

**Jeanette, Tamarind, and the  
Young Guns**

in

**Reindeer Games**

By Robotech\_Master and JonBuck

## CHAPTER 1

*December 8, 157 A.L.*

“You are kidding me. You are absolutely, Grade A, 100% bullshitting me. You did not just say the two words that I thought I just heard you say.”

The immense lioness mecha who had been my partner, mother, daughter, and best friend in the whole world stared smugly back into my face and enunciated clearly. “Cape. Nord.”

“But—but—but—” I sputtered, trying to marshal my thoughts. (When you think like a Marshal, you *always* have to marshal your thoughts.) We were hanging out in the spacious back yard of the A-frame house we’d bought in an Uplift suburb dome. I’d been home working on some last-minute homework to get cleared for school, while Tamarind had been down at the local Marshals office checking on our next assignment. Winter Break was going to start in just a couple of days, and my fellow Young Guns and I had put in for an assignment while we were all out of school.

School had been boring as per the usual, and I was still a little annoyed that I had to go. I was technically almost all caught up with my studies, after spending months in Alpha Camp with Tams there without much else to do *but* study, but there was still some bureaucratic nonsense to get out of the way so I could officially “graduate” with the way cleared for college. I’m from Nextus, after all, and you can’t escape their bureaucracy just by joining the Marshals and moving to another polity. Like a particularly graspy octopus it is, or maybe squid.

To make a long story short, it came out that the easiest way to do it was basically have me go through my “senior year” in a local high school. Given that it meant I could be classmates with my fellow Young Guns Marshal Relena Packard, it wasn’t at all as bad as it could have been—especially since the *other* Young Guns girl, Jenni Ruby, was looking into transferring over to the same school after Winter Break. Since her Mom wasn’t going to be back for a while, she figured she and her RIDE pard Kandace might as well be here as in Aloha, so all we Young Guns could

hang together. Which was pretty cool by me.

Anyway, Tams had just gotten back, announced we did indeed have the assignment we'd asked for, and had made me play guess-where while she grew increasingly more smug with each place I guessed that turned out not to be it. I'd guessed most of the places around the Coastal Ring and all the major Enclaves in the middle, and finally I'd given up, and Tammycat had delivered the Grand Reveal that had shocked me right down to the soles of my feet. And I'd replied, and she'd enunciated, and...well, here we were.

"...they're all testosterone-poisoning basket cases there!" I said. "And only one of us even *is* a man, and *he's* one of those less than half the time!"

"Actually, *none* of us is a man," Tamarind said, still smug. "Bernie's doing other things, so DeniFaye's going to be working with us on this one. It'll be Just Us Girls."

*That* made me stare even harder. She didn't even *like* DeniFaye, but her smugness continued unabated. "So, what in...how are we even going to get anything *done* there?"

"Oh, I think we'll manage, kitten. You see, there are a few things you don't actually *know* about Cape Nord, whereas Denise and I were stationed there more than a few times back in the old days—including one time we stopped a Sturmhaven Valkyrie stalker from bothering a certain Cape Nord romance novelist. It's not *completely* what it looks like from the outside. You seen the Hellir Enclave shows?"

I shrugged. "Glanced at an episode or two, as part of Integrate Studies. I know it was a sort of 'reality TV' operation that went on right under Cape Nord's noses. Wasn't really interested enough to watch more."

"You might oughtta *get* interested. We'll be liaising with them as part of our job up there. Anyway, trust me when I say we'll get along *just* fine."

"We can fast-time them later. So what's the other part of the job?"

"Some of it's that they want us to serve as a training cadre and see if some of *their* kids your age might make a good second squad of Young Guns."

I groaned. "Oh, *great*. They'll *all* have testosterone poisoning."

She smirked again. "I seem to recall you were the one who'd tell *me* to

stuff it when I complained about six-meter wolves and dog drool...”

“That’s because *you fab lion spit*. But *I’m* not testosterone-poisoned...”

“There’s some other part of the job, too, but they want to have a hush-hush meeting when we get there to talk about it. But we don’t need to worry about that now. I brought the dossiers on the Nordie recruits, if you wanna see what they say.”

I sighed. “Toss ‘em at my implants. I’ll go over them once I finish up the last of the school stuff.”

“Works for me.”

I glared at her. She was *still* the picture of “smug and full of herself.” But then, that was Tams for you. “You’re enjoying this *way* too much.”

“It’s good for you to get out of your comfort zone from time to time.”

“Speaking of getting out of your comfort zone, what about you? You gonna be able to work with the hyena?”

That did deflate her a little. “We’ve been chatting, off and on. I’m trying to get used to her as her own person, rather than as someone who partly used to be my partner. It’s not always easy, but...now there’s been more water under the bridge, we’re willing to give it another try.”

I nodded. “Good enough. Well, I guess I better go get to work. That homework isn’t going to do itself.”

Tamarind nodded. “I’ll make the travel arrangements and give the others the good news.”

So, I finished the homework—in real time, as I usually do. I’ll fast-time the homework sometimes, but I’ve found that doing that a whole lot leaves me without anything to do in real-time, and it makes the school week seem to last longer, too. And a week of 30-hour days is pretty darned long enough in my book. So the more real time I spend on boring stuff, the less real time I have to be bored in.

But I don’t feel the same way about entertainment. So once I’d done that and Tammy had gotten all the comm calls out of the way, we met in our own personal little sprawl-in theater in the virtual veldt for some fast-time screening of Hellir Enclave stuff. Watching it at RI speeds, we could pack

dozens of hours into one or two of real-time, and by now I was a little curious about what it would be like.

Even though Hellir hadn't started filming 'til a while after Tamarind had taken up residence at Alpha Camp, she still recognized a number of the places and had nostalgic stories about stuff she and Denise had done there, back in the day. I was glad she was getting to the point where she could talk more freely about her old partner now. I guessed the conversations with DeniFaye had maybe helped loosen things up a little for her.

What I wasn't as thrilled about were the Hellir shows. Oh, they were all right from a technical production aspect. And knowing the background of the place, I did have to admit they'd done a pretty good job of making lemonade from the lemons that sourpuss Fritz had stuck them with. (And Fritz's own so-called performance as "Major Hayseed" had both of us rolling—especially the split-screen version with the overlay that stripped off Fritz's disguise.)

The thing was, though, where the stories were concerned they were all so...Cape Nordy. Whether they were *cinema verité*-style reality TV, dramas with ominous scores, or sitcoms with laugh tracks, everyone acted the same way. The men postured and posed, and you could almost *see* the clouds of testosterone vapor that surrounded them like a haze of cigarette smoke everywhere they went. And the women seemed to be *okay* with that. They might get a little annoyed from time to time, but they always played it off as, "Oh, those silly men. Boys will be boys, tee-hee!" It just set my teeth on edge.

After one especially egregious episode, I turned to Tamarind and said, "You're *serious* about this place *not being so bad*? I mean...it's just...*ugh!*"

And Tammycat just gave me that knowing smirk. "Something you have to remember about this place is, nobody has to *stay* in Cape Nord who doesn't like it there. Even the women—or maybe *especially* the women. Heck, Sturmhaven will buy a first-class sub ticket *and* pay the first month of housing rent for any Nordie girl who wants to emigrate. So, leaving aside all the Hellir Integrates, who're a kinda special case anyway, every one of those gals you see in the shows is there 'cuz she *wants* to be."

I just rolled my eyes. "So they're all a bunch of masochists. That

doesn't mean it's right!"

"You'll understand after we spend a little time there. There's a lot you still don't know." Tamarind shook her head. "I'd tell you more about it, but I feel like it ought to be down to the women who actually *live* there to fill you in, same as they did me and Denise, back in the day. And since we'll be meeting some of them after we get there anyway, just as well to let you get it right from the horse's mouth."

That got her another sharp look from me, but as far as I could tell she was being completely serious this time. No smugness or smirking, except for maybe a little bit of I-know-something-*you*-don't-know around her eyes. Well...even when she'd kept stuff from me in the past, Tammy had always been as honest about all of it as she could. So if she said there was more going on here than I was seeing, I had to give her the benefit of the doubt. Though I'd be damned if I could figure it out from these Hellir Enclave shows.

"All right, fine. I'll take your word for it. For *now*. So what's next on the episode playlist?"

"Looks like..." Tamarind mimicked the TV announcer. "More *wacky hijinks* as Joanna McGee adjusts to the distaff life on another *442!*"

I groaned. "All right, fine. Hit it. Argh, where are Joel and the bots when you *need* them?"

*December 12, 157 A.L.*

So, the weekend came. And with it, the rest of the Young Guns, save for DeniFaye. We had a couple of days to spend together in Uplift before Jonesy came to fly us to Cape Nord, bringing the hyena along, so Jenni and Kandi caught a commercial sub flight from Aloha and there we were, together again.

Relena, Katie, and I were waiting on the concourse at the Uplift Aerodrome as they arrived. Tams was a little too big for the building, so she was parked outside and listening in through my implants, as usual. We'd been there about ten minutes, and the flight had just arrived, and then here they came—a smiling, bronzed, lynx-eared girl, with her furry companion

trotting along beside. Jenni was wearing the traditional Alohan print shirt and bermuda shorts, since it was still summer back where she was from. Of course, even in our “winter,” it was still sixty-five degrees (of the centigrade variety) outside our snow globe, Uplift being on the fringes of the Dry Ocean, but the dome conditioning was set to “cool” so she looked a little chilly.

“Hey, you two! You should get a jacket on!” Relena called, waving. “Or maybe a fur coat.”

Jenni laughed. “Nah. Being from where I’m from, it’s such a new and novel experience being cold that I’m gonna enjoy it as long as I can ‘til the novelty wears off. Which I guess *will* happen, since we’re moving here and all.”

Kandace looked around. “Gonna be interesting living under a dome again. Kind of reminds me of Alpha Camp, especially with the recent changes.”

“That reminds me—are you shipping your stuff along? We hadn’t talked about where you were gonna stay, but Tams and I have a guest bedroom we’re not using for anything that you’re both welcome to use if you want—either ‘til you find someone else, or permanently if you wanna split the rent.”

“I don’t really have much ‘stuff’ apart from my Marshals gear.” Jenni smiled ruefully. “All the stuff from my room back at the old house got put in storage with Mom’s stuff when she left on the liner. Gonna have to wait ‘til she’s back to fetch it out. And we’ll be glad to take you up on that offer, if you don’t think a Jenni and a Jeanette living under the same roof would be too confusing.”

I had to chuckle. “I’m sure we’ll muddle through somehow.”

“So...” Katie said. “Milkbottle, anyone?”

Jenni grinned. “Sounds like a plan!”

A nice thing about the ice cream parlor was that it had outdoor seating and plenty of room for larger RIDEs like Tams. We all sat around a table, Fused so our partners could enjoy our ice cream with us. Tammy’s size made eating Fused to her just a little awkward—picture that scene from

that old Disney movie with the fox eating a piece of cake at the shrew's wedding and you'll get the idea—but we'd had a lot of practice at it.

The park was recovering nicely since the previous year's Domefall, and a lot of people were out and about enjoying the nice weather. It was just going to be another week or so before the Christmas celebration took effect and everything would be covered in honest-to-goodness *snow*. We'd seen the massive Cascadia water tanks at the Aerodrome when we'd picked Jenni up.

"They really went all out this year, didn't they?" Jenni asked, slurping her chocolate ice cream soda.

"They want everything to be 'normal' again, so yeah." Relena took a bite of her RIDE's Dream mondae. "I'm kind of looking forward to it. I don't think I've ever seen snow in Uplift."

"Well, you won't get to see too much of it," Tamarind said. "We'll be shipping out for Cape Nord in a couple of days, though we'll come back for Christmas of course. But at least you'll see plenty of snow up there."

Jenni wrinkled her—well, Kandace's—nose. "They're really sending us up *there*? I thought that was just one of your jokes."

"Nope, no joke at all." Tammy carefully maneuvered the ice cream cone she was holding between thumb and forefinger into her mouth for me to get at with mine. "Thing about being a Marshal is you gotta know how to work with all kinds a' people, even the ones who act totally different from what you do. You got a taste of that in Alpha Camp, but those were RIDEs being different, mostly. Now you get to learn to deal with the human kind."

"Did you know that's wherrre the Qube is frrrom?" Katie put in. "So if you had any prrrrroblems taking orrrrders from a Cape Norrrrd Man, they should have manifested beforrrre now."

"I did actually know that, but...it's just..." Jenni shrugged. "Why do they even want a bunch of tomboyish Marshal girls coming in there in the first place?"

"Couldn't tell you for sure, but they did ask for us specifically," Tamarind said. "So it's not just some bureaucratic mix-up. We'll find out more when we get there."

They'd asked for us? Specifically? That was news to me—but Tammy

had already been mysterious and smug enough that I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of any further freak-outs. So I just filed that interesting fact away against later inquiry.

"Well, however it works out, it'll definitely be a *learning experience*," Relena said. "Maybe we can give a report on it for school afterward."

I nodded. "I think you've got the 'learning experience' part right, anyway. The question's if we're gonna learn anything we actually wanna *know*. But Tams here insists that there's more to the place than it looks like, so I guess that's something."

"So...once we're done here, wanna go hit the RIDE museum?" Jenni suggested. "Haven't been to that place in a while, and we can all say hi to some old friends."

"Works for me," Kandace agreed.

Katie nodded. "Cerrrrrrtainly!"

"Great!" I finished the cone, and Tammy dropped the wrapper in the trash. "Then let's get a move on, Young Guns!"

*December 14, 157 A.L.*

So here we all were, back at Uplift Aerodrome—in the Marshals section, this time. Just as we had before, we were meeting Jonesy and the *Acme* for our ride out. And here he came now...with the hardlight configured to make the sub look for all the world like a giant paper airplane. Yeah, same old Jonesy.

The paper plane slid to a halt in front of us, and a moment later the road runner Fuser appeared out of a hatch. "Hi, kiddies! Climb aboard, fasten your safety belts, and remember—no smoking on the paper airplane!"

So we all filed onto the suborbital, most of us entering through the side hatch but Tamarind using the cargo ramp in the rear. On the inside, the ship looked fairly normal—if you discounted the way the walls, fixtures, and even the acceleration couches seemed to be made out of paper.

"As soon as you're strapped in, we can be on our way!" Jonesy caroled as he headed back up to the cockpit.

“Just so you know, if I get a paper cut I’m suing you!” Jenni called after his back.

“Well, if it isn’t two of my favorite people in the entire world, and four more potential new friends!” A human-shaped hyena sauntered up from the rear of the plane. Her fur was dark grey with black stripes, and she had a shaggy black mane going all the way down her back and blending into her tail. A gold/quantum Marshal badge twinkled from her leotard. “Hello, you lot! I’m Denise-slash-Faye, but please call me DeniFaye. Or DF or just Faye, if you’re in a hurry.”

I glanced up at her as she approached. “Hi, ‘yena.”

“Hello, not-a-kitty-no-more! Glad they were able to fix that for you.” She cocked her head. “And you’ve got good security on you now, too. Sheesh, *everyone* has that DINsec thing these days. Make a gal feel inadequate, huh?”

“It just means we finally figured out how to keep you out of things that aren’t any of your business,” Tamarind put in. “That was always one of the most annoying things about you Inties...the way you felt you were *entitled* to the contents of our heads. You, especially. Frankly, DINsec was one of the biggest reasons I even agreed to talk to you again at all.”

I nodded. “It sure freaked *me* out, last time we met.” Though we’d chatted briefly a few times since, the last time I’d seen DeniFaye at any length, she’d casually and completely hacked my RI core with barely a passing thought. She hadn’t meant anything by it; it had just been the fastest way for her to copy some memories I’d given her permission to view. Still, it had been a little disturbing when it had happened.

DeniFaye held up her hands. “All right, all right, peace! I’m sorry! I guess I always was a little too free with the peeking. Power corrupts and all that. Probably just as well I can’t do that anymore.”

“Darned right,” Tamarind growled. “Anyway, welcome to the team.”

“Thanks, Tams. I promise, I’ll try not to let you down. I might not *be* Denise anymore, but I can still try to carry on the way she would have wanted.”

Before the silence that followed this declaration could grow too awkward, I cleared my throat. “Right! So, let me introduce you to the rest of

the team...” I made introductions all around, pausing only long enough for a giant disembodied hardlight hand to carry the suborbital down the runway and then fling us into the air. Jonesy was doing his level best to dispose of any residual tension with his usual cartoon antics. *Well, good for him.*

“Good to meet you all.” DeniFaye sat sideways on one of the acceleration couches and leaned forward on the armrest. “Impressed with your work so far, and Tams has said a lot about you. Really looking forward to working wit’chas.”

“Just to remind you, Jeanette’s the Marshal in Charge for Young Guns ops,” Tamarind said. “You, I, and Katie outrank her individually, but she’s team lead and we’re just here in an advisory capacity.”

Faye snapped off a mock salute. “Yes, Ma’am, Marshal Tamarind, ma’am! I *was* fully briefed, you know...on everything but what our mission in Cape Old Spice is, anyway.”

Jenni cocked her head. “If Cape Nord is Old Spice, does that mean Sturmhaven is Secret? ‘Strong enough for a Man, but *made* for a woman.’”

DeniFaye laughed. “That’s about right, I guess. Though any Sturmie would say everything *else* was ztrong enough for a vooman, but made for a mere man.”

