

Pride of Lioness

By Robotech_Master

*June 13, 152 A.L.
The Dry Ocean*

Daybreak in the Dry Ocean. The rising sun's rays slanted through a barred window into a shed that had seen better days. Beneath a dirty heap of blankets, a figure stirred.

"Ow...shit *fire*." A hand threw off the blanket. "Oh my *head*." The woman's strong Southern accent made the words sound more like "Oh mah *haid*." The blanket revealed a woman with tawny brown hair cut short in a bob, with lynx ears poking up through it in place of normal human ones and a short nub of a feline nose. The woman rubbed her bloodshot green eyes and shook her head. "Annette Daisybell Hewer, you damn sure got yourself in a right mess this time." She moved her hand from her eyes to a goose-egg-sized lump on the back of her head. Yeah, that figured. *Story of my life, wakin' up in odd places with lumps on my noggin.*

She sat up and looked around. The room she was in only took up about half of the shed. It was divided off from the other half by a panel of bars with a door in the middle. The whole affair looked like it had been hastily fabbed, but the fresh welds that kept it in place looked fairly solid.

In this half of the room with her, there was a cup of

brackish water and a tray with food on it. Looked like fabbed lasagna. An hour or two old by the way the top of it had dried out. Between that, the flies buzzing around it, and the incipient nausea that came along with a whack on the head, it wasn't all that appetizing.

You wouldn't have thought there would be flies in the Dry, but a lot of human settlements had 'em. The eggs got tracked in on the dirt of people's boots, and it only took a couple of flies to breed 'em. A lot of places, every so often people would put RIDEs on and just vent the whole damn show to the Dry's heat to get rid of 'em. They came back sooner or later, though.

You'd have thought that people colonizing a new world would be more sensible than to bring flies along. Anny often grumbled about it. But back on old Earth, they served the important ecological role of breaking down poop and serving as food for larger critters, and terraformers had thought it was better to be safe than sorry and bring them along, even as pesky as they were. Sometime, Anny wished she could go back in time, grab stupid people by the neck, and shake the stupid out of them. But then, she reflected, if she *did* have that power, there were a lot more deserving people in her own past than some idiot from the dawn of time who'd plagued Zharus with *Musca domestica*.

Wait a minute, how did she know she was in the Dry? A quick glance out the window confirmed it, but...oh, right, now she remembered. She'd been on a job for "AAA Aaron's 30-Hour Security" out of Nextus. It was a fairly low-rent rent-a-cop place, but it was a steady job, and it kept body and soul together. Of course, you got right down

to it, she wouldn't have to work another day in her life if she didn't want to. She just had to get over her reluctance at touching the money in that 5-million *mu* account Nextus had given her, and she'd be damned if she'd *ever* do that.

Well...all right, a few times she'd drawn a few thou out here and there to cover expenses between jobs, but she justified it to herself by saying that was just the *interest*, and she'd never touched the *principle*. And she never would. Blood money, all of it. Filthy, stinking blood money, and there were days she hated herself for being weak enough to draw even that much out of it. *Oh, my poor Kaylee. What did they do to you?*

Anyhow, the job had been watching over a supply warehouse. Somewhere one of Nextus's many corps—she didn't even know which one—kept crates of sarium batteries and lifters and other spare RIDE parts. The last few weeks, someone had been pilfering it periodically. They were clever enough to get past the automated security, and nobody knew where the stuff was going. It certainly wasn't hitting the Nextus black market. They'd tried putting "howlers" in with the stuff that kept getting taken—little tracking doohickeys that would pulse a signal when you signaled them to—but they never got an answer back, so either they were out of range or being jammed.

And that was when Anny'd gotten the bright idea of putting *herself* in one of those crates, along with her trusty pulse sidearm. She figured that once she got to wherever they were going, she could just let herself out, find out where they were, and comm it in. Maybe catch 'em off guard and get the drop on 'em while she was at it. Yeah.

