not actually related.:*

:Well, I guess that's true. Still, eww.:  
:So c'mon, get ready, and let's make this good.:

Chet made his way back into the cargo area of the ship. He glanced over his shoulder at the corridor up to the flight deck, but so far there was no sign Ramulus was interested in following. Good. Very quietly, Chet peeled back the edge of the floor mat to reach an access panel.

He wasn't exactly what you'd call an engineer, but as a pilot Chet had studied enough about most shipboard systems to be able to make any necessary repairs that might come up. He'd made sure to familiarize himself with the *Maxima's* schematics before ever launching, as a matter of habit. Now it was time for that to pay off.

One of the luxury extras Rochelle had built into the ship was induction charge plates in the flight couches. Sort of the equivalent of seatwarmers for humans, Chet gathered. (Though the ship had those, too.) Any RIDEs, or for that matter Integrates, piloting the ship could charge up without ever having to get up. And it seemed like Ramulus wasn't at all averse to taking advantage of a little luxury when the job offered—Chet had noticed the indicator light for the induction charger was active.

Well, that was just going to be his mistake.

This panel held the main power leads for the ship's electrical system. They were color-coded—blue for the leads from the conventional generators that fed RIDEsafe sockets, and red for those that led to and from sarium batteries. The color-coding was important, because if you cross-connected the wrong wires, and tried to charge a sarium battery (like the ones in a RIDE or Integrate) *from* a sarium battery (like the ones that powered all the ship's systems *except* the chargers), you'd end up ruining both of them. But all the wires used standard connectors, since you didn't want to have to double the necessary numbers of spare parts.

Chet pulled on a pair of insulated gloves. He'd much rather have disconnected the power before fiddling with high-voltage wires, but like the sheep had said, needs must when the devil drives. *Or when he's piloting your shuttle...*

First, he had to disengage the safety interlocks. He opened a panel to the side of the cables, exposing a number of fuses. *Crap, which ones were they? This would be a lot easier with Nils to jog my memory.* But it came to him a moment later. Fuse 4 controlled the safety system for the pilot's side inductive charger, and Fuse 17 was on the one for the starboard side secondary sarium reserve battery. He took a deep breath and yanked them.

Nothing happened...but then, nothing was *supposed* to happen. Well, not *quite* nothing. A couple of indicator lights for the missing fuses would be on in the flight deck, but they were on an overhead panel that didn't have anything to do with the business of flying the ship. Hopefully Ramulus wouldn't get the urge to look up and notice them.

Now it was just a simple matter of unplugging a blue cable and replacing it with a red one. Chet took a deep breath and did it. This resulted, a moment later, in an entirely gratifying bellow from the flight deck. "AAAAH!!! My batteries! What have you—"

Ramulus lurched to his feet, took a few halting steps toward the corridor, then fell to his knees, silver slime dripping from his nostrils and mouth. "You...what did you..."

"Looks like you're not wired for AC, big guy," Chet said. "Too bad. It's gonna cost a lot to replace the battery I had to blow out just now..."



Ramulus got up and staggered forward again. “When I get my hands on you...”

Chet waited for him to enter the wider cargo room, then dodged past him. In the throes of a battery meltdown, the Integrate’s reactions were nowhere near fast enough to grab him.

As he passed, Chet noticed a small gem winking just above the base of the sheep’s tail. He gave it a quick moment of thought, then decided, *Yeah, let’s risk it.* Putting his shoulder down, Chet lunged forward, hitting the sheep in the small of the back. As he fell forward again, Chet grabbed the DIN from its socket and pulled away.

The bighorn yelped. “Hey! That’s dirty pool!”

“Yeah, and you’re swimming in it.” Chet retreated to the corridor, sealed the hatch, and locked it. He considered opening the dorsal cargo hatch and blowing Ramulus out into space, but decided against it. They might want to interrogate him later, after all.