Relena shook her head. “The 1980s, what a time. Even the *deodorant commercials* were sexist. And this is the era everyone’s crazy about reenacting now?”

Kandace snorted. “That’s Zharus for you. Whole damn planet is like a twentieth-century theme park. But I guess that’s just our Hat.”

“When you get right down to it, both Sturmhaven *and* Cape Nord are every bit as artificial as all those crazy Integrates who model themselves after their favorite shows.” DeniFaye chuckled. “Glad I never caught that bug. If my human half hadn’t already been such a big *Shaft* fan, it would have been Whoopi Goldberg in *The Lion King* for me, for sure. But then, that’s about half the hyena Inties you meet, as there just weren’t that many other memorable hyena characters...”

“Artificial, huh?” I said. “Artificial how?”

“They didn’t teach you in Marshal school? How Sturmhaven was

founded by a bunch of perverted S&M LARPer?”

“Well, a little. They kinda glossed over it, really. I think they thought I was a little too young for all that stuff.” I snorted. “Like I didn’t already know what sex was or something just from all the stuff I found on the net. Are you saying Cape Nord was founded by a bunch of LARPer, too?”

Faye smirked. “Not *exactly*.”

“It’s probably best to let one of the locals explain it,” Tammy said. “We’re outsiders, so we’d probably get something wrong. You know how fussy they can be.”

The hyena nodded. “Yeah, that’s probably true. Still...you know the Cape was founded by a bunch of Men who’d gotten kicked out of Sturmhaven for being too Manly, right? Extremism breeds more extremism. There’s basically no place in all the galaxy that’s quite as extremely straw-feminist as Sturmhaven...as *artificially* straw-feminist. So naturally the whole Manliness thing is going to be just as fake to compensate.”

Katie smirked. “So what you’rrrrre saying is, they’rrrrre all *compensating* for something?”

DeniFaye grinned like...well, a hyena. “It’ll do until a better explanation comes along.”

“So what exactly are we supposed to be doing up there, anyway?” Relena asked. “The part that’s fit for public consumption, that is.”

“They’ve got some kids who’ve said they want to try out for the Young Guns program, seems like,” Faye said. “Two Manly-Men-in-training, and one Girly Girl, because yay affirmative action. And their RIDEs...and it looks like a Hellir Integrate to round out the Seven. The kids’ grades all meet the minimums, without any serious disciplinary problems, and Cape Nord wants to be seen as all forward-looking and stuff despite the sexism thing. So here we are.”

“But apparently they had some other reason for asking for us, too,” I reminded them. “Something we don’t get to know until we get there, I guess. So we all get to be curious for another hour or so ‘til the sub touches down.”

“Are they serious with this Manliness rulebook thing of theirs?” Jenni

asked. “I mean, I’ve just been looking it over, and it’s like...there’s one page with a rule, and then about fifteen pages listing the exceptions—for *every single rule*.”

DeniFaye smirked. “Well, what do you expect? It was written by Men. Why would they bother trying to make *anything* simple?”

“It’s a little worrying, though,” Relena said. “I looked at it too, and...it seems like half the rules also apply to women. Do something they consider too Manly, and they stick you with a Man Card and throw you in a chamber.”

“You don’t have to worry about *that*,” Tammy said. “As active-duty Marshals on assignment, you’re exempt from involuntary Man Cards in all except the most extreme possible cases—and even then, any calls on local justice would have to go through the Marshals first, and they tend to frown on that sort of thing. At worst, you’d just be exiled, unless you actually *wanted* to try life on that side.”

Relena shook her head. “Well, that’s a relief.”

“But you’ll still have to deal with horrible, *horrible* sexism, like... y’know, Men who insist on opening the door for you. Every Man...every door.” DeniFaye shrugged. “Call me crazy, but I think there *are* worse things to worry about.”

I had to admit, despite my early doubts, it *did* sound intriguing. “The more I learn about this place, the more curious I get. I guess we’ll just have to wait ‘til we get there to learn what’s really going on.”

“True enough.” Faye grinned again. “So...does this jaunt come with an in-flight movie?”

“Well, it’s only an hour or so to get to Cape Nord from Uplift, so there’s not really time for something long,” Tamarind said. “But Jeany and I did pick out a couple of the more amusing episodes of Hellir’s Show, and there’s just enough time to fit them in before we land.”

“Oooh, this ought to be good!” Faye giggled. “Well, what’re you waiting for? Hit it!”

## CHAPTER 2

### *Cape Nord Aerodrome*

We came in on the usual suborbital approach, taking us low over a particularly scenic mountain landscape. There were pits in and holes through everything—telltale signs of one of the old Neumonformers’ mining remotes they’d used in the bygone days. According to the Marshals’ history lessons, Cape Nord itself was built in the leftover cavern a ‘former had hollowed out in mining precious metals—probably an ancient meteor impact, given how metal-poor the rest of the planet was. The whole area looked like the land where Pazu and his boss had lived in Miyazaki’s *Castle in the Sky*.

As we approached the biggest hole in the Swiss cheese alp, I noticed Jonesy had switched up the hardlight skin again. The *Acme* was its usual suborbital self again, but now it was pink as a bottle of Pepto, and adorned with flowers and other girly things. “Jooooonesy...” I called up to the cockpit.

“What? Just adding a little local color!”

“If you come out in Bugs Bunny crossdress, I’m writing you up.”

“Aww, spoilsport.”

We descended through the crater to Cape Nord’s main suborbital landing area. As a Marshal team, we could have used the local Marshal base’s private aerodrome, but Tams had thought it would be good for relations for us to come in by the tourist route for our first visit. Also, I suspected this would make it easier for the local contacts to meet us without anyone noticing they were meeting the Marshals, if the secondary purpose of our visit was really *that* clandestine.

Jonesy taxied us to the main terminal, where they lowered one of the adjustable boarding gates to mate with the *Acme*. Then six of our little Seven made our way to the terminal. As usual, Tams would meet us in the parking lot—that size thing again. Meanwhile, she’d monitor through my implants.

When we got to the terminal, the first thing we noticed was a woman in a dark pink dress, ermine coat, and, incongruously, sunglasses and a pink baseball cap pulled low over her face with her hair tucked up inside. She was holding up a sign reading “Young Guns.” As we approached, we noticed the red fox ears poking through the cap, and the matching bushy tail behind.

Her voice was low and melodious as she greeted us. “Welcome to Cape Nord! If you’ll please follow me, we have a private room arranged for a meeting before you travel to your base.”

“Okay, sure.” I nodded to the others, and we followed the mysterious foxy lady. DeniFaye was smirking for some reason, and the others were various shades of puzzled. But we walked across the terminal and into the business adjunct, where people could rent meeting rooms or office cubicles to serve their remote business needs. We headed up a short hall, and into a conference room.

Here waiting for us were a red fox RIDE—the woman’s partner, presumably—and also a white mouse Integrate who I recognized from the Marshal briefing files as Desilu, one of the head honchos of Hellir Enclave.

I was just opening my mouth to say hello when our escort tossed the sign aside, then turned back to face us. She pulled the sunglasses off, then swept the cap away so her hair could tumble free. It fell in blonde waves past her shoulders, in a slight slow-motion effect that told me she probably had the same cosmetic nanos Rochelle had gotten from Uncia. And there she was.

Now that the disguise was off, I could see she had a heart-shaped face, with full, sultry lips and piercing blue eyes. Her waist-length blonde hair had a few streaks of grey in it, and she looked to be in early middle-age—though what with modern cosmetics and life-extension medicine, she could have been anywhere from fifty to ninety-plus. Remember how I complained about Dr. Branch going overboard with the grey? This was the opposite of that. Subtle, especially against the blonde, but just enough to make her look distinguished. And she also looked oddly familiar, though I just couldn’t place her.

But Jenni didn’t have that problem. She was outright staring now, her

eyes almost the size of dinner plates. “I—Iphigenia Rose!” she stammered. “I have all your books!”

And that was where I knew her from: the cover of one of the romance novels I generally wasn’t interested in, but Jenni eagerly devoured.

The author in question smiled. “All 317 of them? Surely not.”

“I didn’t really count them, but...I have a lot.” She shook herself, and tried to regain her composure. “Uh...sorry. I...didn’t ever expect to meet you.”

“It’s quite all right. I know I tend to have that effect on people. Hence, the disguise.”

“Of course, she could just Fuse with me and be one foxy fox among many,” the fox put in. “But it’s not as much fun if there isn’t the risk of being caught.”

“Quite.” Iphigenia gestured to the others. “My faithful companion, personal secretary, and all-around foxbody Pandora, and Desilu of Hellir Enclave. Desi, Dora, the Young Guns.”

“Nice to see ya again, Iffy!” DeniFaye said. “Don’t know if you remember me, as I went by Denise Shafers last time I was in town, and I had a whole lot less fur, but Tams and I helped you out with that Valkyrie stalker from Sturmhaven who thought you were ‘hurting the cause of womankind’ with your books. Oh hey, there’s Tams now.” Tammy had keyed into the conference room’s projector and joined us in her downsized hardlight lioness form.

The romance novelist smiled, dimples showing. “I *do* remember you. Whatever became of...‘Hera,’ wasn’t it?”

“Sturmhaven wasn’t terribly happy about her causing another smudge on their reputation. Given the circumstances, they decided to take a page from Cape Nord’s brand of justice. So she spent some time as ‘Heracles’ before finally crossing back a few years later and apparently settling down,” Tamarind said.

“How apropos.”

The rest of us introduced ourselves, then the humanoids took seats at the conference table while the RIDes sat on their haunches behind their humans.

“It’s good to meet you all,” Desilu said. “I do hope you’ll visit McKenna Street while you’re here.”

“We’ll try to stop by,” I promised, and meant it. If nothing else, it would be interesting to set foot in the very businesses I’d seen on TV—real, practical places, not fake sets. Even if I was still undecided on how much I actually *liked* the shows.

Iphigenia laced her fingers in front of her on the table. “After we’re done here, if you want to use the fabber in the corner to get your favorite book in hardcopy, I’ll be happy to inscribe it for you. But for now, let’s get started.”

Desilu nodded. “By all means.”

Okay, so. In my first draft of this, I tried transcribing the meeting verbatim from the lifelog recordings my implants always make even when I’m not thinking in them, but the problem is, it turned into a lot of “she-said, she-said” talking heads. Threw the pacing way the hell off. I know you’re all eager to get to the *good* parts, and what’s the point of me *telling* a story if I can’t *tell* you stuff instead of *show* you everything? So I’ll just hit the high points.

First off, a little background on Iphigenia Rose. You probably already know she’s Zharus’s most renowned romance novelist. Not to mention most prolific—*317 books?* Sheesh! And probably a couple dozen more by now! How can you even *find* that many different ways to retell the same formulaic plot over and over again? But, hey...as you may have guessed, not a romance fan.

Anyway, I didn’t know this at the time, but Jenni filled me in after the meeting. Iffy’s also one of Zharus’s first famous cross...well, not *crossriders*, since they didn’t have RIDEs back then. But she was the first big public demo of the brand-spanking-new sex-change bodysculpt process using Zharus’s new sarium-powered nanites, all the way back in 112 A.L.—the very same nanites that Dr. Clemens adapted for Fusing a decade later, and Shahrizade corrupted to make me into a kitty a few decades after that. Quite the six-day wonder, even upstaged the visiting Star Circus for a bit.

Back when he’d been a guy, and Cape Nord’s Manliness rulebook had been the size of a pamphlet rather than an encyclopedia—turns out the

Steadier twencen media releases brought on a *lot* of revisions, but I digress—this poor male schmuck had enjoyed writing romance novels in his spare time, under the pen name Iphigenia Rose. Then he got ‘found out’ and made a public spectacle. Or else he intentionally *leaked* the secret, and bought a ticket to the “winning” side in the Cape Nord battle of the sexes, not to mention some free publicity for *her* books. Miz Rose has never really said one way or the other, but Jenni thinks the whole thing was just a little too pat—and after what Iffy said at the meeting, I’m inclined to agree. Anyway, since then, Iphigenia Rose has been one of the most famous Flowers of Cape Nord Womanhood, as well as a poster girl for a strange sort of gender equality, Cape Nord style: it doesn’t matter if you started out male or female. If you’re a woman *right now*, you’re a *real* woman for all they care.

But yeah—that battle-of-the-sexes thing. As Iffy explained it, it was a lot different than I’d expected. And that was the whole reason they wanted to get together and fill us in right off the bat. “Occasionally we have well-meaning but misguided outsiders come to Cape Nord and attempt to ‘reform’ it,” Iphigenia said. “There’s just one little problem...very few of the women who live here actually *want* it to be reformed.”

That was what Tams had been hinting at in all her I-know-something-you-don’t-know smugness. Basically, Cape Nord and Sturmhaven have a lot more in common than it looks like, because beneath all the bluster they’re both basically sort of *live-action roleplaying theme parks* rather than real societies—even if not all the people in them realize it.

To outsiders like me, it looks like Cape Nord is a male chauvinist paradise, but actually, the form of sexism they have in play is very specific, and kept in check by a complicated system of rules and regulations that discourages unwanted behavior—like the jerkiness and assholery of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century ‘Men’s Rights’ movement and GamerGate, or the skeeviness of pickup artists—while pushing more of a mid-twencen golden-age-of-Hollywood standard of gentlemanliness. Women might get patronized, told they belong in the kitchen and crap like that, but they also get treated like royalty in most other respects. As Desilu put it, “Even our most uncouth Frat Boy will nearly always hasten to get the door for a lady.”

And while the Men of Cape Nord get to act out, and play their “Reindeer Games” in which there are complicated and sometimes contradictory rules for what’s “Manly” and what isn’t, the *women* of Cape Nord have their own little games—it’s just that they play them behind the scenes. While the Men are the ones who run the government, it’s the *women* who run the Men. Or else they like to *think* they do. They entertain themselves by trying to make the polity run the way they think it should with no actual political power beyond what they can talk Men into doing for them.

As Iphigenia put it, “Our own little version of things, we call sewing circle, or bridge club, or bingo night, or romance novel book club...that’s my favorite. Just little excuses for the women to get together and chat quietly amongst ourselves...and decide the course of Cape Nord politics, or so we like to believe.” Meanwhile, the handful of men who *do* know about the women’s “conspiracy” (or, at least, the ones who weren’t women and part of it themselves before they got Man Carded) mostly think the women are fooling themselves, but don’t think it’s Manly to rain on their parades so let ‘em believe whatever they want.

*Do* the women really secretly run things? It’s actually kind of unclear. Desilu wasn’t sure, either, though she hadn’t really been a part of it that long—she hadn’t been a full player in the Cape Nord sewing circle until Hellir came out into the open, so she still had more of an outsider’s perspective. She thought it might be that maybe both the women *and* the men actually have a more-or-less equal say in things in their different ways, except they both *believe* they’re the ones who are *really* in charge.

As Iffy put it, “The important thing is, it works because everyone in Cape Nord by and large wants the same things. Men want to feel Manly, and women will put up with being condescended to a little if we’re treated as royalty in other respects. Occasionally there is some...*friction* when some unsuspecting Man stumbles across our little ‘conspiracy’ and gets the wrong idea, but we’re usually able to come to a meeting of the minds. In general, anyone who doesn’t like the way things are done here is always perfectly free to leave.”

“And that’s where we come to the other reason for your visit,” Desilu

said. “Lately, meetings places and occasionally actual *meetings* of the girls club have been...attacked. Disrupted. Vandalized. We thought it was another disgruntled Man at first, but...we weren’t able to find who was doing it. They were invisible to cameras, and sometimes hacked municipal databases to cover their trail.”

“But one piece of evidence we *did* uncover was Integrate data traces,” Iphigenia said. “What some have termed ‘Integrate dandruff.’”

“We cross-referenced it with Hellir’s citizen registry,” Desilu said. “It didn’t match any of our people.”

“But we have to take their word for that, since they’re not giving us direct access to their records,” Iphigenia said. “Oh, not that I blame them, mind. Ever since the revelation that we had a secret Enclave within us, filming themselves and our citizens for their own amusement, relations have been just a bit...fraught. It’s probably best for all concerned that we feel our way to better relations slowly. But something like this...isn’t helping.”

“We’ll be happy to open our records to the Marshals as an independent third party, of course. But it’s worth noting that the traces didn’t match anyone in Cape Nord’s records, either.”

“Not that it necessarily means much. Our only Integrate data trace records are for known criminals. We don’t ask non-criminal Integrates to register—yet, anyway. As I said, Nord/Integrate relations are a touch fraught right now.”

“I see,” I said. “And it probably wouldn’t help if it got around that you’d asked the Marshals to send someone in to investigate the Inties.”

“So, ask them to send a team who would have a naturrral otherrr rrrreason to visit, then meet with them under the prrrretense of merrrrrely explaining the Cape Nord birrrrds and bees to rrrequest an undercoverrr investigation.”

Desilu nodded. “Precisely, Katie. While I’m sure Hellir’s folks would understand, ordinary Nord citizens might see it as another reason to get suspicious, or even violent.”

“Not that Cape Nord even knows anything is going on right now,” Iphigenia sighed. “The police Men think it’s simply a series of pranks. ‘Boys

will be boys.’ It’s hard to get them to take it seriously, because no one has actually been hurt yet. But we women worry it might only be a matter of time. Best to nip it in the bud early on, if we can.”