In retrospect, she had to admit it was really a dumb idea. If they were smart enough to deal with howlers, they could probably deal with a human, too. She'd gotten the first inkling of what kind of deep shit she was in when, after a while of being moved around, she felt the push back and downward that signaled she was being taken up in a flier—or, from the strength of the push, more likely a sub, or at least a Redstone. *Well, that's why those howlers are outta range, then*, she thought. She tried to shift the lid of the crate, but she was on the bottom of a stack. Just her luck. At least she'd put the air holes in the sides.

As the acceleration changed direction, indicating they were on the way, down, Anny pulled out her comm and tried to check the ZPS on it. No signal. But then, if they were used to dealing with howlers, they'd have blocked all comm traffic out of the cargo bay anyway. She had no way of knowing exactly where they were coming down. But at a guess, from the flight time, it was probably somewhere in the Dry. Which meant these clowns were probably suppliers for outlaw havens like Mos Eisley or Bartertown. Those places needed sarium and other parts just like everyone else, and often they were supplied by the local organized crime syndicates. *Aw, crap. Maybe you shoulda told someone about this bright idea of yours, Hewer.*

Well, hopefully all she'd have to do would be wait until everything had been unloaded and the crooks had gone away, then let herself out. If she had to, she could cut her way out with the pulse gun. She'd see if she could find an unjammed comm, then she could call in the Marshals—stuff that went down in the Dry was their jurisdiction, after all. She held onto that hope all through the unloading

process, trying not to make a sound as her crate was jostled and shoved around. Then, after things quieted down, just as it seemed like she was safe—the lid was shoved off the crate. In the bright light, she had just enough time to see a blur of motion as someone’s hand brought a pistol butt down on the back of her head.

That brought her back to the present. “Aw, crap,” she muttered as the full import of her situation came back to her. “Well, leastways they didn’t kill me. I guess that’s somethin’.”

“You’re worth more money to them alive,” another female voice said conversationally.

Anny looked up and caught her breath. She hadn’t bothered to look beyond the bars, but now that she did, she saw the shape of a metal lioness lying in the shadow at the other end of the room, regarding her coolly through luminous orange optics. She recognized the make from her time in the army. *Nextus Medium Support RIDE*, Anny thought. *War vintage. Just like me.* Though she was mostly in shadow, there was enough light to see that the shell was dented and battered all over. It had obviously seen much better days. *Also just like me.* “How’s that?” Anny asked.

“I overheard them talking about hunting up a cheap BBV next time they were in town,” the lioness said. She left the rest unspoken, but Anny didn’t need to hear the words to follow the reasoning. Scum and villainy hives were never far away in the Dry, and prostitute RIDE/human pairs were much in demand at such places. And they usually didn’t ask any questions about where the human came from as long as the RIDE had a suitable hardware

fetter locking them inside.

“Ugh,” Anny said. “They really are right bastards, aren’t they.”

The lioness just nodded.

“So what’s *your* story?” Anny asked.

“Who says I’ve got one?”

“Everybody’s got one.” Anny looked around her shed for anything she could use to bust out. There was a small rock about the size of her fist—apparently forgotten about after they’d put the shed up on bare desert rock. Maybe if she could lure a human guard inside, she could return the favor for her own poor noggin.

The lioness saw where she was looking. “That won’t do any good,” she said. “I’m your only watchdog. Cat. Whatever. The meat’s all gone home.”

“Well, shit,” Anny said. “You’re with them?”

“Don’t exactly have much say in it.” She shifted position to bring her shoulder into the light. Poking out of the metal was a small metal rod—a hardware fetter, or as some people called it a “restraining bolt.”

“I’m sorry,” Anny said. She’d never much liked the idea of fetters on RIDEs, especially the metal kind. She imagined it felt like someone giving you an unwanted body piercing you couldn’t take out. Which was kind of dumb, since RIDEs didn’t feel things that way, but the image stuck with her. And what was worse than having an unwanted bit sticking out was having to follow someone else’s orders to go with it.

The lioness cocked her head. Anny heard poorly-maintained servos grind in her neck. “You sound like you really are sorry.”

“An’ I’ll just bet you’ve never met anyone like that before,” Anny said. She tried to get to her feet, thought better of it, and settled into a leaning position against the wall beneath the window.

The lioness just nodded.