As he walked back up to the flight deck, Chet tapped the “boot” button on Nils, then took his seat at the controls while he waited for his friend to start back up. *Hope Rochelle’s doing all right over there.*

Reggie at last forced the bridge hatch open and stalked through the corridor. Through his connection to the ship, he could sense they were in the engine room, undoubtedly trying to undo his control over the ship. Well, good luck with that! Though...actually, he supposed it might be possible. Not so much from Rochelle and Uncia, who were after all still meat and mech, but that Skippy fancied himself a hotshot hacker and was an Integrate besides. *Well, just have to hurry and shut them both down.* He didn’t anticipate any problems.

The engineering hatch wasn’t hard to force open. Perhaps they hadn’t had time to barricade it properly. Reggie stepped inside...and found himself face to face with a figure not that much taller than he was. It was Uncia, but a much smaller version of the cat—her curves slimmer and more human, with long glossy black hair that almost touched the ground. For a moment, he almost wondered if she’d Integrated, then he remembered hearing about a minimalist form of DE shell she was working on. He had to admit, it looked *good.*

As he approached, she held her hands up. “Wait! Stop! I’m unarmed...I just want to talk.” He could see her eyes were downcast, her shoulders slumped—the posture of defeat. Well, fine, he could spare her a few seconds.

“Talk, huh? About what?”

She looked up at him. “If I come with you willingly...will you let Chet and Nils go?”

*Down to me, the change has come, she’s under my thumb...* “Why should I? If he means that much to you, that’s all the more reason to keep him.”

“I could...sweeten the deal for you.” She slunk closer, tail swishing, sheer grace and perfection in motion. Reggie’s body started to remind him that yes, he definitely was a tom. And toms had a prerogative just as big as Inties. Maybe bigger.

“Oh yeah? And just how would you do that?” Reggie took a moment to consider. Did he have time? Hmm...yeah, Kenth wouldn’t expect to hear from him for another half hour or so. “If you sweeten it *enough*, I could probably be persuaded...”

“Then let me...*purr*suede you.” She slid up to him, and leaned down to kiss him muzzle to muzzle. Like most women he’d been with, she was several centis taller, but

Reggie didn't mind; that was just nature. Besides, he wasn't short where it counted.

Their lips met. She put her arms around him, and he felt fur rub against fur. So what if hers was hardlight? It felt real enough to him. His tongue tingled...

Rochelle broke off the kiss as Reggie's eyes glazed over. "Yep...I've still got it." She checked with Uncia. *:Have we got him?:*

*:We've got him!:* Uncia was silent for a moment, then added, *:Aw, crap. But we can't keep him. He's sandboxed. He'll reboot in a couple minutes.:* Since so many Integrates had been so easily hacked during the battle of Alpha Camp, security-conscious Integrates had developed countermeasures, including keeping their consciousness processes in a sandbox, blocked off from their core systems. It looked like Appa's clique were among the security-conscious.

*:You can't bust out of it?:*

*:Not in the time we have. We'd need a couple of friendly Inties to brute-force it. And I can't say I'd trust even the one Intie we have right now.:*

*:Crap. Well, time for Plan B.:* She hustled Reggie over to the hatch in the wall marked "Engineering Airlock Access," opened the door, and shoved him in. She slammed her fist down on the release. "Take a giant step for mankind." The other door opened, and Reggie went tumbling out into space.

*:Harsh,:* Uncia said. *:I like it.:*

*:Meh, he's an Integrate. He'll survive. We can comm someone to pick him up later.:* She turned to Skippy and said aloud, "How's it coming?"

"I'm in!" Skippy reported.

"Great!" Rochelle waved a hand at a nearby parts fabber, and it quickly spit out a component. She tossed it to the kangaroo. "Here, slot this in the console, quick. It's the very latest spec of DINsec."

Skippy caught it and gave it a dirty look. "G'arn, I'm supposed to plug in a chip you've probably back-doored from here to Brisbane?"

"Who do you want to risk having access, me or Reggie? You've got about two minutes to make up your mind before a very angry lynx is going to try to claw his way back into this ship," Rochelle said.

"We'll need five more of these for Engineering, and another four for the bridge," Skippy said quickly. "Here's the schematics."

"Got ya covered." Rochelle replicated a dozen more, grabbed a handful, and ran back up the corridor.