I wasn’t sure entirely what I thought of the whole story they’d just laid on us, but being asked to investigate a crime was something I *did* understand. “We’ll be happy to look into it, Ma’am. If you can beam over everything you’ve learned so far, we can discreetly cross-reference it with Marshals databases to see if we turn anything up. Meanwhile, we can poke around quietly, while we’re training your cadre.”

“What about the recruits?” Tams asked. “Have they been told the other reason for our visit?”

“Not as such, though Marta does know about the attacks. How much you tell them is up to you, of course.”

“Provided we don’t blab about the sewing circle, of course,” Kandace said.

Iphigenia shrugged. “We can’t control what you say. But I doubt your mission would be well served by annoying literally half of Cape Nord.”

Kandace snorted. “Oh, you don’t need to worry about me. I’m just perpetually amused by human foibles, is all. Right when I think I’ve seen everything, along comes something even more ridiculous. No offense.”

“None taken,” Desilu said. “It *does* seem rather silly, when you get right down to it. But it seems to work well enough for the people who live here.”

“Even if we did disagree, now that we know how things work here we pretty much have to go along,” I said. “One of the Marshals’ first principles is ‘When in Rome...’ Not our job to go around interfering in local politics.”

“That’s just what Reed said you’d say. Very good.” Iphigenia nodded. “Do you have any further questions?”

There weren’t any big ones—or at least, not ones anyone felt comfortable laying on her. So she gestured to the business fabber in the corner, and said she’d even cover the fab fee for any books we wanted her to sign. That was pretty nice of her, I thought, even if I wasn’t really interested.

But even if I never read it, a signed Iphigenia Rose would look nice on

my souvenir shelf, and maybe make for a good conversation starter. So I browsed the catalog of her titles, and was struck by one of her recent books, *Alpha Maelstrom*. As the title suggested, it was a tale of love and lust among the bodyjacked against the backdrop of Alpha Camp in its “glory days.” Having lived in Alpha Camp myself for some months, I thought it might be good for a laugh.

When Tammy saw what I was getting, she favored me with a sad-kitty emoticon in sideband chat. *:Can we fast-time and read that right now? PWEEEEEEASE?:* Like any fabbed book, it had a near-field chip in the spine containing the fabber recipe, ebook, and audiobook files, so I could read it on a tablet or in VR if I wanted...or *we* could read it in VR together.

*:Sure, why not? Should be good for a laugh.:* So, for the next few subjective hours, everyone else stood still like a statue as we retreated to our jungle glade and took turns reading the book out loud to each other.

To my surprise, it actually turned out to be pretty good—for a romance novel, anyway. For a wonder, Alpha Camp actually *wasn't* laughably mangled beyond all recognition. As Jenni told me later, Iffy is known for doing extensive research on the subjects of her books.

The afterword noted she'd visited Alpha Camp on a book tour and talked with a number of its inhabitants, and it showed. The protagonists were fictional, but a number of real public figures featured in the background—AlphaWolf, Smash, Ohm, even Tocsin. As for the plot...well, I knew there'd been plenty of *lust* in the camp. Rose (the not-Iphigenia one) and Nora had been proof of that. But love? I wasn't so sure. But nothing said it *couldn't* have happened, and the love-and-Stockholm-syndrome quadrilateral among the two human protagonists and their RIDE bodyjackers was at least an interesting departure from the usual romance-novel formula.

“Kandi says she's read Jenni's copy and she thought it was pretty good, too,” Tams said after we finished. Kandace had been an Alpha Camp resident, too. “Not that I really expected anything less from old Iffy. I read a few of her books back when Denise and I were dealing with her Sturmie stalker, as part of the investigation. While they weren't really my thing either, they were well-written for what they were. And it's not every day you

get to read a book about somewhere you lived.”

“Yeah, I guess. Think we should ask her to autograph a copy for Alfie?”

“She’s probably sent him one already, but we can check.”

Back in the real world, we’d all finished up getting our books signed, and were in the process of saying our farewells. “Remember, if you have any further questions, just let me know—or check with a local girl.”

“Don’t forget Tams and I have been here before, too,” DeniFaye said. “So check with us first; we can probably fill you in.”

Desilu nodded. “Another good idea. And be sure to visit Hellir soon!”

Tams was waiting in transport truck mode in the parking lot, so we all climbed aboard and pulled into the main road leading downtown. After we got away from the aerodrome, I was surprised to see it was almost as bright in here as it had been outside. The ceiling was studded with skylights and fiber-optic light pipes to bring the exterior light in, as well as big diffused light panels to supplement them. It was almost like being outside—not what you’d expect in a polity located inside a huge cave.

As we passed the last of the traffic control gates out of the aerodrome, we all seemed to take it as a signal to talk about what we’d just seen and heard.

“Well, that was certainly an...*interesting* meeting,” Relena said carefully. “I knew Cape Nord was odd, but...”

“I’d heard a few things about it here and there, over the years,” Kandace said. “Never paid it no mind, as I didn’t expect to find myself here, but now I have, I’m not *too* surprised.”

“Guess I shouldn’t be eitherrr,” Katie added. “But what a *planet* this is!”

Jenni frowned. “But...what does all this mean to our mission? Are we going to have to act all *feminine* and stuff to keep from getting into trouble? That’s just kind of...ugh.”

DeniFaye chuckled. “That’s one thing you don’t have to worry about, as it happens. The rules here only restrict the Men. We girls can act however we feel like, and they’re pretty much required to take us as we are.”

One of the characters in a Hellir Show had said much the same thing. That didn't quite fit with one of the things I'd heard, though. It was something I'd been thinking about a lot since I'd heard we were coming here, in fact. I hadn't brought it up in the meeting because it didn't seem like the kind of thing to ask a stranger...but DeniFaye wasn't a stranger. "But I heard from one of Shelley's friends about the time she almost got stuck with a Man Card, for the Manly act of accidentally drinking a bunch of Men under the table."

"That would be dear Rufia?" The hyena grinned. "Now there's a story that makes the rounds. See, the thing is, the mandatory Man Card rules are really there to provide a fig leaf to any women who want to hop the fence and play on that side for a while. Rufia wouldn't *really* have been Carded since she didn't want it—especially what with her being an outsider and stranger to their ways. I doubt very many women are *ever* unwillingly Carded...not unless they've ticked off enough *other* women to get stuck with it. And that would take something personal, not just being un-girly."

Tams laughed. "It's funny, really," she sent through our com channel. "All the Manliest Men live in fear of losing their Man Card, because they're afraid they might never get it back...or might never *want* to. But the thing is, by the time their cooldown is up, if they've gotten into the spirit of the game but *do* still want to go back, the other women will get together and set up a scenario where they 'redeem their Manhood.' Of course, now they know how everything really *works*, but still, it amuses them to play along."

"Huh," Jenni said. "I guess that makes a sort of sense."

"Here's something else that might surprise you," Kandace said. "I heard from Pandora in sideband chat that Iphigenia Rose has been a Man again *twice* since she originally crossed."

Jenni blinked. "Really? *Her*?"

"Yep! She had to use fake identities because of who she is, but it wasn't a problem. Pandora was her ticket back the second time, and they've been together since. She said Iffy wouldn't mind crossing back for a third go-round, but doesn't want to leave her without a partner for that long."

DeniFaye smirked. "Once they've Integrated, that won't be a problem—they can use a Hellir-style hardlight disguise and no one would ever

know.”

“Still, that’s a pretty big surprise,” Jenni said. She turned to me. “She was the original poster girl for nanite-enabled quick sex change, you know. About 40 years back, she used to be a Man who wrote romance novels under a female pen name...” And this is where she told me that part I mentioned earlier.

## CHAPTER 3

It took about twenty minutes to make our way to the Cape Nord Marshal station. Most of that was because Tammy took us by the scenic route, all the way around the cave. As was the case in most polities, the station was located right by the aerodrome because of the Marshals' role in policing inter-polity commerce and travel. We could have taken a private utility road directly from the 'drome and ended up right there in five minutes. But Tammy wanted to show us the sights, and maybe give us time to talk over that meeting first.

The main dome was a pretty impressive sight. It was several times the size of Uplift's hardlight dome, for starters, but the light-pipes and stuff made it almost as bright inside even though it was made of stone. The main floor of the room was about halfway down the dome, but there were also a few terraces and platforms higher up—including the hydroponic farms where Cape Nord grew some of its food. ("Iceberg lettuce and snow peas," DeniFaye said. I'm *pretty* sure she was joking.) There were enough light sources spaced all around that there weren't any deep shadows on the main floor under them. DeniFaye said there were also a number of other floors and chambers under the main floor, including the one Hellir Enclave had dug in.

The aerodrome was in a separate upper chamber, a smaller roughly spherical bubble above and off to one side of the main dome. We made a circuit of the main dome along a terrace on the same level, then we were back to the aerodrome chamber. The Marshal station was dug into the wall at the corner, so part of it poked out through the wall overlooking the main dome, and another part faced the aerodrome itself. It was a good vantage point for keeping an eye on everything. It also had its own separate landing pads, with external access on a different face of the mountain than the civilian aerodrome used so as not to interfere with civilian traffic. We'd have come in by that route if not for the meeting with Iffy.

When we pulled up to the gate, the sentry—a copper star in a cougar RIDE—waved us through after reading Tamarind's transponder. We pulled

up in front of the main building, then all climbed down and Tammy switched back to Walker mode. “All right, folks, let’s head inside and sign in.”

The building had an entrance hall big enough even for Tammy—but then, this was Cape Nord, and polar bears were a thing. At the right as we entered was a desk, with a Cape-Nord-attractive blonde woman wearing brightly-colored cowgirl chic clothes behind it—the sort of thing you’d see in a technicolor Western, or on that cowgirl character from the *Toy Story* movies. She had a hollow star badge—but when I looked closer, I noticed it was a hollow *gold* star. *:I didn’t know hollow-star badges came in gold,:* I sent in sideband to Tammy.

Tammy sent back a smirk emoticon. *:Ask her about it, why don’cha?:*

*:Well, I don’t want to be rude...:* The idea was that a hollow star denoted a civilian expert or functionary, like on that hospital receptionist back when I’d checked in to meet Dr. Branch, or occasionally a part-time reservist. To earn enough authority to rate the gold color, they generally needed to go all-in and get a solid badge. Silver was supposed to be as high as hollow got, and even that was pretty rare.

The woman smiled, dimples showing. “Welcome to the Cape Nord office, Marshals! Hollow Gold Star Della Rae Stevens, at your service. I’ve pinged Dell, and he’ll be right down.”

“Good to see you again, Rae,” Tammy said. “Surprised you two are still running things down here. It’s been, what, fourteen years and change?”

Della nodded. “We found it a comfortable posting, Tams. And when you get right down to it, the place has enough of a learning curve that Reed is happy having old hands on the job.”

“Well, I’m glad you two found your niche,” DeniFaye said. “Though weren’t *you* Dell, last time we were by? It’s hard to tell with the Cape Nord ‘sculpts...”

“True enough. We’ve switched a few times since then. Oh, there he is now.”

A solid gold-star Marshal, wearing a matching movie-chic cowboy outfit to Della’s, stepped out of the elevator near the desk. He had blond hair and a mustache and beard that put me in mind of Tom Skerritt.

“Howdy, pard. Gold Star Dell Shannon Stevens, and I see you’ve already met my wife.”

I blinked. “Dell and Della? Uh...what? Uh...I mean, good to meet you, sir, ma’am.”

Della laughed. “A little confusion is not uncommon, first time around in Cape Nord.”

“So we’ve been finding out,” Relena said. “It was weird enough having Iphigenia Rose meet us at the aerodrome.”

Dell grinned. “Ah, so you’ve had your first ‘orientation’ already, so we can skip over *that* part of the explanation.”

“If Miss Rose briefed you on the way things are, you have some idea of the importance they place on traditional gender roles around here,” Della said. “As Marshals, we’re basically exempt from the Reindeer Games, but we find it helps to keep up appearances. So, the two of us, we co-chair the Cape Nord Marshal station.” She pointed to her badge. “This is hollow just for appearance’s sake, since my ‘official’ title is head of the secretarial pool. So, as far as the Cape Nord Men are concerned, I’m just as ornamental as it is. But in actual fact, and to anyone *not* from Cape Nord, I’m a full gold, just like Dell there.” She tapped the badge and it flickered into full solidity for a moment, before winking back to a hollow outline.

“Of course, we don’t exactly *tell* them that we trade jobs, badges, and first names every three years.” Dell chuckled. “Not to mention general physical appearances. Whichever one of us is Dell at the time deals with the Cape Nord Men...”

“And I keep a line open to the women,” Della said. “That’s how we got word of what was going on with the vandalism.”

“And so here we are,” Jenni said.

“I...see,” I said slowly. “This place really is weird, isn’t it?”

“Suppose it’s all in what you’re used to, Marshal,” Dell said. “The local culture has so much inertia, it’s generally easiest all around for outsiders like us to adapt and ‘go native’ as much as we can. Easier to fight crime when we’re not fighting against all the unwritten laws, too.”

Della smirked. “If you can call them ‘unwritten’ when the ‘rulebook’ would give a twencen *Dungeons & Dragons* manual a run for its money.”

Kandace snorted. “I suppose I really shouldn’t be surprised anymore by all the nonsense humans get up to, but I just keep finding new twists.”

“Soonerrrr or laterrrr, I might have to wrrrrrite a book,” Katie mused.

“I think I want to subscribe to your newsletter, niece o’ mine.”

“Whatever gets them through the night, huh?” DeniFaye said. “Are the new recruits around?”

“They’ve moved into their quarters and are settling in,” Della said. “You’ll meet them tomorrow. For now, we thought you might want to do some settling in yourselves, or maybe get in a little tourism.”

“I would like to see where we’ve been billeted, though I don’t know if I’ll sleep there,” I said. “Generally I just curl up in the garage with Tams.”

“And that’ll be fine, too,” Dell said. “The training barracks has excellent facilities for humans and RIDEs alike. Yours won’t be the first batch of Marshals we’ve trained here, though it will be the youngest.”

“But if this works out, we might just put the program into effect continent-wide,” Della said. “It’ll be something for kids to do, after all.”

“About this vandalism thing,” Tamarind said. “You’re not seriously expecting this to be a matter for full-fledged Marshals, right? Something potentially hazardous?”

“Well, the truth of the matter is, we don’t rightly know,” Dell said. “It *seems* like one of those cases they run across every so often, where some schmuck who’s bought too deeply into the whole Manhood business runs across a bunch of women talking about Woman Things and takes the wrong notion. But if it were as simple as that, they’d leave traces...and not Integrate traces, either.”

“Understand, we mainly want you to investigate, inconspicuously,” Della added. “Like you did with the Alpha Camp bodyjacking affair. Once you learn what’s going on, fill us in and we’ll take it from there. We don’t *expect* you to run into trouble—but given that you lot are considerably more combat-capable than we expect the average Young Guns team to be, we expect you can handle yourselves if trouble finds you first.”

“But do try to keep the trainees out of harm’s way. They’re your cover for being here, and we *do* want you to train them, but they shouldn’t be involved in the *serious* investigation.”

“We’ll do our best,” I said. Inwardly, I was starting to worry a little. This was looking a lot more complicated than I’d originally expected. But I supposed we’d muddle through somehow.

With the introductions out of the way, Dell and Della showed us through to the barracks section of the base, which had a common bunk room for the new trainees and two-beds-to-a-room dormitories for the rest of us. Jenni and Kandace would bunk together with Relena and Katie, and DeniFaye would theoretically share a room with me—though the way it was going to work out, it looked like she’d have it to herself most of the time since, like I said, I’d probably just crash with Tams out in the garage. There was a gym and combat training area that looked at least as well-equipped as the one at our desert base, and a cafeteria-style eating area to round it all out.

Anyway, once we’d seen the place, and the humans amongst us with stuff to unpack had tossed their suitcases onto their beds, we met back up out front of the Marshal station to head downtown and do a little tourist stuff. It was probably about the only chance we’d get to look around without having to worry about our new charges, after all, so we were going to make the most of it.

Tams switched over to hovertruck mode and we all piled in or climbed aboard. I fastened my belt and patted the wheel. “All right, so! Where should we go first? McKenna Street?”

“Might as well. It’s the part of Cape Nord you’ve all seen the most of on screen lately,” DeniFaye said. “And given we’ll be working with the folks there on our Integrate investigation, it wouldn’t hurt to make a point of dropping by first thing.”

“Also the part of Cape Nord that’s the most friendly to outsiders, since they’ve been getting so many of them since their show went wide.” Tammy chuckled. “Been giving the rest of Cape Nord’s tourism industry conniptions, so I gather.”

“Then let’s head that way. Tams, wanna call ahead and let Desi know we’re on our way? Might be polite.”

“Good plan. Hang on, I’m buzzing her.”

A moment later, the mouse Integrate’s face appeared on a HUD

projection on the windscreen. “Oh! Hello again! I’m glad to hear you’re on the way down.” She paused, glancing at something off-screen. “Say...since you’re coming *now*, if it’s convenient...would you all be willing to appear in an episode of our Show? I hadn’t planned on this, but...a role is available you all would be *perfect* for. We’d just need your permission to use you, and of course there would be royalties when the episode is sold.”

“Since we’re on duty, our regs say you’d need to earmark any royalties to the Marshals Benevolent Fund,” Tammy said. “But I’d be up for it. What say the rest of you?”

I grinned. “Sounds like fun.”

“Oh, sure!” DeniFaye put in. “Where do we sign?”

The others quickly chimed in their assent as well.