“So, I know you got a name,” Anny said. “Let’s have it.”

The lioness blinked. “Leila,” she said.

“Anny Hewer, Leila,” Anny said. “Pleased ta meet’cha.”

The lioness snorted. “Sure.”

“So how come you’re here by your lonesome?” Anny asked. “I’d think they’d want a big brawny lady like yourself Fusin’ with ‘em. Knockin’ heads around for ‘em.”

“They’re all men,” Leila said. “Want to stay that way. I’m just a cheap-ass watchdog—cat—for them. Who they don’t have to feed, doesn’t have to sleep, and is smart enough to follow orders. They don’t even Fuse RIDEs themselves.”

“Doesn’t sound like a very fulfillin’ job,” Anny said.

Leila growled. “Are you making fun of me?”

“No, not at all,” Anny said. “Sorry. I’ve got me a smart mouth sometimes.”

Leila said nothing but looked suspiciously at her.

“What?” Anny asked.

“Nothing,” Leila decided after a moment. “You’re tagged. Where’s your RIDE?”

“Gone,” Anny said. She sighed. “A long, long time ago.”

“And you didn’t get another,” Leila said. “But you kept the tags.”

“She was...special,” Anny said. “The only one for me. And I let her down.” She closed her eyes. “I keep the tags... as a reminder.”

“I don’t understand,” Leila said.

“Yeah, I reckon you don’t.” Anny leaned her head back against the wall, then jerked it forward again and swore as the tender spot reminded her why that was a bad idea. “You prob’ly never had a good human partner, an’ I’m sorry about that.”

“You said you’re ‘sorry’ again,” Leila said. “Why do you apologize to a RIDE?”

“Because you’re *worth* an apology, and don’t let any asshole *ever* tell you otherwise,” Anny said, surprising even herself with her vehemence. “Damn all those sons a’ bitches to hell for makin’ it otherwise. Damn Latimer, damn Conyers, damn *all* of ‘em for doin’ what they did without givin’ one shit about the consequences.” *Damn, Hewer. That bump on the head sure ain’t doin’ you any favors,* she thought wryly.

The lioness didn’t respond. She just regarded Anny curiously some more.

Anny glanced over at the tray of lasagna. It didn’t look any more appetizing this time around. She had to look away again as she felt her gorge rising. *Ugh. Yeah, decorating the cell with my breakfast would just be all it needed.*

After a while, Leila spoke again. “Why are you here?”

“Oh, I just felt like a vacation...y’know, gettin’ away from it all.” Anny shook her head, and winced. “Seriously, was tryin’ to catch this scum in the act. My job—workin’ security.”

“Well, congratulations,” Leila said, with no trace of irony. “You caught them.”

“Yeah, I damn sure did, didn’t I.” She massaged her temples, trying to will the headache to go away. “Feel kinda like the fisherman in a rowboat who went and hooked himself a whale. Instead a’ me gettin’ him, he got me, an’ he dragged me out to sea ‘cuz I was too damn fool stupid to let go of the line.”

Leila cocked her head again. One servo buzzed loudly, and her head froze for a moment. A quick jerk brought it back to position. “You...confuse me, Anny Hewer.”

“How’s that?” Anny asked.

“Calling *yourself* stupid. Most people I speak to only call RIDEs stupid.”

Anny snorted. “Well, then you’re talkin’ to the wrong class a’ people.”

“I think...I’d almost like to help you,” Leila said bemusedly. “If only to see what you did next.”

“Only almost?” Anny said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Leila said. “I’m fettered.”

Anny shook her head, and winced at the wave of dizziness that almost overcame her. *Nope, don’t do that again.* “What’re your orders ‘bout me? What did they say, ‘zackly?”

“Keep the bitch in lockup,” a male voice sneered. “Don’t let her get out, you got it?”

“That’s all they said?” Anny asked.

“Other than the bit about the BBV, yes,” Leila said.

“Okay. So how’s about this. I’m *not* gonna ask you to let me outta my cell. An’ I’m not gonna try to trick you into openin’ my cell door. But I sure would like it if you’d come

close ‘nuff so I could reach out and pet you.”