The next thing Reggie knew, he was tumbling end over end. He shook his head muzzily, trying to clear it. His first coherent thought was, *Wow, what a kisser!*

Then reality reasserted itself as he realized he was falling through hard vacuum. His body had already kicked in its automatic vacuum survival reflexes—closing pores and nictitating membranes, emptying the lungs, switching over to other forms of oxygen reserves. Integrates were built to survive in all environments, and even without space paks he still had enough oxygen to get by for almost ten minutes before he'd have to hibernate. *What the fu...?*

He quickly replayed his logs of the last few minutes. Supplicating snow leopard, kiss...and then a security breach. His countermeasures had brought him back on-line a couple of minutes later, but by then she'd already dumped him out an airlock. The ship

was several clicks away and receding further by the moment.

*That...that bitch of a queen! That queen bitch!* Reggie growled, righting himself with his lifters. Some things just *weren't done*, and playing with an Integrate's heart (or, if he was honest, his libido) was one of them. *Your ass is mine.*

At least they hadn't taken his DIN. Probably hadn't had time to look for it. Not that it would have been easy to find regardless; he kept it hidden under a patch of hardlight fur that matched his pelt. Now he warmed it up and tried to access the *Dundee VII's* on-board computer. As he'd half-expected, his login didn't work, and when he tried to hack back in he met an impenetrable firewall. He swore again, then set the DIN to a different frequency.

*:Kenth! I need you! And I also need my spare space paks.:*

The smarmy reply came back a moment later. *:Going with Plan B, hmm? Wondered what possessed you to go on a spacewalk without a suit.:*

*:Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, wise guy,:* Reggie fumed. *:Just hurry up with my gear and an intercept before the meat beats feet. Appa's not going to be happy about this.:*

But on the bright side, at least Rochelle and Uncia were on the *Dundee*, not the *Maxima*, and it was too far away for them to reach in a hurry. *Heh heh, no Fusing the Donizetti sub-sized shell for you! Which is kind of a pity, 'cuz now you're sitting ducks.*

"Well, there's Skippy's ship." Nils brought up an optical zoom and superimposed it on the flight deck's head-up display panel. "No sign they know anything's up yet."

"Well, yeah. If they knew something was up, we probably wouldn't be here," Chet said. "There's a cheerful thought. So, what do we do?"

"You're asking me? I thought you were the hotshot ace pilot."

"Yeah, but you're the grizzled veteran soldier. Since we're in a potential combat situation and all..."

Nils snorted. "Hey, all my military experience is based in ground-pounding. If you wanted to know exactly how to schuss down a slope to get the drop on a bunch of Sturmie she-wolves, I'd be your guy. But out here, *you're* the one who knows what's what." He nodded pointedly over their shoulder, toward the rear compartment. "Anyway, you didn't do too badly without me."

"Thanks." Chet considered. "You know, given that as far as they know ol' Lambchop there is still in charge, there's no reason they should be suspicious if we slowly close up with them. And the closer we get, the less they'll want to blow us up because it could damage them too."

"Sounds reasonable. Let's do it."

"Right." Chet shoved the throttle forward, and guided the *Maxima* in closer to the other ship. He kept a close eye on it through the optical zoom, which is how he happened to notice the rear airlock open and a body hurtle out. "What...? Hey!"

"Well, there's a thing," Nils said. "Not Shelley. Or the 'roo, for that matter. What...a lynx Integrate in a bathrobe?"

Chet shook their head. "*Something's* going on on that ship. Should we try to call Uncia?"

"Let's hold off on that for now. We still don't know who's in control over there. But maybe we should power up our weapons just in case?"

Chet reached over to the bank of fire control switches. "Yeah. Yeah, I think that works for me."

Rochelle walked back into Engineering. “Got the bridge all kitted out.”

“Good on ya,” Skippy replied, peering at the main engineering console. “Looks like that wally tried to hack his way in again, but didn’t have any luck. *I* coulda done it, of course. Piece of piss for a *real* hacker.”

“Sure.” Rochelle went over to Uncia’s full-sized shell and Fused the minima back into it. “So, now we need to do something about Lambchop over there.” She turned to face Skippy. “But first, you need to disarm that ‘Detonant’ thing. I won’t have my ship blowing up.”