“Great!” Desilu paused. “Um...not to seem rude, but...there’s a lot to fill you in on in regard to the backstory of this scene, but your part will come up in just a few minutes. Could I talk to the RIDEs and Integrate among you in fast-time, then you could fill in your partners *en route*?”

Tams replied, “Sure, we’ll meet you there.” So, all of us except Jenni and Relena dropped into my jungle clearing virtual meeting space.

We were joined a few milliseconds later by Desilu. She blinked at me. “I’m sorry, but we’re going to need to go to fast-time, and...” Then she blinked again. “...wait, we’re already *in* fast-time. What...?”

I had to grin. “Don’t read the news much, do you? It’s a long story. But speaking of long stories, fill us in on the parts we’ll all be playing?”

“Oh...of course.” Desilu cleared her throat. “Well, it started like this...”

#### INT A DIM AND DUSTY WAREHOUSE

The warehouse was capacious, dim, and more than a little chilly—not too surprising, being buried in the bottom of a cave in the frozen north. The dim yellow overhead lights did little to penetrate the gloom. Vast piles of crates stacked five, ten, twenty meters high cast deep shadows.

But then, Private Detective Mitch Goldman was used to working in deep shadows. When you thought about it, he reflected, his life these days

was more lived in shades of grey than in vivid color. *In terms of both visible light and morality. Heh.*

Mitch grasped the butt of his .38 Police Special reproduction gauss revolver as he put his back against one of the stacks of crates, gingerly leaning over to peer around the corner. Clear so far. He jerked his head in that direction and his partner JadeCat nimbly moved forward to the next bulwark of crates, the tiger stripes on her shapely legs flashing in the gloom. She took up a similar position there, the .25 Beretta gauss automatic gripped securely with her finger laid alongside the trigger guard. Small and ladylike though the gun was, it was a gauss gun like Mitch's and would pack a lot more of a wallop than the old-school slugthrower it resembled.

Jade glanced around the next corner, and nodded back to Mitch that it was safe to leapfrog her. He moved around the corner, finding himself in a little open area where the crate stacks widened out. Here, someone had pulled a few crates out into the open. A crowbar lay on top of one of them, and lanterns were scattered here and there to brighten the ambient light level. It looked like someone had been interrupted in the middle of things.

"Well, now." Mitch slid the .38 back into his shoulder holster. "Let's see what we've got here." He picked up the crowbar and pried the lid off one of the crates, revealing a row of bottles of amber fluid nestled into shredded paper packing materials. He lifted one out. "'The Glenlivet,' is it?" He pulled the cork with his teeth, spat it out, held his nose over the lip of the bottle and sniffed. "Phew! I've seen scotch *tape* that's more scotch than *this* swill."

JadeCat moved to his side, and nodded. "True, but still..."

Mitch looked at her. "Still *what*?"

"No, no. *Still*." Jade pointed at one corner of the open area, where a conglomeration of copper tubing and metal tanks steamed merrily away.

Mitch rolled his eyes. "Oh, ha ha. Well, at least now we know where all that fake gen-u-wine imported Earth booze is coming from." He put the bottle down. "C'mon. We've found what we came here for. Now let's scam before—"

"Before *what*, flatfoot?" came a menacing sneer from behind them. Mitch and JadeCat slowly turned to see a short, fedora-clad gangster,

complete with tommy gun replica pointed their way, and a half a dozen similarly-armed men behind him. “Leaving so soon? Why not relax and have a drink?”

“Oh, hey, Tiny Tony!” Mitch said cheerfully. “Well, since you offered, suppose I don’t mind if I do.” He reached down behind him for the bottle, tipped it up to his mouth, and took a swig. He made a show of swishing it around in his mouth, then pulled a handkerchief from his pocket with his other hand and spat the booze onto it. “Ah, eau de paint thinner. Gotta admit, you don’t run into a bouquet like that every day. Thank goodness.”

“How do you sleep with yourself, huh?” Jade sneered.

“Oh, it’s not hard to sleep with yourself when you’re Tiny Tony,” Mitch said. “You could fit three or four of him in the same bed.”

The diminutive mobster snorted. “Oh, a couple a’ wise guys, huh? *Verrrrrry* funny. Give my regard to the fishes.”

“De plane! De pla—*ack!*” Mitch and JadeCat dived for cover behind stacks of crates as the mobsters opened fire with their tommy guns.

As the gauss pellets splintered wood, Jade glanced worriedly across at Mitch. Mitch just grinned at her, stuck the handkerchief in the neck of the bottle he’d managed to hold onto, and fished for a lighter. It only took a couple of flicks to light up the rag, then he ducked out around the corner and gave the bottle an overhand toss. FWUMP! The mobsters yelped and danced back as the flames spread onto the floor all around them. Mitch and JadeCat took advantage of their distraction to lean out and plink at them with their pistols. They managed to wing a couple of them, but the other mobsters found cover of their own and started giving back as good as they got.

“How’re we gonna get out of this, boss?” Jade asked. “They’re between us and the only door!”

Mitch gave her a grin far more confident than he actually felt. “Oh, don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll think of something...”

And that was our cue. Desilu had completely briefed us RIDEs and DeniFaye about the ongoing plot and our role in it, and we had ample time to condense it for the benefit of Jenni and Relena. We had all our weapons

locked into “hardlight tag” mode, and Tams had rezzed up an entirely convincing hardlight ramming plate on the prow of her hovertruck mode, in addition to the hardlight gatling cannons she used for intimidation. And Desilu held up her end of things—right as we hit the hardlight-simulated “wall” of the warehouse, she cued the “crash inward” animation so it looked like we just plowed right on through, crates scattering everywhere.

“Gondwana Marshals, everybody freeze!” I yelled as we opened simulated fire.

*:What the hell?:* Mitch—rather, Tallyhawk—yelped over the cast channel Desilu had patched us into.

*:We’re ad-libbing,:* Desilu said. *:Just go with it.:*

*:That’s a little more than just an “ad-lib,”:* JadeCat—Jade—sent.

Fused up, Jenni/Kandi and Relena/Katie moved to the flanks as DeniFaye drifted up above the crates, her Integrate-grade hardlight shielding easily shedding the (simulated) gauss pellets mobsters winged her way. Tams Fused around me, and we took advantage of our Optimal Optimus-class size to bash a few more piles of crates over onto some of the mobster mooks. Then we leveled a hardlight cannon at Tiny Tony. “Do ya feel lucky? Punk?”

“Cazzo!” said the mobster, throwing his gun away and hurriedly raising his hands. “Nuh...nice kitty?”

“Detective Goldman? JadeCat?” Tammy said. “Gold Star Tamarind, Young Guns division. My partner’s Jeanette Leroq, and we’ll introduce the others later. You two okay?”

The two of them were too professional to let our sudden entrance throw them for long. “We are now,” “Mitch” said, holstering his gun and straightening his trenchcoat as he came out of cover. “I suppose you lot were just in the neighborhood and decided to stop by?”

“Something like that,” DeniFaye said, touching down in front of them. “This brand of rubbing alcohol has been showing up as far away as Aloha, so Marshals HQ asked us to track down the source. We were going to touch base with you first, but there was no one at your office, so...”

JadeCat smirked. “Told you we should look into an answering service.”

Mitch rolled his eyes. “It’s on the to-do list.”

With sirens and flashing lights, Cape Nord cop cars pulled up outside of the warehouse, and a trenchcoat-clad Chief Willard Selleck, JD, TN, stalked in. He glowered around at all the battle damage. “Well, I see it’s business as usual for you lot.” He tilted his head back to peer up at Tammy and me. “Oh, great, as if you two couldn’t cause enough damage by *yourselves*.”

*:Wait, isn’t that guy a real cop?:* I sent. He’d been in the briefing packet we’d gotten with the Cape Nord assignment.

*:He puts in the odd cameo appearance while he’s off-duty,:* Desilu replied.

“Hey, Chief,” I said. “We were just in the neighborhood and we decided to stop by.”

“I’m innocent!” Tiny Tony yelped. “I was just out for a walk, minding my own business...”

Willard snorted. “With a tommy gun?”

“This is a rough neighborhood!” the mobster insisted. “I want my lawyer!”

The chief nodded to the uniformed officers who’d filed in behind him to secure the warehouse. “Take ‘em away.” He turned a gimlet eye on Mitch Goldman and JadeCat. “And I want to see *you two* in my office first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Sure thing, Chief,” JadeCat said.

*:Annnnd...that’s a wrap!:* Desilu said. *:Wrap party at Hooters!:*

A few minutes later, six of us seven were physically in the sports bar on McKenna Street, while Tams bent parking regulations out front and mingled via hardlight telepresence. The “OOC” sign was lit, and cast disguises were off as we all mingled.

“You know, you could have *told* us you were sending in something more than the usual ‘cavalry,’” Tallyhawk said, giving Desilu a mock glare over her glass of beer.

Desilu smirked innocently. (I’m not sure you normally *can* smirk innocently, but somehow she pulled it off.) “Your reactions were more

natural this way. Enforced method acting is a time-honored tradition.”

As I circulated through the room with my mug of sarsaparilla, I passed the table where DeniFaye sat across from Chief Willard, nibbling on a plate of hot wings. “So, Chief, I’m a little surprised to see you in an on-camera role. The scuttlebutt I’d heard was you weren’t so hot on the idea when you found out about The Show.”

Willard waved a hand. “Meh. By the time I found out about all this nonsense, they’d already made me into a popular character. So what could I do but go along?” He shrugged. “Besides, it’s good publicity for the Precinct, and the royalties mean more money for the Widows and Orphans Fund. And *someone* has to keep an eye on this bunch.”

At the next table over, Jade grinned and caught my eye. *:Besides, he found he likes the limelight after all, now that he doesn’t have to worry about messing up his “True Nordsman” application. Though don’t ever suggest that to him.:*

The seat across from Jade was empty, so I slid in. “Hey. Nice to meet you. Not every day you get to play a scene with celebrities.”

“After the job you did breaking up that Alpha Camp kidnapping ring, I could say the same for you.” Jade smiled. “Compared to something like that, we’re all just play-acting over here.”

I felt my cheeks heat up a little. “Oh, that wasn’t anything special, really. Just the job we signed up for.” I switched over to one-to-one encrypted sideband chat for a little more privacy. *:Speaking of which, we’re partly here on a case ourselves. Had you heard about that?:*

*:The Integrate vandalism thing? Yeah.:* She sent across a “concerned frown” emoticon. *:As far as I know, no one here’s involved in it, though I’ve been wrong before.:*

*:Well, if you hear anything odd, please let us know. You never know what might turn out to be important.:* Not wanting to be one of those people who spent the whole party sitting around staring mutely at my conversation partner, I switched back to speaking aloud. “So how’s life here been treating you? When we got the assignment, I *really* wasn’t sure about this place...but what I take from those behind-the-scenes featurettes, it sounds like you’ve had had things a lot harder than I have.”

She blinked at me. “Seriously? If the magazine profiles and interviews I dug up are true, it sounds like *you* were the one with the really rough time. You were the one turned into an *actual* cat, with paws instead of hands. I just got the lower half.”

“But at least I stayed the sex I was born as.” I considered. “Is this a ‘the grass is always greener’ thing?”

“More like ‘the grass is always browner,’ I think.” She grinned. “This seems to be a planet of change.”

“Ain’t it just. Here’s to hoping it’s mostly change for the better.”

“Hey, everyone, your attention please!” Desilu called out over the hum of conversations. “We’re going to go IC for a *denouement* to the warehouse raid in five minutes! Places, everyone, and hardlight glamours up!” She nodded to the diminutive shrew Integrate who had played “Tiny Tony.” “And Beverly, great job today, but remember to switch to another character for this.”

I looked up. “Oh...where do you want me?”

Desilu glanced over. “Oh, stay right there, that’s fine. Tallyhawk, pull up another chair for Mitch? And Faye, you want to join them?”

The hyena Integrate waved a hand. “Nah. Jeany’s the boss here. Far be it from me to steal the spotlight.” She waved across the room to where Tammy was chatting with another of the Hellir Integrates, via the bar’s hardlight projector interface. “Yo! Tams! C’mon over here a minute!”

So Tammy padded over to take a seat across the table from Tallyhawk, as Tally turned back into Mitch Goldman and Jade made the half-a-dozen little adjustments that separated her in-character “JadeCat” persona from her normal appearance.

I grinned. “Hey, whoa, no one told me I was gonna have to *act*. I hope I don’t blow my lines.”

Jade chuckled. “Don’t worry about it. We’re real big on improv around here.”

“But what’s my motivation?” Tammy asked.

“Mitch” raised an eyebrow. “Oh, I dunno...a bunch of sarium batteries, hydraulic actuators, and lifters? Those make up the motive systems of most RIDEs, after all...”

Tammy rolled her eyes. “I’m surrounded by comedians.”

Desilu called out, “We’re live in three...two...one...ACTION!”

“It sure was lucky you all were in the neighborhood,” JadeCat said.

Goldman snorted. “Luck, huh? That’s one word for it.”

Tammy spoke up. “We were headed this way anyway—we’re going to be stationed locally as a training cadre for the next little while. That being the case, it made sense for us to look into the rotgut distributors while we were here.”

“Even so, we don’t want to step on any toes,” I put in. “Really, you guys were here first. We just helped with the cleanup. We’re happy to let you get the credit for this bust.”

“Anyway, you’ll probably be seeing a lot more of us for the next little while,” Tammy said. “We’re going to have to go somewhere to blow off steam, and this seems to be one of the more...*cosmopolitan* quarters of your little polity.”

“So we might as well start off on good terms.” I grinned. “Hey, barkeep, another glass of this sarsaparilla, if you would! Someday, I’m going to be old enough to know what *real* beer tastes like...”

Tams smirked. “Trust me, you wouldn’t like it.”

JadeCat chuckled. “Anyway, we’re glad you’re here. When you’re done eating, how ‘bout we show you around the neighborhood?”

“We’d like that.”

Across the bar, I noted Katie and Relena sitting at one table with some locals, and Kandace and Jenni at another. They were all having conversations of their own, which would presumably be edited into the final cut if they were deemed interesting enough. I had to admit, I actually was kinda looking forward to seeing what they made of it—and was halfway pondering figuring out some fairly-transparent excuses to show up here more often.

Tams picked up on what I was thinking and sent a smirk emoticon across. *:Seems to me you’ve already made all the excuses you need.:*

Eyeball emoticon. *:Yeah, for them. I was talking about excuses to use on the rest of you lot. “Uh...more money for the Benevolent Fund is always a good thing, right?”:*

As we were getting up to head out for the promised tour, Tammy and I got a fast-time chat request from Desilu. We accepted, and popped into our jungle clearing. “Hey, Des, what’s up?”

The mouse Integrate glanced around. “This setting is nice. It’s very ‘you.’” She cleared her throat. “I just thought, as long as we were here, I should pass this over to you.” She handed over a tablet, which was the VR rendering for a bit of digital data. “It’s an access link to Hellir’s Integrate signature database. If you run across any digital fingerprints during the course of your investigation, you can check and see if they’re known to us.”

I accepted the tablet, and nodded. “Thanks. That’ll be useful.”

“I should note, it’s a one-way access—you can scan signatures, but you can’t download ours, and anything you do with it will be monitored.” Her ears drooped a little. “We’re still a little nervous about giving outsiders access, even the Marshals, simply because there are so many possible abuses of this kind of data repository. Especially given how ‘iffy’ human-Integrate relations still are in general. Fritz’s regime did us no favors in that regard, and don’t even get me started on Appa.”

“Understood,” Tammy said. “Still, this kind of direct access will be helpful, and we appreciate it.”

“Please, let us know if there’s anything else we can do to help.” Her nose twitched. “By the way, I took the time to google you, since the briefing. I’m really quite amazed. I hadn’t known it was possible to translate human minds into RI cores.”

“Well, it is now.” I rolled my eyes. “I realize it’s something that will help a lot of people, and getting my name in the history books is probably good for my ego. Still, doesn’t make me feel any better every time I hear about yet another case where some RIDE pulled an involuntary body swap and absconded with his human’s flesh and blood.”

“Really?” Desilu said. “That’s...a rather more *literal* bodyjacking than what we could do before. I’m beside myself.”

“If they ever get around to lifting the export restrictions on RI tech, I’m going to request reassignment to go out and track down some of those schmucks, wherever else they’ve gone in the galaxy. Put in some effort toward cleaning up the mess I helped make. But if I roll my eyes any more

about this, they'll probably fall out." I sighed. "We should probably get back to the Real and get on with things. Please feel free to page us if anything new comes up."

Desilu nodded, and winked out. A moment later, so did we.

## CHAPTER 4

*December 15, 157 A.L.*

After all the fun and games on McKenna Street was over, and we got an off-camera tour of Hellir Enclave in the bargain, by common agreement we all headed back to Marshals HQ and found our beds or reasonable facsimiles thereof. We could have spent another hour or two going around Cape Nord itself, but really, it didn't have much appeal just at the moment. We were just about to have more than enough Cape Nord buttheadedness to deal with without ever leaving the barracks, after all.