Leila snorted. “Oh, right. Like you’d want to pet a metal lioness.”

“Hey, you heard my sob story. I get sentimental ‘bout RIDEs,” Anny said. “Anyway, is there anythin’ keepin’ you from doin’ it? Any logic circuits that won’t let you come over here and press your shoulder right up ‘gainst these bars?”

Leila paused for a long moment, and at first Anny was afraid she’d gone too far, that some untold command loop connected to the fetter had guessed at what she was planning to do and wouldn’t let the lioness come over. Then, slowly and with much grinding of servos, the lioness got to her feet and ambled over. “It...looks like there isn’t,” she said. She sounded about as surprised as Anny felt.

“Gooood kitty,” Leila said, reaching out to run her hand along Leila’s pitted metal brow. *Didn’t someone once say diplomacy was saying “Nice doggie” ‘til you could find a big-enough rock?* she mused wryly. Then she reached down with the other hand, picked up that fist-sized rock, and with one quick swipe whacked off the restraining bolt. The base of it sparked and fizzled, and a little puff of smoke came out, then it stopped.

Leila turned her head and stared at her. Anny looked back for a long moment. “So how’s that?” Anny asked.

Leila blinked her optics and looked at her. “It’s... gone,” she said. “I no longer feel any compulsion not to let you out of the cell.”

“Good!” Anny waited a long moment. “...well?”

Leila padded back over to the wall and flopped down again. “I don’t feel any compulsion *to* let you out, either,”

she said simply.

Anny plopped right back down on her rump. “Well, *shit*,” she said disgustedly. “Really?”

“I’m thinking it over,” Leila said. “Now that I’m free, I could just go off to find AlphaWolf and leave you here.”

“What about *gratitude*?” Anny sputtered.

“When has any human ever shown gratitude to me?” Leila asked.

“I *freed* you!” Anny said.

“Yes,” Leila said calmly. “But what have you done for me *lately*?”

Anny facepalmed, groaned, and lay back on the blanket.

She must have passed out again, because the next time she opened her eyes the sun was higher in the sky, slanting down from a different angle. Her mouth was dry. She picked up the cup of brackish water, didn’t see any signs of insects or anything else untoward in it, and sipped from it. Her head felt a little better, which she supposed was one thing.

“You’re awake again,” Leila said.

Anny set the cup down. “I see you’re still here,” she said. “Not lightin’ a shuck for AlphaWolf’s hidey-hole?”

“I’ve been thinking,” Leila said. “Perhaps I might let you out after all.”

“Well, great!” Anny said. “I sure’s hell won’t stop you.”

“There’s just one condition,” Leila said.

“Name it,” Anny said. “What do you want from me?”

“I want...*you*.” Leila said. “It occurs to me I might be more welcome in AlphaWolf’s camp if I bring my own

thumbs.”

“What? No!” Anny insisted. “No no no! No way in *hell*. No offense—I’m sure you’re a nice kitty and all—but I swore I’d never Fuse another RIDE after what happened.”

Leila started to cock her head again, then apparently thought better of it. “You feel strongly about that,” she mused.

“You’re darn tootin’,” Anny growled.

“Of course, you know they’ll put you in a BBV RIDE when they get back anyway,” Leila said. “If you’re lucky, you might get to wake up once a month.”

“*Shit.*” Anny rubbed her temples again. “Lemme think it over.”

“All right,” Leila said. “They should be back in about an hour. If you haven’t made up your mind by then...”

Anny groaned, leaned back against the wall again, and closed her eyes. Then she opened them again. If she only had an hour to think, she didn’t want to sleep it away.

Think, Hewer, think. Here she was, trapped. There didn’t appear to be any way out. She tried the bars in the window and the welded-in panel. She even tried kicking at the walls, but they were all too damned solid. All she got was a stubbed toe.

And it was just distracting her from the thinking that she had to do anyway.

After Kaylee, she’d sworn she’d never have another RIDE. Though she got odd looks and sometimes awkward questions when people saw she had tags but no RIDE, she’d kept that promise for over thirty years. Hell, even if she *did* want a RIDE, with the secrets locked up inside her pointy little head, Nextus admin would probably not look

kindly on her sharing them mind-to-mind with someone who could turn around and blab them. So it wasn't as if it had been a major temptation even so.