Skippy snorted. “Pig’s arse! I’d be a bloomin’ wally meself if I gave up me ace in the hole.”

“Well, how about this?” A hardlight broadsword appeared in Uncia’s hand. “You disarm the Detonant, and I don’t see how much crap I can slice up in here. I may not have any guns on me, but I’m *never* unarmed.”

*:He’s trying to hack me!: Uncia reported. :Fat chance. I don’t care how good he is, he’s not getting past your newest DINsec in a hurry.:*

“Ten,” Rochelle said, raising the blade. “Nine. Eight...”

“No way!” Skippy raised his fists, and a pair of glowing boxing gloves appeared on them. “I’ll take you down good an’ proper ‘fore I let you have a go in here!”

Rochelle smirked. “Sure, you do that. With both you *and* me fighting, I’m sure we’ll cause *twice* the collateral damage. Five. Four. Three...”

“*Wait!*” Skippy sighed, and lowered his fists. His ears drooped. “Truth is...there is no Detonant. No such thing. Never was.”

Uncia’s ears swiveled forward and her eyes narrowed. “No shit?”

“It was a bloody Corbomite Maneuver. A bluff.” Skippy slumped into the console’s seat. “There’s a zero-day halt-and-catch-fire exploit on those light panels you used. I could blow them up, but not anything else with the level of access I had.”

Rochelle shook her head. “Well, *shit*. I don’t know whether to congratulate you or strangle you.”

Uncia giggled. “You pulled it off really well.”

“Thanks. I dunno where that leaves us now, though—” Skippy broke off as an alarm tone sounded from the console. He stared at it, and his ears shot straight up. “*Starreuth!* Radar contact, inbound, fast!” He raised his wrist and his DIN flashed. The console lights twinkled back. “Aw no. They’ve got a bloody *dragon!*”

“Figures they’d bring backup,” Rochelle said. “Quick, let’s get to the bridge.” She turned and ran for the door, and Skippy bounded after her. She glanced over her shoulder. “What weapons you got on this thing?”

“Nothing worth a zack. Just a couple gauss popguns for clearing space junk.” Skippy shook his head. “If I had any real guns, we wouldn’a needed the Detonant bluff.”

“Terrific. Well, we’ll do what we can, anyway.”

*:Wow, really got yourself in a jam this time, huh?:* Kenth oozed. He’d never thought much of Reggie, and hadn’t made any secret of his resentment over having to work with the lynx.

Reggie growled, then sighed. Regardless of whether Kenth was a jerk, Appa wasn’t big on his lieutenants fooling themselves. *:Yeah, I guess I did. But we’re gonna fix it.:* He reached out as Kenth glided by in the vacuum, snagging the harness strapped

around the bronze dragon's body and pulling himself in. He worked his way hand over hand to the pack on Kenth's back where his spare gear was stored. A couple of minutes later he had several hours' worth of oxygen and a hardlight spacesuit that let him warm back up.

*:That's better. Here's the plan. You let me off here, then fly around and create a diversion. While you have them distracted, I'll move in and—:*

Kenth sent a "snort" emoticon. *:Enough of your "plans." I'm taking over this operation now, and we don't have time for any more fiddly nonsense. I'll take out the engines, then we'll see what's what.:*

*:Wait! You don't know what you're doing! If you kill them, Appa will have your hide!:*

*:No, he'll have your hide,:* the dragon sent smugly. *:After all, you're the one who screwed it up. But don't worry. If it comes to that, I can give you a quicker end than Appa would. I hear we dragons find you lynxes tasty.:* Kenth pulsed his lifters and fired a burst of compressed air from his dragon-sized space maneuver pak. Then he opened his jaws and took aim.

"Well, there's a thing." Nils nodded to the screen. "That dragon—"

"On it." Chet led the dragon with the HUD's crosshairs, then squeezed the trigger on the flight yoke. The *Maxima's* wing-mount pulse cannons fired, beams of energy lancing out toward the dragon. "I think I winged him!" The dragon fired thrusters from its space pak, altering course to take it out of the line of fire—but also spinning around to take aim at *them*.