So, the next morning, we all gathered on the training grounds to await with bated breath the arrival of our charges-to-be. We got there a good half-hour early just so we'd have the initiative—which of course gave us plenty of time to tell ourselves just how bad this was gonna be. *:I can't believe we let them talk us into this. I mean...Cape frigging Nord.:*

*:Now, now,:* Tams reassured me. *:I'm sure they won't be that bad.:*

*:Not only are they Nordies, they're adolescent Nordies. Not just the culture, but the hormones to match.:*

Tamarind was the kind of indecently smug that made me wanna smack the stuffing out of her. *:Not like those are a problem for you, huh?:*

*:Oh, hush, you. That just means I know what I'm talking about from experience.:*

And that was when they showed up. Came marching onto the parade ground all formal and stuff, humans all in one column with their RIDEs next to 'em, and the Integrate coming up behind. The pair in the lead were a big brawny bighorn sheep and a just as big and brawny teenager. The kid had brown hair and what looked to me like a surly expression. But I told myself not to jump to conclusions; maybe he just had resting jerk-face. On the other hand, his RIDE looked kind of surly, too.

"Young Guns training seven reporting for...wait. *You're the trainers?*"

I couldn't help grinning a little at his expression. I imagine it must have just about mirrored the one on my face way back up there at the

beginning of this story when Tams told me where we were going. “That’s us! Copper Star Jeanette Leroq, commanding the *original* Young Guns seven. You were expecting someone else?”

“But you’re just...uh...I mean...”

“A bunch of *girls*?” Relena asked, crossing her arms.

“I *think* what our boss meant to say is that he was surprised to see you’re younger than we are,” the next one in line said diplomatically. This was a willowy young black man wearing ‘specs, alongside a bull of a breed I didn’t quite recognize, with horns almost as curly as the bighorn in front. A quick ‘net search turned up “auroch”, a previously extinct type of cattle on Earth.

“*Some* of us are,” Jenni said. “But we’re older in terms of experience, buster, and don’t you forget it.”

“And the rest of us have more experience at living than all of *you* do put together,” Kandace said. “So how about a little respect, huh?”

“Y’all are cats,” the bighorn drawled.

Katie smirked. “Nothing wrrrrrrong with the optics on that one.”

“Not *quite* all,” DeniFaye put in. “I’m one of the dogs who goes around cleaning up *after* the cats.”

“Well, *technically* hyenas aren’t dogs...” the second young man said, before clamming up. “Um, sorry ma’am. I’m a bit of a pedant. It’s my thing.”

“Nerd,” the first one sneered.

The girl behind the two boys giggled, patting the impala RIDE next to her on the neck. “Well, *I* think it’ll be great to have girls in charge of the training. Maybe that way we’ll actually have a chance to *learn* something.” The girl had faintly Hispanic features and light brown hair. Next to her right hornlet she had a sideways ponytail, and was dressed like a teenaged mall rat from those 1980s movies, down to the pink leg warmers and poufy brown hair.

I cleared my throat loudly. “So, yeah, we’re not what you were expecting. But guess what? We’re all Marshals here, and one of the first things they teach us is we don’t always get what we expect. I know *we* didn’t expect to get stuck in the testosterone center of the universe for our first

training gig. So how about we take this from the top and pretend like we're all professionals here, or at least we want to be?"

The brawny guy in front flushed crimson, but at least did a creditable job getting over it after a moment. He jerked his hand to his forehead in an only slightly stiff attempt at a salute. "Young Guns training Seven reporting for duty! Drake Steele, commanding. And this's my partner, Hank."

Drake saluted smartly, and Hank bent down on one foreleg. Then they moved to one side so those behind them could step up. The black kid who Drake had called a nerd came next.

"Tin Star Jason Johnson, at your service, ma'ams," the young man said.

"Call me Argo," the bull supplied.

And then they stepped aside. Behind them were the female members of their group. *Token* females, I wanted to say, save that "tokenism" implied being *forced* to include them—and this being Cape Nord, they only did that sort of thing because they wanted to.

She practically pranced up to us and saluted. "Tinny Marta Cardoza!"

"Raada," the impala said. "Now, Marta, don't..."

Marta hugged me. "I'm *soooo* thrilled to meet you, Jeanette!" she squeed. "I'm sure you all have a lot to teach us. This is really exciting!"

Ever since I'd first heard the word, I'd always wondered what it must feel like to be "nonplussed." I mean, I'd never even been "plussed" in the first place, so how would I know? But now, all of a sudden, I thought I finally understood the term. "Uh...it's good to meet you, too," I managed. I was vaguely aware of Jenni stifling a giggle somewhere behind me, and made a mental note as to who was going to be the one to demonstrate the mud crawl obstacle course when we got to the part of the training.

"I'm sorry, Miss Leroq, I gathered from our Fuse that she's always been rather...physical," Raada said.

"Just making sure she's real and all!" Marta said. "Well, better get to it, right?" And she closed her eyes and giggled, and I couldn't help but stare. I had honestly thought that was just an anime thing; I'd never expected to see someone do it in real life.

"Uh...right." They moved aside too, and that just left the Integrate

member of the party. He had brought up the rear directly between the human and RIDE columns.

The sharp-dressed Integrate jackal saluted. He wore a sharp wool suit and a fedora that had earholes cut in it and carried a tommy gun strapped to his back. I couldn't decide if he was supposed to be a gangster or...what did they call them? G-Men?

"Welcome to Cape Nord. I'm Tin Star Kevin of Hellir Enclave," he said, doffing his hat. "We're at your service. Positively champing at the bit to begin training. I've already chosen my style, as you can see."

Kandace smirked. "Kevin, is it?"

"I tried for 'Sean,' but my Scottish brogue was terrible."

Tammy grinned. "Yeah, I'm not gonna touch that one. In fact, I can't touch it at all. It's...unable to be touched or something."

The jackal rolled his eyes, tongue lolling. "Everyone's a comedian."

I cleared my throat, feeling like I'd better go ahead and take charge. "Well, then, here we all are. With the exception of the upcoming Christmas holiday, we're gonna be your trainers for the next few weeks. So I guess we should get to it."

"How long have you all known each otherrr?" Katie asked. "Have you been teamed up forrrr long?"

"Not really," Jason said. "The three of us humans and Kevin had some classes together at the Academy, but they only paired us up with our RIDE friends and grouped us into a Seven shortly before shipping us out here. We've just had the time on the plane to get acquainted."

"We've hardly had time for a single Fuse," Hank drawled. "But I'll tell ya'll right now, ma'ams, I like this kid. We'll get along real fine, won't we, Drake?"

The boy shrugged. "Hope so."

Tammy sent me one of her "eeeeevil grin" emoticons—the kind where her grin is wider than her actual face. *:How 'bout that? They're first-time Fuse virgins. You know what that means...:*

*:I know what it means normally.:* Part of the standard training process for newly-paired human/RIDE teams in the Marshals was a week-long Fuse with the RIDE in charge, as a trust-building exercise. Tams and I

had sorta skipped over that part—it would’ve gotten lost in all the *months* we spent together out in Alpha Camp with her in charge. *:But we’ve just barely met these guys. I’d like a couple days to get to know ‘em all a little better before we lock ‘em into Fuse for a week.:*

*:Yeah, I guess that’s a point. We’ll put it on the to-do list.:*

“So, now that we’re all here,” I said, “let’s go right back into the classroom for a bit. We’ll do some review, then we’ve got a quiz we’d like you to take, just so we can see how you stand in regard to the classroom instruction versus field work. After that...well, we’ll see.”

So, yeah. Not the most experienced Marshal in the world, but I did take the whole “training” thing seriously. Maybe you don’t get that sense from the bits I pick and choose to talk about in this story, but I’ve already told you that I don’t tell you *everything*. Just the interesting bits.

Being a RIDE on the inside means I’ve got the time to do thinky stuff in the spaces between paragraphs with bits of fast-time here and there. So in the hours and hours we pried out of a few odd seconds while we were touring Cape Nord and Hellir Enclave, Tams and I spent a lot of time going back over the training curriculum, with input from DeniFaye every now and then. If there were gonna be teachable moments, then I was gonna help teach ‘em.

And I could see right off there were going to be some moments worth teaching. I got the sense when I met them that Drake was probably going to be the biggest problem child, probably with some egging on by Marta. And when we were going over hostage negotiation tactics, it seemed like they were gonna prove me right.

The issue was that Drake’s physique suggested a particular “Manly Focus” on his Man Card. As I understood it—and yeah, I spent *more* fast-time seconds I won’t ever get back going over Cape Nord’s stupid rule books—you could pick a particular sort of Man you were trying to play, and then you get bonus points for being that particular kind of manly. Drake’s big burly type was a natural for the “Dumb Muscle” class. You know, the big lunkhead who can punch out livestock but also *thinks* with his muscles. Like Moose from the old Archie comics. So showing you were *too* smart

would get you docked for points.

Drake's test scores were actually pretty good—but you wouldn't have known that from the answers he gave in class. He was playing up the whole “dumb lug” thing...and I only had to look a couple of seats over at the adoring glances Marta was giving him to get some idea of why. She kept making little notes on a media tablet she was holding—and I didn't need to access the cameras in the back of the classroom to guess she was tallying points on a Manliness scorecard.

As I was saying, it came to a head when we were asking questions about hostage negotiation. As the most seasoned instructor here, Tams had just laid down the scenario—a small college campus with lots of one-and-two-story buildings and gardens that offered a lot of potential places to hide, four known hostiles holding guns on a crowd in a central building, and an unknown number of others elsewhere on the grounds. “As team leader, Drake, we'd like your input on the first thing you would do here.”

Drake screwed up his face in thought and scratched his head—other little mannerisms that suggested the Dumb Muscle role—and glanced sidelong over at Marta, who had looked up from her tablet with an interested expression. Then he smacked a ham-sized fist into a book-sized palm and said, “We go in right up the middle! Full frontal assault, guns blazing.”

Marta gave one of her little “tee-hees” and tapped on the tablet again. So, I looked at Tams, and she looked at me, and the unspoken agreement passed between us that this was just about the far side of altogether too much. So, I was just opening my mouth to say something about it when one of the cadets beat me to it.

“Whoa, wait a second, Steele,” Jason interjected. “We're not supposed to be Lawful *Stupid*, are we? Marshals rules say we're supposed to lay off on the Manliness stuff while we're on duty. Which is basically what we are when we're in class. Right, Miss Leroq?”

“If we're supposed to lay off, cut out the rules lawyering, Nerd,” Drake sneered.

DeniFaye spoke up. “The thing is, though, he's right. Didn't you read what the Marshals bylaws had to say on the Reindeer Game? And what the

Manliness rulebook has to say about service in the Marshals? That goes for you, too, Marta.”

I cleared my throat. “The rule in *both* places is, no scoring for stuff that happens on active duty or on Marshals property.” I’d read up on those sections again just then in a quick fast-time blip to be sure before I said anything. (This being-a-RI thing isn’t half handy sometimes!)

I went on: “We don’t want you to feel like you have to pull yourself back to anything less than your best to keep from losing points, and Cape Nord doesn’t want any of its citizens to wash out of the Marshals for stupid crap like that and make them look bad. So, it doesn’t matter if you binge on frou-frou drinks at the PX, or lounge around in frilly pink underwear in barracks—what happens in the Marshals stays in the Marshals.” There were a few exceptions, like for line-of-duty stuff that was blatantly in the public record, but those didn’t factor into the current situation.

“Now, would you like to try again with your answer? We *know* you’re smarter than the role you chose,” Tamarind said. Marta at least had the grace to look embarrassed and put the tablet away. As for Drake, his whole body language just...*changed*, like flipping a switch. He stopped giving off the Neanderthal vibes and suddenly looked thoughtful and attentive.

“I believe the proper trope would be Obfuscating Stupidity,” Jason added. “That’s you to a T, Steele.”

“I *know* that trope, Jason,” Drake said. “You *have* to be smart when you’ve picked Dumb Muscle. Okay, I got this. Now, if the hostages are all held in one central location, the first thing we do is...”

Things went a little more smoothly after that. Even Marta started speaking up, putting herself forward a little more. Not too *much* more, though. She seemed to be kind of naturally demure, I guess. But everyone had some good contributions—even the RIDEs, who were sitting in Walker form in the back of the classroom.

It was getting into afternoon by the time we finished in the classroom, and I was satisfied they hadn’t stuck us with a bunch of total idiots. So, good there, I guess. Between us showing we actually knew something of what we were talking about, and forcing him out of his Man Card role, Drake had gradually warmed to us, so there was that, too.

After that, by common agreement we Seven split up for individual one-on-one sessions so each of us could get to know each of them, and vice versa. As team lead, I might have been expected to start with ram-boy, but I'd seen just about enough of Mr. Obfuscating Stupidity to last me a while. Besides, hacker that I was, I was more interested in the Nerd.

So I wanted to talk to Jason right away. But just to mix things up, I decided someone else could have the first go-round with him. I'd talk to his RIDE partner first. It was important to show we didn't consider RIDEs as any kind of lesser partner, and besides, that would give me more of a sense for him before I talked to him directly. So I took a seat behind the desk in the office they'd given me the use of in the barracks, and commed for Argo to come on in. Time to take the bull by the horns!

A couple of minutes later, the door slid open and Argo stepped in. He looked a little out of place in a room built on a human scale—except it kind of wasn't, really. The door was still proportioned the same, but was about one and a half times larger than a normal human door, so there was plenty of room for him to fit through—and the office itself was bigger than it would have been when they were made for just humans rather than accommodating barnyard animals. The desk was even on an adjustable pedestal, which could be raised or lowered so we could be at eye level rather than one of us looming over the other. Not like I'd have expected anything less from a Marshals facility, which put a premium on treating humans and RIDEs as close to equal as possible.

“Tin Star Argo reporting as ordered, ma'am.”

“Thanks for coming. Get comfy—stand or lie down, whichever you feel like.”

“I'm fine with standing. What would you like to know?”

I looked him over thoughtfully. He really was a fine figure of a bull, helped by the fact that he was probably about 25% larger than the average would have been for the meat version of his kind of critter—which wouldn't have been exactly small, considering. According to my research, the translators of the old King James Bible had translated “auroch” as “unicorn,” because they weren't familiar with what an “auroch” was but had heard about this “unicorn” critter from the ancient Greeks. “Will the

unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib?”

Well, this “unicorn” *was* willing to serve the Marshals. And here he was, hanging out in our “crib” with everyone else. It seemed reasonable to ask why. “For starters, why’d you decide to sign on with us?”

“To serve my fellow sophonts,” Argo said.

I propped my arms on the desk, lacing my fingers together. It was kinda neat, having a desk. Made me feel like I actually had some authority. “That’s not really what I was asking. Why do you *want* to serve your fellow sophonts in this way? When you could do pretty much anything you want to now?”

“To be honest...I suppose I don’t rightly know.” He tossed his head in a bovine version of a shrug. “I gather it’s a different story for my generation than those who came before. I had a choice in what I wanted to do—the only stipulation being that if I wanted to live in the Real, I had to repay the factory’s investment in my shell. I didn’t know what to do with such a broad choice, so I picked an option that would pay off the shell soonest—the Marshals always pay in full as a matter of course. Then once my service was over, my options would be open.”

“I gather that’s why a lot of RIDEs join up these days,” I offered. “That, and the fact we’ve got a long history of treating RIDEs like people because it was the right thing to do, not because we had to.”

He nodded. “That was another part of it. Though again...I’m new. I’ve never *not* been treated like people, so I guess to me it was more of a theoretical distinction.”

“So how did you end up with Jason? Was it just a matter of both scoring 89s on the personality match test?”

“That, and we hit it off when we first met. I was a little doubtful at first—I mean, he’s from Cape Nord, and I was born in the Knossos Creche in Sturmhaven, so you wouldn’t think we’d get along. But turns out, he was looking for something different, and I was just the right kind of different for him.”

“I realize you haven’t been paired up for long, but what’s your impression of him?”

“Well, I’d never Fused before. But Ma and Pa told me what it was like.

Doesn't really prepare you, though. Of course, Ma and Pa were made the old way. It was built into them, right? We creche-born are more like you organics."

"So I've heard. Not really sure I buy it completely, though. It's always seemed to me something kind of like how we see color. You can hear someone else describe it to you, but you can only experience it for yourself. And that's true whether you were 'programmed' for it or 'grew' into it." I shrugged. "Of course, I've only Fused from the organic side. Maybe someday if I put me in a DE shell and Fuse to some other human, I'll have a whole new perspective."

The bull nodded. "That's just about how I'd put it, too. Not something that's easy to describe. But...I think we understand each other. He's not the usual Cape Nord Man. I think he just picked the Nerd role because it was the least likely to get in the way of doing what he wanted to do. It was the most like who he already was, I guess."

"It may be a little early to ask a question like this, but what do you see yourself doing after your Marshals tour is up? Assuming you don't re-enlist..."

"I suppose that depends on how well Jason and I get along. If the partnership works out, maybe we'll decide that together. Other than that... yeah, it really is too soon to say."

After that, the conversation moved on into pleasantries and stuff, and Argo told me some more about himself. His DE shell was one of a new line built by a RIDEworks run by members of the Athenas political faction—the ones who're least down on the idea of men having redeeming values or whatever, so I understand. What with all the political changes that had been going on around there lately, this was the first time the Athenas felt like they could push a few limits and bust a few barriers on what was permissible to stick into a shell for "mere males."

And as he'd already said, his RI core was one of the first creche-born generations to come out of Sturmhaven once RIDE rights came in. Fortunately for all concerned, the influence of the Sturmie society in the Real on the creche environment was strictly limited—they might pay it lip-service for the sake of keeping peace in the family with their flesh-and-

blood partners, but a lot of RIDEs don't put quite the same emphasis on biology as meat-minds. (Gee, wonder why *that* would be?)