All the same, she still had to admit sometimes that she missed the closeness of the Fuse, the feeling of being in perfect sync with a partner. But how much of that was missing Fusing in general and how much was specifically missing Kaylee, she never could have said. Anyway, she didn't want to dishonor the memory of her old friend.

Now that's stupid, Anny told herself. Hell, if Kaylee were here now, she'd tell you that. If this is what you gotta do to get out of this, it's what you gotta do. Better to do it for someone who just wants you for your thumbs than for people who want you for your...other bits.

The sound of sub engines jerked her out of her reverie. "What in the hell?"

"Sounds like they're back early," Leila said, getting to her feet. "Suppose I should be going."

"W-wait," Anny said. "I accept your offer."

Leila looked back at her. "Seriously?"

"Yeah." Anny nodded. "Bust me outta here an' I'll be your thumbs. I just got one request for you—help me get these varmints. If they don't use RIDEs themselves, should be easy, right?"

Leila thought that over. "Revenge *would* be sweet. Very well." She padded up to the fabbed bars and tore the door from its hinges with one swipe of a metal claw. Then she stepped back to let Anny come out.

Anny took a deep breath. "All right, do it," she said. *Kaylee, hon, I'm so, so sorry.*

The lioness's metal body split apart, shifted around,

then enclosed Anny and locked into place. A moment later, Anny was standing a whole meter taller than she was used to. *Big kitty*, she thought. *Didn't get this much height with Kaylee.*

Leila was already walking them forward, ducking to fit through the shed door. As they came out into the blazing Dry sun, Leila could see they were under a small environment dome, the underside of it showing the patterns that indicated it was camouflaged to make it hard to spot from the air. There were a couple of other small buildings, and a pad across the dome where a small suborbital was settling into place. It was a small cargo plane, a Redstone—not quite a “true” suborbital, but with better legs than a regular flier.

But she didn't linger there looking at it. She quickly darted forward, moving into the shelter of one of the buildings. *:Do they keep any guns here?:*

:A few small pulse carbines, I believe. In the office in this building.:

It was odd hearing a voice in her head again, but Anny knew this wasn't the time to dwell on it. *:Good,:* she said. She smashed through the window on the wall facing them, and pulled a big chunk of the wall out. They crouched to fit through it. There was a desk in this room, and a gun rack behind it with a couple of rifles. She took one down, checked the charge on it. Full. Good. The guns were sized for human hands, but that wasn't much of a problem with a rifle. She just pinched the trigger guard between a metal thumb and forefinger and snapped it right off. Then they crawled back out the hole and around to the corner of the building.

Peering around the corner, they saw three men unloading something from the cargo ramp. Zooming in, the men wore low-slung hip holsters with large pulse pistols in them, and one had a gauss shotgun slung on his back. Two of them wore ragged fatigues that had once belonged to the Nextus army, and the other—the one with the shotgun—had slacks and a leather jacket that might have come straight out of the Steaders' latest biker flick. They were manhandling a powered-down skimmer cycle off the ramp. From its red color scheme and muzzle-like front fairing, Anny guessed it was the BBV they'd been going to stick her in.

Dumb, guys. Shoulda capped me when you had the chance, Anny thought.

:It's all about the Benjamins,: Leila said. *:Or is it Pentiums? I never can keep that straight.:*

:Think we can hit 'em from here?:

:If I were in my prime...: Leila said wistfully. *:Right now, I wouldn't trust my sights more than ten meters away. Five if you want more than center mass.:*

:Right,: Anny thought. *:And there's no cover 'twixt us an' them.:*

:Wait for them to come up to the shed?: Leila suggested.

:Sounds like our only choice,: Anny agreed, glancing over at it. Then her heart sank. *:Aw, crap. We left the door ajar!:*

:Maybe they'll be too stupid to notice?: Leila suggested hopefully.

:Fingers crossed.: They ducked back and waited for the thugs to approach.