"Whoa crap!" Chet shoved the control yoke hard over, barely avoiding the plasma beam that lanced out of the dragon's mouth. "That would leave a mark!"

Nils opened a link to the ship's combat computer. "You dodge, I'll shoot."

"Got it. I'll try to keep us from getting crispy-fried."

"Yeah, do that." The pulse cannons fired again, and the dorsal-mount gauss turret popped up and started throwing rocks.

Skippy stared out the viewport as the *Maxima* opened fire. "Fair suck of the sav, look at that!"

"Something tells me Lambchop's not in control over there anymore," Rochelle deadpanned.

"They can't take on a dragon Intie in sub mode! They're sitting ducks!" Uncia said. "Why don't they Fuse?"

Rochelle facepalmed. "They don't know they *can*. We never told them about the Tiresias system. We were saving it for a surprise, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. We better tell them now." Uncia hesitated for just a moment, then sighed. "I really wanted the first Fuse."

"I know, Un-hon. But sometimes these things happen. Open a comm line and let them know."

"On it."

In the midst of lining up a shot, Nils registered a fast-time comm request. A split-second later, Uncia's avatar popped up in front of him. "Listen, Nils, you gotta Fuse up." Nils blinked at her. "We *are* Fused. Chet couldn't handle the Gs otherwise."

“No, no, I mean with the ship!” Uncia said. “We were kinda keeping this as a surprise, but we built an experimental system into the bird, based on that centaur shell we found in the same building as you. It can switch the *Maxima*’s body around to let it link up with either guys or gals. I’m beaming you the info now. Give that dragon asshole a bite or two for me, huh?”

Nils opened the file Uncia tossed over. It was full of the schematics and code necessary to Fuse a male RIDE into the *Maxima* shell. “Got it. On it. Thanks.” He cut the transmission and activated the Fuse.

Chet was startled, to say the least, when the flight controls retracted out of his hands. When his seat reclined and lowered into the flight deck with him and Nils still on it, he was downright surprised. “Nils? What the heck—?”

“Bear with me, buddy. This is gonna get awesome.”

Reggie held onto the harness for dear life as Kenth jinked and dodged, changing direction constantly to try to avoid taking hits and get a bead on the sub. It wasn’t as bad as it would have been in an atmosphere, with the rushing of wind and centrifugal force to try to pull him off, but it was quite bad enough. Kenth was moving this way and that, and Reggie kept getting snapped like a whip. He finally managed to work his feet under another loop of harness. *:Argh! You idiot dragon, we need to abort and get out of here! This is completely off the road map!:*

*:Screw that. I’m not leaving without destroying at least one ship!:*

*:You do realize Ramulus is on that ship, right?:*

*:Meh, he knew the risks, and I never liked him that much anyway. Ooh, we’ve got him now!:* Kenth dropped below the shuttle’s line of fire, zooming up toward its belly.

That was when the shuttle suddenly grew legs and a head. A very toothsome snow leopard head, which lashed out and closed around Kenth’s neck. Propelled by its own lifters, the giant winged snow leopard slammed into the dragon’s body, ripping with all four claws. The dragon howled in surprise and pain.

Reggie twisted his body aside as a metal talon tore through the space where he’d been a moment before. *:SHIT!:* He tried to pull free, but to his horror found he was now tangled up in a torn segment of the harness.

The snow leopard changed again, this time taking on a huge humanoid Fuser form. *:See, this is what you get when you pick on someone your own size,:* Nils sent smugly. The leopard gave Kenth a lifter-driven kick to the side. Reggie felt several of the dragon’s ribs crack through his skin-to-skin contact. With a groan, the dragon went spinning away into space.

As the dragon crumpled up and stopped putting up any fight, Rochelle felt a great sense of relief and elation. “Woohoo! It worked!” Before she even quite knew what she was doing, she’d de-Fused back into the minima shell, grabbed Skippy, and delivered him a big kiss full on the lips.

The kangaroo’s eyes glazed over for a moment, then he shook his head. “Wowser. What was *that* for?” He rubbed his muzzle with the back of a handpaw.