Though it's probably just as well my implant tech hadn't been around when they were setting it up. Wouldn't have put it past some Valks to get themselves digitized just so they could lord it over the Y-chromosomes in there, too. But it would be too late for that now that the RIDEs have their own digital society established.

Anyway, one thing Argo had put together pretty quickly was that while it was okay in the creche, the way Sturmites did things in the Real wasn't for him. And that had probably helped with his decision to take service with the Marshals. And hey—Sturmhaven's loss, our gain, right?

Once our talk was over, I sent him over to Tams, who had been talking to Jason herself. A couple minutes later, the nerd himself came in.

"Uh...hi." Without the accompaniment of his immense bull, the young man seemed a little shy. The square, horn-rimmed 'specs added to that impression. He wore an olive green Cadet uniform—the plain one we generally use before deciding our style. On the right one pocket had a protector, with a comm unit nestled inside.,

I waved him to a chair. "Hey, sit down. Don't worry, I don't bite. Not in *this* body, anyway." Little Amontillado joke there...

And that seemed to prompt him to ask the big question on his mind right off. "Is it really true you're the one who discovered how to transfer consciousness into an RI substrate? By *accident*?" He looked at me in sheer nerdy awe.

"Well...yes, it is." It's funny; I usually found getting tagged with that accomplishment a bit irritating, but...this guy was of my tribe. So I guessed I could cut him a little slack. Besides, it was nice when someone actually *was* impressed, rather than annoyed that I'd touched off a spate of "true bodyjacking." "That's me—Jeanette Leroq, juvenile ex-delinquent and serendipitous cyberneticist."

"I...kinda want to do that myself, but...I want to understand the process first. As much as I can. So, I'm catching up on my education."

"Good luck with *that*. I've gone over it with Dr. Patil and Dr. Clemens themselves, and *they* don't entirely understand the process yet. As far as we

can make out, it's one of those things that 'just works' if you do it the right way. And, lucky me, there are about a zillion RIDEs out there who want to try their human on and can easily duplicate the process whether they 'understand' it or not."

"That's a lot of data points to draw from..." Jason mused. "Uh, ma'am. Sorry I got off on a tangent there. It's a Nerd thing. I mean, an *official* Nerd thing. It's in the rules."

"I still can't get over there being actual *rules* for Manliness. It seems like such a ridiculous idea."

"Between you and me, ma'am, I'd entirely agree." He rolled his eyes. "Since I didn't exactly have a choice, if I wanted to hold onto certain...body parts, I picked the pigeonhole that at least allows the most flexibility. Nerds are expected to be weird, somehow. Like, collecting pony dolls and whatnot."

I raised an eyebrow. "So you didn't pick it because of, oh, your *technical* inclinations?"

"Oh...it's not really a *bad* fit, I admit." He smiled and blushed a little. "It's just that guys like Drake might be as big a little-n nerd as I am, but they can't do anything about it because their rules are stricter. And changing your Manly Focus is...well...not that easy. You get your points cut by a lot depending on how different the new Focus is from the old."

"And *naturally* you're a rules expert, because..."

His smile picked up a wry twist. "Bingo. My mother's from Nextus, too. She taught me everything about loopholes."

"Just as long as you use your powers for good, not evil. You don't want to pick up a rep within the Marshals as a rules lawyer. Not before you've got your copper, anyway."

"No worries there. Getting the job done is the important part." He paused, then changed the subject. "So...uh...that imprinting thing. How does it work? Have you really operated a RIDE from within? What's it like?"

I grinned. "Oh, it would take more time than we have for me to fill you in all the way, and even then you wouldn't be able to get it without actually doing it. But yes, I've run Tams's shell a few times, though I didn't

actually copy all the way over. Not sure if I really *want* to go all-the-way RIDE. What if I accidentally Integrate with someone? But maybe you don't feel the same way?"

"I'd...probably go with one of those non-Fusable human-form frames at first. Just for a test drive."

"I suppose that's one choice. I have a good friend who went that route. Still feels kind of like cheating to me. RIDEs were *made* to Fuse." I chuckled. "But far be it from me to tell anyone else how to live their life. And speaking of how you're living your life, what brought on joining the Marshals? Especially joining up so young?"

"Well, for one, serving my fellow sophonts," he said, echoing Argo. "But mostly...well, I grew up on Steader kids adventure movies—like *The Goonies*, *Explorers*—Davy Rocket Raccoon shows. And...well...it just feels like the right ticket out of Cape Nord for me. My Dad think it's 'Manly' no matter I'm supposed to be a Nerd. So there's that, too."

I thought back to class earlier that day. "And I imagine that knowing you can't be scored while on active duty also plays into it. I can't imagine living like that, knowing that you could get docked for anything you do if the wrong person happens to notice."

An expression of *vast* relief came over him. "Cape Nord just isn't right for me. But all the same, I can't just up and sever ties. I mean, I *would* just burn my Man Card and be done with it—there *are* ways to do that that don't result in you getting sent an even higher-ranking one, and I know exactly what they are—but the rest of my family's just fine with living there, and I don't want to burn my bridges with them."

"Yeah, I can see that family would be important." Not for the first time, I wondered what having family would be like. Probably a lot like what I had with Tammy, come to think of it.

"That's why I asked for a non-Nordy RIDE to partner with. I think me and Argo will get along just fine." He tugged at one of his curved horns and bovine ears. "And these are pretty cool, too."

"No doubt. Though I don't know that I'd want to walk into a Cape Nord bar with them. I'm sure all the gags about 'being horny all the time' would get even more tiring here."

Jason rolled his eyes. “Yeah, and *every* Man will think he was the first one to come up with them. But luckily, I won’t have to spend *that* much time here.”

“So I guess from that you plan to be a lifer once you get into the regular Marshals? You think Argo will be cool with that?”

“Well, there’s nothing that says he’d have to be my partner forever, right? After all, we barely know each other yet. Maybe we’ll bond, or maybe I’ll find another RIDE that’ll actually work out better. Who knows.”

I nodded. “True enough. I couldn’t see teaming with anyone other than Tams, but we’re kind of a special case there. And we’ve been together a lot longer than you and Argo.”

“So far my first day as a Young Gun is going pretty good, I’d say.”

I nodded. “Seems good from this angle, too. So anyway...you know I’m a computer hacker, with a specialty in fabbers and a developing one in RI technology. What are your Nerding specialties?”

“Well, on the technical side, I’m a bit of a tinkerer. I’ve always been interested in taking things apart to see how they work. You know Jacques Cousteau started out that way, right? On the *nerdy* Nerd side of things, I’m into old-school pen-and-paper RPGs—in particular, the *Traveler* series. The original ones, not that *MegaTraveler* crap...”

The conversation grew successively more Nerdy after that, to the point where I had to go into fast-time and do some search-engine research just to understand what the heck he was talking about. But then, he *was* a Nerd, so that sort of thing was only to be expected.

When the conversation eventually turned back to talk of Cape Nord, Jason confessed that he hadn’t been terribly pleased to learn he’d be assigned to a Seven made up entirely of Cape Nord applicants, but he’d been sufficiently impressed by Drake’s willingness to put aside his role that he’d give it the benefit of the doubt. So, good there, I guess.

And for my part, I told him I’d be happy to discuss the implant imprinting process in greater depth at some time when we were both off duty. I figured I owed it to him to give him a little guidance. After all, it’s not like most of the people who did it (or RIDEs who did it *to* people) asked my opinions. We parted on good terms, and that was largely that.

As I was getting ready to pick the next name out of a hat, the comm on the desk chimed. I hit the button. “Yes?”

It was Iffy. “You need to get down here right away!” She sounded breathless. “There’s been another attack!”

“Is everyone all right? Was anyone hurt?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. Just...get down here as soon as possible. We’re trying to keep everything undisturbed until you get here, but...I really, *really* want to take a shower.” She gave an address downtown and signed off.

“Now what was *that* all about?” Tams wondered aloud over the intercom.

“Guess there’s only one way to find out.”

“Should we bring the newbies?”

I thought it over. “Nah. They’re still too much of an unknown quantity yet. We’ll give ‘em some homework to keep ‘em busy for now and maybe bring them in later.”

“Got it. I’m paging the others to meet us out front. Let’s get down there and see what’s going on.”

## CHAPTER 5

The address led to “Hearts Afire,” a small bookstore in one of the “girly” commercial neighborhoods. Judging by the name and the display in the storefront window, it specialized in romance and erotica titles, not least those by Iphigenia Rose. The sign on the door read “Closed for Private Party,” in a curvy calligraphic font with little hearts and smiley faces. Tammy parked out front, I climbed down, and the lynx duos Fused up. Then the six of us tramped in.

Have you ever been punched in the face by a smell? That was what happened to us when we walked in that door. Maybe not literally, but *barely* not. It was like that musky aroma was a physical presence in the room. That musky, *manly* aroma.

Relena wrinkled Katie’s nose. “Is that...Axe Body Spray?”

“Smells like liters of it,” Jenni agreed. “Or, well, it did before Kandi filtered the air for me. Thanks, Kandi.”

I rolled my eyes so hard I think I sprained the muscle. “Oh, geez, rub it in, why don’t you. I dink by dostrils are closig ub.”

*:You know, you’ve got a gas mask in one of your belt’s compartments,:* Tammy reminded me.

*:Oh, yeah, all I’d need is one photo of me wearing that against the smell of fricking Axe Body Spray and I’d be the laughing stock of Cape Nord.:* I held my nose—I mean, my nose (seriously, revisiting the incident for this story is giving me flashbacks, that’s how bad it smelled!) and moved forward into the store.

Past the main room with bookshelves and comfy upholstery was a staircase. Iphigenia Rose leaned into view at the top of it, the bottom of her hair brushing the floor. “Up here!”

We made our way up the stairs to find a comfortable meeting room, with a table and a dozen folding chairs arranged around it. Another table along the wall held the remains of a light buffet. Iphigenia and a number of other women were waiting for us, most of them holding their own noses in disgust. A few RIDEs were seated against the back wall, including

Iphigenia's fox Pandora.

"So," I said. "Whad habbened?"

Iphigenia raised a hand to point to the fire extinguisher nozzles in the ceiling. "We haven't touched anything yet, so as to leave it clear for you, but as nearly as we can surmise, someone must have attached canisters of Axe to the fire suppressant system in the building. As soon as we had all finished eating and were just settling down to business, they set them off." She wrinkled her nose. "I greatly fear I am going to have to ask the Men in my life to make an adjustment to their *toilettes* for the next little while. I suddenly find the aroma of Axe Body Spray a trifle hard to stomach. Would you mind if we waited outside while you investigate? We promise not to leave the scene without your approval."

"Uh...is there somewhere outside you can wait without random passers by noticing you?" I asked. Either my nose was starting to adapt to the smell, or else I'm just getting tired of typing in stuffed-nose dialect. "We don't want to start any rumors if we can avoid it."

"Ah, a good thought. There's a private back yard where Men go to smoke while the lady friends who dragged them here take their time about shopping. We can use that." She beckoned to Pandora, and the women and their RIDEs filed one by one down the stairs.

Once we had the room to ourselves, the six of us in four bodies spread out, taking a look around. As the lynxes and hyena started scanning, I asked, "Can I get uplinks of your sensor feeds so I can see what you see? I'm kinda minus my lioness here."

Faye nodded. "Oh, sure thing."

"And I'm doing an overall scan of the building from outside," Tammy said. "Beaming you that as well."

"Thanks." I shifted gears to my RI core and took a few fast-time minutes to go over the scan results. "Yeah...looks like we got something right up there." I pointed to one of the ceiling tiles. "Anyone got a stepladder?"

"Let me get it," DeniFaye suggested. "I've probably got the most finesse with my lifters."

"All right, but be careful. We don't know, it might be booby-trapped."

“Doubtful. Any serious threat would have shown up in the scans. But I’ll take care.” Faye moved over to below the tile in question, and slowly rose off the floor. She carefully lifted the panel, slid it aside, and rose up until the ceiling tiles were almost level with her waist. “I see it. It’s just as Iffy said—a five-liter canister patched into the suppressant pipes. Looks like there are two more on this floor, and two on the first floor too. I’m taking high-definition 3D imagery before I unhook it.”

A few moments later, she came down with a dull silver metallic canister trailing a length of hose suspended in lifter fields. She set it on the table. “Here’s one of our culprits. Why don’t you lot look it over while I go get the other ones.”

We three moved closer, the RIDEs’ eyes flickering into scan mode while I pulled out my comm and engaged the scanner attachment on it. “Okay, definitely getting some Integrate dandruff here. Even filtering out DeniFaye’s, there are traces of a stranger.”

“Same trace as in some of the earlier incidents, too,” Tams put in. “So it’s gotta be the same bad guys. Or gals.”

I looked over the setup with my technical eyes. It seemed pretty simple as far as it went—a pressurized canister, kind of like a giant aerosol spray can, with a computerized release valve that incorporated a radio receiver. On receiving the right signal, it opened up, and FSSST, suddenly the girls’ club smelled like a bunch of insecure high school boys who didn’t have time to take a shower after gym class.

“Where was it made?” Relena asked. “Is there any way to tell?”

“Good question.” I consulted the comm screen. “Looks like it was fabbed, probably locally. Which means...hmm.” I put the comm down for a moment so I could crack my knuckles. “Time to use my hard-won fabber hacking talents for good.”

That was how I got all this metal in my head, after all—learning how to hack the machines to make it for me and not tell anyone they had afterward. Along the way, I picked up an awful lot about what the machines could be made to do, and even more about what they couldn’t be made to hide.

I dropped back into my jungle clearing in VR, and brought up a dozen

display panels in front of me showing everything I'd been able to dig up so far about the canister. "First off, by default anything that comes out of a fabber will usually have a microchip on it somewhere containing the fab recipe—unless it's still proprietary—and various other metadata. Which this canister...doesn't. I guess it was too much to hope that this schmuck wouldn't know how to bypass that."

"So where does that leave us?" Jenni asked.

"Just getting warmed up, actually. Because there are other things that *aren't* so obvious." I shoved a few display panels aside and brought up another one. "Fabbers' post-fab 'rinse cycle' isn't perfect. It always leaves a few hundred or thousand fabber nanites smeared across whatever it is it just built—and that's *not* something your average schmuck is going to realize. Those nanites are dormant, but still viable for a few weeks. So if you hit 'em with a little microwave energy, and a radio frequency pulse, you can often read all sorts of metadata off 'em."

DeniFaye put another canister down on the table. "That seems like poor security."

I glanced through the software archives I'd downloaded from fabber hacking sites back in the day. "Most military and industrial fabbers have a 'degauss' cycle built into the process to protect against potential information leakage, but no one really cares about that for consumer models. Ah...this should do it." I uploaded the program into my comm, then triggered the pulse and pulled up the response I got back.

"What's the good word?" Kandace asked.

"Well...let's see." I sifted through the data. "Mr. or Ms. Malodorous T. Schmuck was not entirely stupid about security matters. Looks like the fabber was kept isolated from the network, and its global positioning function was turned off as well. So there's no network or physical address metadata, and no way to tell where it was physically located from that. But it was made three days ago on a NextusTech Bureaucrat 7 light commercial fabber, using NordicGel FabBrosia feed stock."

"That's one of the standard models used in small businesses and do-it-yourself autofab stations," Tammy said. "And that's a Cape Nord fabber gel brand."

I nodded. “Yeah. DIY fabberies usually *are* on the network, but disabling the network uplink and GPS before fabbing is a pretty simple hack. Used to do it myself, all the time. The fabberies know some people are paranoid about privacy, so they don’t try to lock it out. More’s the pity.”

“But at least we know these werre prrrrobably made locally, or somewhere nearrrrby at any rate,” Katie said.

“True enough. But there are so many places it *could* have been, it might as well have been practically anywhere. And the culprit probably knew enough to delete themselves from its records afterward. But still, it’s more than we knew before.”

“And we might find out more after we run these through a complete forensic workup,” Faye said, putting a third one on the table. “Worth a shot, anyway.”

It made sense to me. “Right. Faye, why don’t you finish removing them all and get them loaded onto Tams. Katie, you and Relena take a look around and see if you notice anything else. Did whoever installed them have to come in through the doors, or was there a way into the crawlspaces from the outside? And Tams, see if you can get ahold of local street and security cam footage from the last three days, starting at the time the canisters were fabbed. The rest of us should go downstairs and interview the guests, see if any of them noticed anything.”

“Sounds like a plan!” Relena agreed.

“Getting right on that,” Tamarind chimed in.

So we trooped back downstairs, and out to the smoking garden in the back. The small lawn was surrounded by a three-meter wood fence, and had a rough-hewn wooden picnic table up against it. There would have been plenty of space for the odd Man or three to sit and smoke or chew (there was a spittoon there as well), and it was probably a cozy space for the bookstore staff to come out and eat their lunch as well.

At the moment, the space was occupied by a dozen women and a handful of RIDEs, so was a little more crowded than intended. But between sitting at the picnic table and standing around, they were able to preserve their personal space, for the most part. All their heads turned in our direction as we stepped out from the building.

The air smelled funny at first as we emerged, then I realized that was just because I'd gotten *used* to smelling Axe Body Spray. *Ugh*. "We've found the devices that were used to...ah...fumigate," I said. "We're removing them for analysis. I'm not sure if there's anything that can be done to clear the smell out, though..."