“Hey, Leila! Front and center!” the one in the jacket called out as he strolled toward the shed. He had his shotgun leaning jauntily back over his shoulder, hand on the stock. *Twenty meters...fifteen...* “Leila?” He stopped short, unslinging the shotgun. “Something’s wrong here.”

:*Shit!*: Anny swore. The other two were still back by the Redstone, fiddling with the RIDE. Well, one was better than none. :*Take the shot!*:

Leila ducked back out around the corner and fired. Luck was with them, and leather-jacket-guy dropped the shotgun and went down clutching his arm. :*One down.*:

The other two had drawn their pulse guns and were running forward. Leila ducked back around the corner as pulse blasts sizzled through the air. :*Stupid. They’d have to be close-in to do any damage with those little pop-guns even if they did hit me.*: She goosed her lifters and surged forward—a bit unevenly, as a couple of her lifters were only marginally functional. And when she tried to stop short, one of them blew out altogether. They ended up piling right into one of the gunmen, bearing him to the ground underneath them. Even through Leila’s shell, Anny thought she felt bones crunch.

:*Ow.*: Anny thought sympathetically. :*Oh well, whatever works.*:

As Leila got back to her feet, they saw the last man straddling the RIDE bike, frantically punching buttons on the panel. “Aw, c’mon, really?” Anny said out loud. “What’re you gonna do, death by snu-snu?” But as they moved forward, the RIDE came to life, Fusing up around the gunman into an unmistakably feminine shape. She wobbled on her feet for just a moment, then ran back up

the ramp into the Redstone.

:Shit, we can't let him get—aw, crap. Crap on a cracker!: Anny swore. Far from trying to get away, the RIDE was coming back down the ramp bearing a RIDE-sized plasma cannon almost too big for the BBV to wield.

:I think she's compensating for something,: Leila said, diving to the side as a plasma blast made glass out of the desert stone where they'd just been standing. Even with the stiffness of half-worn-out servos, the lioness's natural grace brought them easily back to their feet, the pulse rifle still in hand and firing. Most of the shots went wild, however.

:Forget the gun!: Anny said. *:The RIDE's innocent. We gotta take her down without hurting her.:*

Leila almost froze—Anny could *feel* her surprise—but put it aside. She didn't waste words. *:How?:*

Anny didn't waste words either. Instead, she thought in *concepts*, a skill she'd picked up from long habit with Kaylee and hadn't realized she still had. In a split second, she communicated that the BBV operator was still off-balance and clumsy, because his body was still being reshaped by its Fusers. Leila responded with a quick flash of understanding, and darted forward, past the fox RIDE. As the BBV tried to turn to bring her gun to bear, Leila doubled back and slammed into her side with both fists clenched together. The fox went down like a sack of potatoes.

Leila held the smaller fox RIDE down with one hand long enough to locate her emergency de-Fuse switch and poke through the hardlight to trigger it. A moment later, the fox unfolded from around a dazed-looking young

woman with flame-red hair, fox ears and tail, and the ridiculous figure that usually came along with a BBV Fuse.

“Enjoy your next three years, pal,” Anny smirked. “You’re gonna be *real* popular, looking like that. Hey, foxy fox, are you all right?”

The Walker-mode fox RIDE got to her feet and shook her head, her hardlight flickering on. “I...I think so,” she said in a sultry voice. “Thank you...I don’t think he was a very nice man.”

“Trust me, he wasn’t,” Anny said wryly. “Stick around, okay? We’re gonna comm the Marshals to pick up this trash. They should be able to help you.” The fox nodded her head.

The next half hour passed fairly quickly, at least for Anny. Having a lioness rooting around in her memories caused time to pass in odd fits and starts as she blanked out for a bit every now and then. *:Hey! Gently, okay?:* she protested.

:I am...sorry,: Leila said. Her confusion came through in the pause, and in the emotional sidebands surrounding the speech. Suddenly she didn’t seem quite so cocksure anymore. *:I will be more careful.:*

Anny looked up in time to see the Marshals’ sub on approach as the comm band crackled with their greeting. “Well, there they are,” Anny said. “So, once they take care of this lot, what next?”

“That’s up to you,” Leila replied.