“Oh, just...I dunno, being here,” Rochelle said. “My design worked! Boy *did* it work! We kicked that dragon’s dragony ass!”

“Well, *some* of us did,” Uncia put in. “Others just got to stand around and watch.”

Rochelle opened a comm channel. “Hey, guys, come on in and dock the ship. We’ll be coming back aboard. Just give me a minute to comm the Rangers to come pick that dragon up.”

“We’ve got that sheep to drop off, too,” Chet said. “Boy he’s not happy about how I fried his batteries.”

“Uh...yeah. About that.” Skippy’s ears drooped. “I guess you’re gonna want to turn me over too, huh?”

Rochelle waved a hand. “Eh...I think we can let you slide *this* time. You’ve learned a lesson, we’ve learned a lesson, we got to beat up some Appalites...we’ll call it even. But no more piracy, eh? I’m sure the Diet of Enclaves can work something out if you get in touch.”

“We’ll...think about it.”

Rochelle nodded. “Good enough. See you later.”

Skippy waved half-heartedly. “Hooroo, mate.”

Rochelle Fused back into Uncia’s full-sized body and made her way down the corridor again. As she left the bridge behind, Uncia giggled over the comm. *:You know, for a super-duper hot-shit non-script-kiddie hacker, he’s not very security conscious where it counts. Not sandboxed at all.:*

Rochelle stopped. *:Uncia, you didn’t...:*

*:Didn’t what? He frickin’ hijacked us, remember? And then gave us a little speech about how we’re ‘too complacent’? I’ll complacent him!:*

Rochelle facepalmed. *:Uncia, that’s not why I kissed him.:*

*:Yeah? Why did you kiss him then? Just horny again?:*

Rochelle sighed. *:Oh, never mind. Just...never mind.:*

Uncia smirked. *:Whadaya think, want me to give him a big ol’ crush on us?:*

*:Not just no, but hell no. One technologically-induced crush at a time, please. In fact, no messing with his head at all. We’re better than that.:* Rochelle considered. *:Though y’know, maybe having him send us reports about what’s going on in his Enclave every so often and then forget he did it wouldn’t be so bad.:*

*:Done and done! One suggestion planted!:* Uncia said cheerfully. *:Now let’s board up and go! It’s my turn to Fuse now!:*

Reggie clawed through one last strap, and was finally free of the harness that bound him to the crippled dragon. *Now what?* He glanced across to the *Dundee VII*, with the *Maxima* now docked to its dorsal cargo hatch. They’d be calling Zharus Orbital Tracking to arrange for a paddy wagon, he was sure. And he didn’t want to be here when they arrived. It was going to be bad enough reporting his failure to Appa; he *really* didn’t want Mom and Dad to show up and cluck disapprovingly over him in custody. That would be the last straw.

He glanced up at Zharus above him, just a few kiloklicks away. If he could just get up a good turn of speed, he could...burn up like a meteorite when his batteries ran dry about halfway down. *Crap.*

*:Nnngh...:* Kenth groaned, twitching his mangled limbs. A rent in the flesh of his side opened, exposing a glint of metal. And suddenly Reggie had an idea. He plunged his hands into the wound.

*:OW! What...what are you doing? St-stop!:*

:*Sorry, Kenth ol' buddy, but if I'm gonna get outta here I need to boost my storage capacity.*: Reggie said, rummaging for the metal he'd just seen. :*And this is just what the doctor ordered.*: His arms were in up to the elbows now, but he almost had it. Almost...almost...*there!* A quick yank and it came free: the irregular bulbous orb of a natural-grown Integrate sarium battery. They grew in clusters, and on a dragon this big each nodule was about the size of an orange. Reggie dissolved his hardlight helmet and chowed down. His Integrate jaws made short work of it, then he went back to digging for more.

:*I...stop! Stop! I need those!*:

Reggie snorted. :*Grow up, you big baby. You've got tons of these, you won't miss a few kilos.*: He yanked out another battery. :*Hey, guess what? We lynxes find you dragons tasty, too.*:

"Well, that was certainly an eventful test flight," Rochelle mused. She leaned back in the shock couch, fingers interlaced behind her head. For the final test of the day, Chet had wanted to see how the ship handled from outside of a RIDE, and Rochelle had decided to join him. Uncia and Nils were looking around the rest of the ship together.