The woman sitting next to Iphigenia Rose at the picnic table sighed. "Even if we get it out of the building, I'm afraid the books are going to be a total loss." This was a brunette, probably about the same age as Iffy judging by her own streaks of grey. Though given how prevalent biosculpt seemed to be around here, and the xerox-copy-like Cape Nord standard of female beauty, I suppose she could actually have been pretty much any age. "But fortunately, they're all fabbed anyway; I don't deal in actual antiques. So they'll be cheap enough to replace. I'm Sandra Kopeck—I own the place."

"Pleased to meet you, Ms. Kopeck. I'm sorry about...all this." It seemed like an inadequate apology.

She shrugged. "If I didn't want to deal with Men's foolishness from time to time, I could have opened a shop in Sturmhaven. I'm sure I'll be able to look back on this and laugh, eventually...in a decade or two, perhaps..."

"I feel as though I'm largely to blame," Iffy said, patting Sandra's hand with her own. "After all, I'm the one who suggested we meet here. If you want to, say, have the building demolished and rebuilt, I'll gladly cover the construction costs."

Sandra snorted. "Nonsense. We've held dozens of meetings there in the past. Why should this one have been any different? Besides, I'm sure the odor will go away eventually."

"Did anyone notice anything odd over the last few days? Any signs of someone outside your usual clientele visiting, or maybe just watching the building from across the street?"

Sandra shook her head. "Not that anyone said to me. Of course, since we're assuming it was an Integrate behind it, they could have watched us all day invisibly if they wanted. How do you even deal with someone like that?"

"Sandra..." Iphigenia said.

"Oh, I know, we're supposed to welcome them as our new brothers

and sisters, but every time something like this happens, it's just a reminder of how *different* we are. Can we really find long-term peace with people like that?"

"Y'know, it's a good bet that trying to drive a wedge between humans and Integrates could be a big part of the reason they're doing this," Kandace observed. "If they can turn one of the groups with the most power around here against them with something as simple as a few stink bombs, that's a pretty economical return for the investment."

"That's why we need to solve this as quickly and, preferably, *quietly* as possible," Iphigenia said. "Is there anything we can do to help right now?"

"Well, we do have some questions for everyone," I said. "Maybe someone noticed something we didn't."

"Well, we're at your disposal," Sandra Kopeck said. "Please, ask away."

The Q&A session was, on the whole, not terribly useful. No one had seen anything. What's more, the bookshop didn't have security cameras in it—after all, who would want to steal stuff you could more cheaply and easily fab?—so that was going to be another dead end. Katie and Relena didn't turn up any obvious crawlspaces or hidden doors, but a second-floor window was unlatched and could easily have been entered by a levitating Integrate. But at least the women seemed to appreciate that we were trying to do *something* about the matter, so that was something.

We trundled on back to the Marshal outpost with a half dozen stink bomb canisters, and put them in the lab facilities for further analysis the next day. Then, given that it was getting on toward late evening by the time we were done, we went ahead and turned in.

*December 16, 157 A.L.*

So, the next morning, I popped into the lab, and there they were...six identical spray tanks, wreathed with the unmistakable odor of Axe Body Spray, waiting for us to work our magic and learn what there was to learn.

So I called the others together. Well, most of the others. Tams popped in via hardlight projector, of course, and DeniFaye was a few minutes late as she was currently tasking the trainee Seven with some directed study tasks. But once we were all together, we stood around the table with the spray tanks for some discussion.

“So what’s the plan for today?” Jenni asked. “You know not all of us are techie types...are you gonna have some leg-work for us?”

“That’s what we’re here to hash out.” I nodded to the tanks. “First off, these things had to have been built *somewhere*. Probably somewhere in Cape Nord proper. I’m gonna do everything I can to try to trace the components and ingredients, but some of us are going to need to hit up... well, every public fabberly in the polity and do a log dump for us to go over and see if it looks like anything’s been patched over. And that’s gonna take a lot of manpower.”

“That does rrrrequirrrre a searrrrch warrrrrant, doesn’t it?” Katie asked.

“Tams and I already put together a request and beamed it to the local Diamond Girls,” I told her. “They’ve put their RIDEs on filing it in fast-time, and we should get something back in just a few minutes.”

“Couldn’t we just download the data over the ‘net?” Relena asked. “It seems like a lot of extra effort to visit each one in person.”

“I think I see what the boss is getting at,” Faye said. “We need to get the data as pure and untainted as we can—straight from the lion’s mouth, so to speak. We need to download it right from the source, just so we can be sure no one put something in the ‘net to filter stuff out between them and us.”

I nodded to her. “Right. Plus, we can run some physical checks of our own while we’re there in person. Like, scan for traces of Axe Body Spray. Even if it’s too faint to smell by now, there should still be enough of it to pick up with a scanner. I’m sure there’ll be a lot of false positives, especially for public fabberies that share space with pharmacies or cosmetics stores, but it could still be a clue if we find a whole lot of it somewhere unexpected.”

“Who do you suppose could be behind this, anyway?” Jenni

wondered. “Could the *way* they attacked be a clue itself?”

“What, like maybe it’s a canine Integrate, because they were ‘marking their territory’?” Relena asked.

Faye smirked. “You know, when you get right down to it, *cats* ‘mark territory’ that way, too. And back on Earth, Axe products went under another brand name when they sold it in Europe and Asia—over there, they called the brand *Lynx*.”

Kandace wrinkled her nose. “Oh, you are *shitting* me. Ain’t no way any lynx ever smelled like *that*.”

Faye grinned. “Nope, it’s true! Ran across that when I was googling the stuff last night. They even associated themselves with the ‘Lynx’ spaceplane a company in California was designing back in the early 21<sup>st</sup>. It’s possible whoever did it got wind we specifically were coming, and that was their clever little way of sending a message.”

“Cute idea, but you *might* be overthinking it,” Tammy said. “We don’t really have a whole lot to go on as far as theory-making is concerned. Hopefully we’ll have a few more facts by the time we’re done.”

Jenni frowned. “Visiting every public fab in person is going to take a *lot* of manpower. There must be...*hundreds* of them.”

I nodded. “Just over thirteen hundred—I checked. If we discount the ones that are too small to build something of this size, that cuts the total to about five hundred. And only three hundred of those use the specific model of fabber we’re looking for. Which is still a lot. So I was thinking this is just the sort of low-hazard grunt work job we could bring the newbie seven in on. Double our manpower, and give them a taste of what the less glamorous side of Marshaling is all about.”

DeniFaye considered that. “I don’t see anything wrong with that idea. You, Tams? Katie?”

“Seems rrrreasonable,” Katie said.

Tammycat nodded. “Could be good experience for them.”

“Great! Let’s round ‘em up and go over it with them. Preferably *outside*.” I glanced at the tanks still sitting on the table. “The less time I have to spend smelling *this* stuff, the better.”

A few minutes later, we two sevens faced each other on the parade ground. “So here’s the thing,” I explained. “While we’re here, we agreed to take on a routine investigation for a group in Cape Nord who felt like the local police weren’t able to take them seriously.” Marta caught my eye and winked. I remembered Iffy said she’d been briefed on the details. “We had an incident crop up last night that gives us a few leads to work, and since they’re the kind of lead that needs a lot of manpower to run down, we decided to bring you in on it as part of your training.”

“We’re ready to assist, ma’am,” Drake said. “What do you need us to do?”

“Drake, Hank, Marta, Raada—you’re going to be joining up with the lynxes and their partners in visiting Cape Nord’s public fabberies to gather some evidence. They’ll fill you in on the details.”

I glanced toward the nerd pair. “Jason, Argo, I’ll need you two with me in the lab, running analyses on some equipment we recovered. I’ll go over that with you once we’re there.”

Jason nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And Kevin—since you’re from Hellir yourself, I’d like you to take Faye with you and visit the public fabberies there. Try not to make it too obvious you’re *investigating*, if possible; we don’t want to stir anything up if the investigation actually does lead there, and we don’t want to harm relations if it doesn’t. As far as anyone else is concerned, you’re just showing a friend around your home.”

“I don’t even know what we *are* investigating,” Kevin said. “So it shouldn’t be too hard to look like I’m not.”

Faye smirked. “I’ll brief you on the way there, sweetie.”

“And I’ll be on patrol in Cape Nord, able to divert to help anyone who needs it while I help Jeanette out with the lab analysis by remote,” Tamarind said. “Needless to say, we don’t want you taking any risks. Any of you. We don’t *expect* this to be dangerous, but you never know. If you see anything suspicious, report it in immediately.”

I patted Tammy on the shoulder. “Anyway, that’s the job. So, Marshals, let’s get to work!”

And so the three of us gathered around the table. Well, mainly the two of us, Jase and me, physically. Argo was a little big to fit into the lab, so he used the same hardlight telepresence rig Tams was using. Luckily it had two projection nodes, though if we needed to make use of any hardlight gear like specialized tools, one of them was going to have to drop their link.

But it didn't look like that was going to be in the cards, as the canisters were a simple, standard design that we could dismantle with the normal physical toolkits. They were an adaptation of a long-since-public-domain design for spray canisters used on drones for dusting crops, as it turned out. Anyone could have downloaded the recipe from one of the Gutenberg repositories, so no leads there.

Jason wrinkled his nose as removing the various parts released a fresh surge of Axe Body Spray odor. "Eww, sheesh...can we crank the ventilation? I joined the Marshals to get *away* from this sort of stuff."

That earned a raised eyebrow from me. "You joined the Marshals to get away from Axe Body Spray?"

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, c'mon, you know what I mean. It's like I told you yesterday...there's way too much virtue signalling in Cape Nord, and far too many of the signals they use are olfactory."

Argo chuckled. "I believe what my partner is trying to say is, rampant masculinity *stinks*."

I wondered what they would think if they knew how artificial Cape Nord's notion of masculinity really was—but it wasn't my place to tell them. "You won't get much argument from me there. Be glad you weren't with us at the bookstore yesterday. That place is going to reek of Axe for *days*. And they'll probably be uncovering new traces of the scent daily for years to come...unless they really do tear it down and rebuild from scratch." I finished dismantling the first tank and laid all its components out on the table. "Now let's run some scans on these, see if we turn up anything unusual. We're looking for things that seem out of place—trace elements left over from previous fab jobs, or little irregularities from a fabber that hasn't been tuned up in a while. Anything that we could use to fingerprint the source."

Jason nodded, pulling a high-resolution scanner unit down from a

rack overhead. It swung down on a manipulator arm, gimbals holding it in place as he positioned it over the parts. “All right, let’s see what we can see.”

“And I’ll start to work on the next one. We want to check ‘em all, just in case they were fabbed in different places.”

“Give me a minute to get this scan started, and I’ll take another one. We can probably get ‘em all dismantled in just a few minutes.”

I watched him as we worked. Given what he’d said about getting started by taking things apart, it wasn’t exactly a surprise he was good at it. By the time I was done with my second, he was halfway into his own second. Between us, we got the rest of them dismantled and sorted within just a few minutes. He dragged the scanner over to start looking at the second one, and then the third.

“Huh, this is interesting.” Tams peered at the container parts under the scanner. Of course, that was just theatrics on her part, as she was actually getting the direct data feed from the scanner and didn’t need to have her hardlight avatar anywhere near it, but RIDEs are well familiar with the importance of kinesics. “Looks like this was made on a fabber that had previously been used for...hmm...hygiene and grooming products. Trace elements in the materials are consistent with manufacture of absorbent products like tampons or bandages. And there are traces of aromatics from other brands of colognes and aftershaves in the Axe residue.”

I glanced at her. “So, what...a drugstore, you think?”

“Seems reasonable. But I’m only seeing those particular traces in the second and third units. Similar traces but in different concentrations in the first and fifth. As for the fourth and sixth...some residue of what looks like...hmm...printer toner?”

Jason cocked his head. “So...we’re looking for two drugstores and a print shop?”

Tammy nodded. “It seems likely. And there *are* two drugstores and a print shop within just a block or so of Hearts Afire.”

“If it was just one person, they probably wouldn’t have wanted to be seen fabbing a huge amount of equipment in any one place,” Argos said. “So just do two at a time. Find a good hiding spot outside until they were

ready. Then put them in.”

I thought about that. “Outdoor hiding spots wouldn’t have been a problem. If they did it overnight when the shop was closed, they could have stuck them in the fenced-in backyard until they were ready to take them inside. Most Integrates can fly, so the fence would have been no obstacle. And there aren’t any security cams on that area, either.”

“We’ve already got data from the public fabs near Hearts Afire,” Tams said. “We hit that area first. I’ll start crunching those numbers. Also, Marta and Raada are still in the area, so I’ll have them run back by and give those particular shops a little extra attention.”

“Great! If we get positive results there, we can probably cut the fabber patrol short and get everyone back here. We’ve still got more training to do, after all.” I grinned at Jason. “So, what do you think of your first real Marshals Nerding session?”

Jason grinned back. “I think this sounds like a promising career track, ma’am. Let’s just hope the rest of the investigation is this easy.”

“And I’m pulling security camera footage of those fabbers, where I can find it,” Tams said. “Seeing if there’s anything there at the timestamps from the nanos.” She paused. “Hmmm, okay. Think we’ve got something here.”

I dropped into VR. “Pass it over?”

“Here, catch.” She beamed me the data in question, and I screened the clips in fast-time. In the dead of night when no one was around, a sort of blur in the air stepped up to the fabber controls. A moment later, the machine started cranking away on something. The other two videos played out much the same.

“So, it *was* an Integrate. And not one with a great amount of cloak skill, either.” An Integrate with more practice could have managed it with almost no motion blur at all.

“Looks like. And I’ll bet when Marta checks in, it’ll be the exact same dandruff signature as in the bookstore.”

“We’ll just have to see.” I dropped back into reality and filled Jason in on what we’d found.

He gazed at me, wide-eyed. “You saw all that? In just a couple of

seconds?”

“Well, I can fast-time it when I’m thinking with my implants. It’s kind of convenient.”

“Wow...”

Too late, I recognized my error. “Uh...not that it’s all that big a deal. You still shouldn’t rush into anything.”

“Riiiiight...”

The response from Marta and Raada came in a couple of minutes later. They’d run by the places we’d pinpointed and done a little more research, including scanning for Integrate data traces and talking to anyone they could find who’d been on duty that night. They’d found the exact data traces Tams had predicted, as well as Axe scent traces in two of the three locations. They’d also heard from the night-shift pharmacist at one of the drugstores who’d been surprised when the fabber went off seemingly by itself without any remote orders listed on the system monitor. But by the time he’d gone down to check, the output hopper had been empty.

“Well, that seems to settle that. Should we call them back in?”

“Actually, let’s make sure we have the logs from this bunch of fabbers first.” She showed me the list she was sending off to the remote teams.

“These are the closest 30-hour fabberies to previous incidents Iffy reported. If they follow the same pattern, there might be irregularities to check there, too.”

“Okay. Let me know when your log analysis turns anything up.”

## CHAPTER 6

By an hour later, everyone was back and reporting in. And since we had an hour or so to spare, I set up the next round of one-on-one interviews. This time, I decided to talk to Raada, and then Marta. Given this job we were doing for Cape Nord's women, it seemed like a good idea to get a read on the new seven's Cape Nord woman next.

So, I had a seat behind the desk as the antelope RIDE trotted in. "Hey, thanks for coming. Make yourself comfy."

She dipped her head. "I'm happy to be here. Thank you for inviting me."

"So...why don't you tell me about yourself? I saw in your files that you come from Uplift. How'd you end up partnered with a Nordie girl like Marta?"

"Well, it was mainly the results of the personality test...and Hank is an old friend. He got me curious about Cape Nord, and I wanted to stay with him. So when Marta came up as a potential match and Hank with Drake, I decided to follow along. I gather that not many female RIDEs from Cape Nord choose to join the Marshals, so there weren't any compatible ones from there on offer for her."

"How are you two getting along? I noticed you don't exactly see eye to eye on some things."

"There's a lot going on here that I just don't understand," the impala said, ears a-flick. "At first I thought her—the way she is—was just a front she puts on for the men here. But after we got to know each other a little better, I realized that's not the case at all. She might act a little more scatter-brained than she really is sometimes...but all in all, she's really *like* that. It's confusing."

"What is she like? Whatever you're comfortable saying. I'm not asking you to gossip or tattle, but I'm still trying to get a read on her myself."

"Well, not to be too specific, I just can't imagine this partnership being permanent. She's just...involved in this—what to call it? Female conspiracy? It must be a human thing. I just don't get it at all."

I had to chuckle a little there. “Oh, I understand. Trust me, I *do* understand. I was a little put off by it myself, when I first found out about it. But after I thought about it for a while, I had to admit it’s not a *whole* lot weirder than a settlement where the RIDEs boss everyone else around—and Tams and I lived in Alpha Camp for months. And at least everyone here seems to be okay with it.” I considered the spate of sabotage we were investigating. “Or, well, *almost* everyone.”

“She seems to have a lot of her identity bound up in the process of scoring men for their behavior, and otherwise taking part in the local culture. Not that she feels ‘superior’ to men as such, just that she thinks it’s her...*civic duty*, I guess. Though at the same time, she did take what you said to heart about not scoring while on duty, and is determined to try not to let what happens on duty affect any scores she might give outside of it.” She cocked her head. “The most confusing thing is that it’s *not* out of any feeling of superiority, or control issues. It’s...a matter of *principle* with her. Just like enforcing the law in the Marshals. It...just doesn’t make any sense to me, but *she* firmly believes in it.”