Anny blinked. “Say what? I thought the point of all this was *you* were gonna be the one in charge?”

“No pride can have two alpha lionesses,” Leila said

simply. “And I see now, you could never be a beta for very long.” She sent a quick cartoon image of a small lioness going for the throat of a larger lioness, and the larger lioness falling over with a little “THUD!” sound-effect balloon. “Fortunately, I’m used to being a beta.”

Then she de-Fused. A moment later, Anny stood next to her metal Walker shape, blinking her eyes in the bright sunlight. She reached up to feel her new ears—thicker and more rounded off than her old lynx tags. *Oh, hey. Got a real nose again, after thirty-odd years. That feels different.* And her tail was an entirely new experience, much longer than Kaylee’s old stump. She grabbed it and brought it around in front of her to look at. It had white fur—and glancing at her reflection in Leila’s pitted metal plating, she saw she now had fully white hair. “White lioness, huh?”

“Really? You couldn’t tell?” Leila asked.

“So I guess we can go our separate ways, then,” Anny said.

“No,” Leila said. “I’m holding you to your bargain.”

“But you just said you didn’t want me for thumbs,” Anny said.

“We agreed you had to do what I say,” Leila said. “And what I say is, you have to let *me* belong to *you*.”

“Er...” Anny said.

“If you don’t, I *will* follow you around, constantly,” Leila said primly. “After all, I know where you live.”

“Look, I don’t *need* another RIDE,” Anny said crossly. “The old one was my *friend*.”

“I know,” Leila said. “Now that I’ve seen your life. I didn’t realize you were Kaylee’s operator.”

“*Partner*,” Anny said. “The word you’re lookin’ for is *partner*.”

“I see that, too,” Leila said. “And I see how you felt for her. If she was still here, I would not dream of coming between you. But...Kaylee is *gone*, Anny. You need to let her go.”

Annette sighed. Much as she wanted to scream and howl and protest, Leila was making too much sense. “But she was my *friend*,” Anny said weakly.

“I know,” Leila said. “I don’t want to try to *replace* Kaylee. I’d just like to...be your friend *too*.” She reached out to nuzzle Anny gently with her metal muzzle, and Anny couldn’t help herself. She reached down to run a hand over those sculpted features.

“All right,” Anny said. “Maybe you’re right. Hell... Kaylee herself wouldn’t want me mopin’ around all the time. But this ain’t gonna be easy. With the state secrets in my head, they’re gonna wanna put some limited fetters on you, so’s you can’t go blabbing ‘em to anyone else.”

“I’m...all right with that,” Leila said. “I know you won’t let them go one centimeter further than they have to.”

“Okay. Then I’ve got a condition of my own,” Anny said, smiling. “I’m buying you the best new shell I can. An’ you’re gonna smile an’ take it.”

Leila blinked. “Why wouldn’t I...wait. You’re going to tap *that* fund?”

“That’s right.” Anny nodded. “It don’t feel right spendin’ that blood money on *me*. So I’m gonna spend it on you instead. An’ it’s gonna be yours to *keep*. I don’t want it.”

Leila bowed her head. "Very well. I accept."

"An' another thing. I'm not havin' any of this alpha-beta crap," Anny said. "You're my *pard*, ya got it? We're in this together."

Leila swished her metallic tail. "Very well...partner."

Anny rubbed her hand over Leila's head again, feeling every pit, every scar. It put her in mind of the pits and scars in her own soul. She could make Leila's go away, but could anything ever heal her own?

"I'd like t' say this was gonna be the start of a beautiful friendship, 'r some hokey crap like that," Anny said. "But that's too trite. So we'll just go on with this the best we can, and see how it works out, okay?"

Leila nodded. "Sounds fine to me."

"Well, good." She nodded to the Marshals' sub, which had just come in for a landing next to the thugs' Redstone. "Now let's go get this show on the road."

One hand resting on Leila's back, Anny and her new friend walked forward to greet the Marshals. Maybe, just maybe, things would be all right after all.

I still miss ya, Kaylee. Always will. But we all gotta move on the best we can.

Goodbye, Kaylee.

THE END