"Too right." Chet glanced over at her, and chuckled. "I still don't understand exactly who those people even *were*. Who's this Appa person anyway?"

"Oh yeah, you haven't hung around with us much, have you? You're going to end up getting a crash course in Intie politics. For now, it's enough to say he's the new Fritz." Rochelle grinned. "Of course, he'd hate that comparison. Which is all the more reason to make it."

"Oookay." Chet shrugged. "Well, he'll have two fewer thugs now. Pity we couldn't find Reggie, though."

"Yeah. Kaylee's not gonna be real pleased when we tell her what went down. 'My son tried to do *what?* And you did what to *him?*'" Rochelle grimaced. "At least we have that report from meteorology."

"What was that? I must have missed it come in."

"Weather sat picked up a re-entry streak the right size to be an Intie space-diver, right about where Reggie would have made planetfall if he skedaddled before the cops arrived." She sighed. "Guess we'll have to tell Fritz about it, too. If he's still got those contacts in Appa's camp, maybe he can find out if Reg made it back okay."

Chet shook his head. "I hope you'll understand I'm not exactly worried about that."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But family's important to Kaylee, and Kaylee's important to me." Rochelle shrugged. "But I guess the important thing for now is, we all came through it okay. *And* the Tiresias Fuse system works!" She grinned. "So what was it like being a huge snow leopard?"

Chet chuckled. "Everything suddenly seemed a lot smaller. I'll bet doing this on the ground will be like being in a Godzilla suit on a miniature film set."

"We'll have to go out into the Dry once we've gotten everything fixed back up, do some stomping and kicking rocks around."

"Yeah."

They flew on in silence for a while, then Rochelle spoke again. "So...about the other thing."

"Other thing?"



“You know. You. Me. Us. Working together. Breathing the same air.” Rochelle waved a hand. “How is it?”

“Huh. You know, in all the excitement I kind of forgot about that.” Chet grinned. “Which is good, when you get right down to it.” He glanced over at her. “I still find you attractive. I can still daydream and fantasize...but I don’t have the urge to *do* anything about it. No more than usual, anyway.”

Rochelle grinned back. “You know, I think it’s about the same for me. I can imagine you in...certain situations, but don’t feel like I actually have to *put* you in them. That’s good.”

Chet’s face flushed a couple shades darker than usual, and he looked away. “Er... what...*kind* of situations?”

Rochelle giggled. “Maybe I’ll show you sometime. If we get that far. But for right now, I think after we land and maybe go out for a drink or two, we go our separate ways for a while. We can afford to take things slow for a while.”

“Works for me.” Chet glanced at the instruments. “Well, we’re coming up on our de-orbit point if we want to land at Nextus this pass. Shall we?”

“Yeah, I think it’s time to take ‘er in. I’ll go get the others, we’ll Fuse up for the re-entry.”

Chet nodded. “I’ll lock in the course.” He glanced over his shoulder to watch her go, then leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes for a moment. It had been a long day, but all things considered a better one than he’d expected. Not so much in the flying and kicking of alien butt, though that had been good, too. But what he really liked was getting to see Rochelle’s smile again, and this time being able to enjoy it.

So many things had happened over the last few hours that his attraction to Rochelle had been driven right out of his head. He hadn’t had time to think about it. It wasn’t like before, when he couldn’t think of anything else. It felt almost...normal again. Like any other time he’d met a pretty girl and was getting along well with her.

Of course, in other ways it wasn’t and could never be. They still had that time together under the influence of a nanotech aphrodisiac between them. Chet suspected he’d never be completely able to get away from the nagging little voice of self-doubt that suggested their attraction might just be a holdover from that instead of a valid relationship in its own right.

But all things considered, he thought he could cope with that.

Putting those thoughts behind him for the moment, Chet leaned forward to activate the navigation system, humming under his breath.

*When the lady smiles  
I can’t resist her call  
As a matter of fact,  
I don’t resist at all...*

**THE END**