“Maybe it’s like any political or religious difference with your friends?” I suggested. “If you want to stay friends with someone, you learn not to make too big a deal out of any weird beliefs or customs they might hold as long as they aren’t outright *evil*.”

Raada wrinkled her nose. “I guess that’s one way of looking at it.” She still sounded a little doubtful, and I could definitely sympathize.

“So...were you raised in a creche, or born in the old way?”

“Oh, I’m an old-timer as RIDEs go. Not a war vet—I was made in Uplift, after all—but my first partner was an ecologist at Martinez U. She divided her time between Uplift and doing ecological development down on the savannah near Aloha, so an impala was a natural choice for her.”

“Ah. I’m sorry, so many RIDEs come out of the Uplift creche these days it was just a natural assumption to make.”

She nodded. “After the Emancipation came along we decided to part ways. Not out of personal dislike, but she just just felt like I needed to spread my wings, so to speak. The Marshals just felt like a natural place, after Hank suggested it. I have forensic and research skills not learned by

chip.”

“We’re certainly glad to have you.” I chuckled. “Figuratively and probably literally, the next time we can all get together for Nature Range. I know I’ve seen Tams drooling when she thought I wasn’t looking.”

Tammy and I usually kept a latent link open in the background, which allowed us to notice when one of us mentioned the other in casual conversation. That particular mention brought a “snort” emoticon, and *:Oh, ha ha, very funny.:*

*:Hey, you do fab lion spit!:*

Raada tilted her head. “I’m afraid I’m not often in Nature Range these days. But I might be...game.”

I chuckled at the pun, but wagged a finger at her. “You do need to take time for recreation. Given I was born a human, and fledged as a predator RIDE, I’m not entirely sure I understand the appeal of Nature Range from a prey standpoint myself, but I’m told it’s necessary for your psychological health. Play is important.”

“To be honest I think it’s not quite *that* necessary. There are quite a few prey RIDES who managed to turn the tables on predators. But I understand where you’re coming from. The Marshals need me at my best.”

From there, the conversation wandered into the psychology of Nature Range, followed by general discussion of hobbies, research methodologies, and some differences between the cultures of Uplift and Cape Nord. By the time the half hour was up, it felt like we’d hit it off really well, and I elicited a promise for an engagement in Nature Range at some point—possibly even a one-on-one, though I don’t tend to hunt that much in Nature Range myself after having done so much of it in the years I spent raising Tammy there.

At last, we said our farewells and she trotted to the door, and a few minutes later Marta entered.

The stiff way she walked I could tell she was very frustrated. She closed the door behind her. “Permission to speak freely, ma’am? Can I just clear the air a little before we start?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Sure, go ahead. What’s wrong?”

“I’m not putting on a show. I’m not faking anything. I’m not going to

turn into someone else when the men aren't looking. I'm just me, okay? *Gawd.*"

"What brought this on?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yesterday, talking to Relena and Jenni. They both had questions. So many questions. So many of the *same* questions. Which *you'll* probably have now, too. And I'll have to talk to their RIDE partners sooner or later, who haven't been here before either. At least Marshal Tamarind has, and she tells me DeniFaye has, too..."

"Well, I'm sorry about that. Maybe it wasn't such a good plan to start with one-on-ones before a free-for-all discussion. I'm a little new at all this. On the bright side, I don't think you need to worry about filling in Katie or Kandace. They'll have gotten their partners' memories of your convos when they Fused. And they probably wouldn't have so many questions anyway. They've had a lot more time to study human nature."

Marta cocked her head, looking at me. "You know, you sound a *lot* older than you look."

"I kind of *am* older than I look, a little bit. I've spent some years in fast-time. And I read a lot. Sometimes *I* forget I'm only 17 years old in person-years." I grinned. "Go on, have a seat. Maybe we can pretend like I've gone ahead and asked all the questions they did and you can just sum up?"

Marta moved across to the chair and perched on the edge, shaking her head. "I don't even know why you *have* all those questions. I thought you all met with Iphigenia Rose when you got here. Didn't she already tell you everything?"

"Well, yeah. But she's at the top of the food chain. Pretty much as powerful as a Cape Nord woman can get. So it's pretty obvious what she likes about the system. But you're right down here at the bottom, and it's a little harder to figure out what someone like you gets out of it. Why do you put up with Men...well, *patronizing* you? I read that there was a whole big movement against that sort of thing back in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>."

"Well, this isn't five hundred years ago, is it? The whole power dynamic is different. I did a report on it for one of my history classes." Marta waved a hand. "Back at the cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup>, it had been barely a

century since women had gotten the vote, and only a few decades since they'd *seriously* started to press for equality in other ways too. There were still lots of men who'd grown up under the old ways, or who'd been raised by men who had, and the worst of them saw it as a zero-sum game—women agitating for more rights meant *they* were gonna lose some of theirs. Plenty of women who'd grown up having to fight for every inch of their rights raising *their* next generation, too. You know how it is that abused kids tend to grow up to be abusers themselves? It's something like that. The struggle gets passed on to both sides of the next generation.”

“Well, that's an interesting theory,” I said.

“It even got to the point where some movie theater hosting all-femme screenings of a female superhero movie was seen as some sort of evil, terrible, *reverse-discriminatory* thing.” She rolled her eyes. “But heaven forbid anyone should ask *them* to throw stag bachelor parties open to the opposite sex or something. Or even acknowledge that the fact they'd been having men's-only things for decades entitled women to have something their own way every so often too.”

“I know, right? So why doesn't that happen here?”

“Well, because the last of the misogynist dinosaurs and the women who were just as ready to fight 'em died out a few centuries ago. By the 22<sup>nd</sup> century, most of the last vestiges of that sort of sexism were as obsolete as racism.” She shrugged. “Of course, the whole energy crash and collapse of civilization for a while sort of helped, there. People didn't care if you were male, female, black, white, red, yellow, as long as you could use a gun and were willing to point it at their enemies. And we just grew from there.

“The point is, by now the idea of *real* sexism in most of the galaxy is totally obsolete. Modern men aren't threatened by the idea of women with the same rights they have, and modern women don't have to struggle all the time to get the same rights as men. So we're all good for playing with it.” She shook her head. “I mean, come on! Give us a little credit. It's all a game. Everyone seems to know it, except for outsiders. It's like Nextus, right? Nobody can figure out how their government works except them. It's another game. Sturmhaven is what happens when it gets taken too seriously, see?”

“Besides, you know what my own Dad did when he got tired of playing? Became my second Mom for like five years. Geez.”

“Okay, okay, I think I get the point. But you do seem to take the game kind of seriously yourself...all that scoring yesterday until we brought up that rule...”

“I’m sorry about that, Ms. Leroq. It’s just, like, habit. This is a game and I’m a ref, and it’s a job I take seriously. It’s one of the reasons I think I’ll make a good Marshal.”

“Honestly, what’s the appeal? I don’t mean to sound like I’m putting it down, but...” I shrugged. “Maybe I’m just weird, but I don’t get it.”

“What’s the appeal of chess, or *Dungeons & Dragons*, or...or Nature Range? They’re games. If you enjoy them, they’re fun. If you’ve never played, you can’t understand why those people are wasting their time like that.” She shook her head. “Sorry, I’m not *trying* to dodge the question, but...if I even try to say exactly what parts are fun for me, then you’ll ask me why I like *those* things, and so on, and before you know it I’m on the couch and you’re asking me about my childhood. It’s like that old commercial on the Steaders twencen cartoon tapes. ‘Why do you like Apple Jacks?’ ‘We just do!’”

“I guess it doesn’t get any more plain than that.” I considered. Perhaps a change of subject was in order for now. “As an interested local, what do you think about the case Iffy put us on?”

She blinked at me. “‘Iffy’? You...call Iphigenia Rose...‘Iffy’?”

“Well, not to her *face*...” I considered. “Well, maybe Tams or Faye might call her that to her face. But they’ve known her a while. *Anyway*, the case we’re working...?”

“The whole thing feels like a Frat Boy prank, except not as subtle. My Dad was a Frat Boy in college, so I know what they’re like. Of course, he’s a Family Man now, but he told me a lot of stories about his ‘glory days.’”

“Easy to see why the local police would tend to dismiss it, then.”

“Except, like I said, not as subtle. Like they were trying too hard. I think the vandals must be outsiders who don’t quite get it.”

“Yeah, that seems likely. If it were a local, Hellir would probably have their ‘dandruff’ on file. Anyway, it seems like we’ve figured out where the

sprayers were fabbed, and Tams should have the fabbers' logs analyzed pretty soon now. So at least that's something." I considered my next question. "So...why did you want to join the Marshals? I get the impression that most Cape Nord women in police service go the 'metermaid' route. Which is kind of weird, given that in this day and age all your parking meters should be completely automated."

Marta shook her head. "You still don't get it. Putting people in niches is a Man thing. There's no wrong way to be a woman. Just because a lot of us *choose* to do things one way doesn't mean we *all* have to. In fact, it means there's more room for those of us who want to do things some other way, because it shows the rest of us that we can if we want to. It's just that most of us *don't* want to."

"And it gives the Men some useful token examples they can point to when someone accuses their polity of being backward?"

"There's some of that. Thing is, what most people just don't get is that Men can't force us to do *anything* we don't want to. Not like in the Dark Ages, anyway. But a lot of them *think* they can, so they *talk* like they can, and so everyone gets that impression. After all, Men are straightforward, all about face value. We women are complex and mysterious creatures." She grinned.

"I'm starting to see that." I smiled ruefully. "What I don't get is, why none of this leaks out to the rest of the world. You'd think anyone who got fed up with the place and left would spill it sooner or later."

Marta shrugged. "Anyone who got 'fed up' probably wasn't in on the big secret. And anyone who left without getting 'fed up' probably doesn't want to spoil everyone else's fun. I'm sure there are a lot of people out there who know what's really going on, but no one feels like blabbing it to the news channels. Odds are even the *news channels* already know but don't feel like there's any percentage in making trouble."

"Okay. I guess I'm finally starting to get it worked through my ceramacrete noggin that there actually is a system in place here that just seems to work for people, no matter how screwy it looks from the outside."

Marta smiled. "If you *really* want to know how it works, you should try 'going native.' Get a temporary tourist 'sculpt to look like a Nordie girl,

and go out and let some guy pick you up. Maybe do a double-date with Drake and me. See how the other half lives!”

I pondered that for a moment. “That sounds like it might be a *little* too much fun for this girl. But I’ll think about it. Did you have any questions you’d like to ask me, now we’re not in front of an audience?”

Marta looked thoughtful for a moment. “So this is the point where I show I’m a hypocrite by asking you the crap I’m sure *you’ve* gotten sick of everyone wanting to know about. How did you spend *months* in Alpha Camp without going off the wall?”

I chuckled. “Believe it or not, for me, Alpha Camp was like a vacation. Listen...”

The rest of the interview went pretty well. I had some stories to tell, and Marta opened up a little more about Cape Nord. Maybe I didn’t end up knowing a lot more than I did when the interview started, but it did put things in a little more perspective to know that Cape Nord wasn’t *totally* insane after all—they just liked to play their little game. Even if not all of them realized they *were* playing.

As I thanked Marta for coming and she headed back out of the office, I got a comm ping from Tammy saying she’d finished her analysis and wanted to go over it with me, so I headed to our jungle clearing for a quick chat. I arrived to find Tammy gnawing on the half-eaten remains of a familiar-looking impala.

I raised an eyebrow. “Really? I’m glad she took my advice, but I thought you were gonna have a chat, not dinner.”

Tamarind smirked, licking some blood off her muzzle. “We had plenty of time for both. RIDEs, remember? Fast-time? Besides, Nature Range is a good setting for casual conversations in sideband chat.” She considered. “Can I offer you a haunch?”

“No thanks, impala goes right to my virtual hips. So, what did you find in the logs?”

“Well, for one thing, I’m pretty sure there’s penny-ante fraud going on at something like half the fabberies we got records from. Maybe even some moderate to major fraud at a couple of them that might be worth

passing on to local law. But that's all unrelated to the current case." She shook her head. "I took a look at the records for the public fabs near the sites of the previous incidents Iffy reported, and found similar activity there. Way too long ago for any Intie 'dandruff' to still be around, but the hack pattern's just the same as at the ones from yesterday's attack, and it seems to establish a pattern for the perp. So yay for us there.

"Apart from that, there's not much there to shed any light on whodunnit. The most we can say is, when they pick somewhere to hit, they'll fab any of their 'party favors' at some public spot near the target site. And given what I've found, I've got a pretty good notion we can guess where they're gonna fab stuff if we know where the next 'sewing circle' meeting is."

"Huh. Well, I guess that's something, at least." I thought about that. "So if we knew where and when the next one was going to be, we could set a trap."

"As long as they haven't put it together we're onto them yet, yeah. What're you thinking?"

"I think maybe it's time we paid ol' Iffy a visit."

So we mounted up and headed downtown, just the two of us. Faye wanted to tag along, but we needed one of our nominal adults overseeing the new Seven's study time. As we left, they'd put together a training sim with Katie, Relena, Kandace, and Jenni in charge of the op force. I looked forward to finding out how that went when we got back.

I leaned forward, crossed my arms on top of the dash, and peered out as Cape Nord's central city spread out all around us. "So where's Iffy live, anyway?"

"It's one of the higher terrace platforms on the other side of the city. I'd have circled the rim, but it wouldn't have saved us that much time, and besides, the place is kind of impressive when you go right through the heart of downtown. And I haven't been here in awhile."

All around us, buildings reached up into the upper regions of the central cavern—dozens of storeys into the sky. Or, well, what *would* be the sky if there weren't a stone roof over it. "Wow. You know, you don't really

get a sense for just how big this place is from the outside. And would you look at all those skyscrapers?”

“Yep! Doesn’t quite seem like the most efficient use of space, does it? They could have gotten a lot more acreage if they just built staggered terraces all the way up. But Men gotta have their giant phallic symbols.”

“I guess that’s one possible explanation.”

It took a few minutes to pass through the central terrace, but traffic was light at this time of day and the stop lights didn’t take too long to cycle. Before too long, we were heading up a ramp on the other side, toward a terrace near the cavern’s ceiling. This one also had skyscrapers on it, probably just as tall as the ones down below, but a couple of these actually went all the way up through holes in the cavern’s ceiling into open sky beyond. And it was to one of these that we were heading now.

I glanced at the sign next to the driveway as we pulled in. “The Rosebriar Building?”

“Yeah. Built by and for Rosebriar Press—it’s the publishing company Iffy started back in the ‘30s, once the money had really started coming in. They occupy the top ten floors now—and Iffy lives in the penthouse.” Tammy pulled up out front of the entrance. “You go on up—I’ve let ‘em know you’re on your way. I’ll just go find a place to park and tag along virtually.”

I opened the door and stepped down to the curb. “You know, I love that you’re so big, but sometimes it gets pretty inconvenient.”

“Yeah, I know, but at least I’ll be with you in spirit.” The door swung closed and she headed back out the drive. I shrugged and headed on in. The doorman directed me to an elevator not far from the entrance. As it started to rise, it turned out the thing was a glass capsule on the outside of the building, with a great view of the surrounding cavern and the city spread out below as it rose. I was glad I wasn’t afraid of heights...much.

We finally rose up through the hole in the ceiling, meters and meters of rock cutting off the outside view for a moment, then beyond. Except for the bright, if slightly weak, natural sunlight which we were now getting direct from the source, the view once we were outside wasn’t all that impressive. Just a big stone dome, with the stubby tops of a few other

buildings poking up and out here and there, in the middle of that same blasted bedrock landscape I mentioned passing over on the way in. I guess the impressive thing was that we were able to look out on that view at all, not what the view actually *was*.

Finally, with a “ding!” the elevator pulled to a halt, and the inner door slid open. I stepped out into an understated hallway, done up in pastels, with some fancy but probably uncomfortable chairs and sofas along the walls. I followed the hallway along, then I heard Iphigenia Rose’s voice coming out of one of the doors ahead.

“—and once the books finish fabbing, you can have them shipped to the bookstore where I’m holding the signing. Which one was it going to be this week?”

“Rule Books, in Nextus,” another woman’s voice said.

“Gosh, with a name like *that*, I was expecting it to be in Aloha!” Iffy and the other woman shared a laugh. By then, I was up to the door. I knocked on the frame as I stepped into view.

The room was a tastefully furnished office, with a polished mahogany desk containing a comm terminal, a couple of picture frames, and a vase with roses in it. Iffy was seated in an executive chair behind the desk, and occupying one of the seats in front was another woman, of about the same ageless age and the standard Cape Nord female physique. Really, save for their different facial features and hair colors (Iffy blonde, the other woman brunette), and Iffy’s fox tags where the woman was tagless, they might as well have been stamped out with a cookie cutter. The source of those fox tags, Pandora, was lying against the back wall behind the desk.

Iphigenia looked up. “Ah, Marshal Leroq! Welcome! Tammy told me you were coming.” She nodded to the other woman. “This is Lenora Richmond. She was my agent and manager back in the day; now she runs Rosebriar Press for me. Lenore, Jeanette Leroq.” Tammy’s hardlight lion form rezzed into being in front of the desk, and Iphigenia smiled. “And her partner, Tamarind.”

“I’m pleased to meet you both.” Lenora rose from her chair. “Well, publishing waits for no woman. I should get back to business and leave you to your conversation.”

“Let me know if there’s anything else you need.”

Lenora Richmond nodded, and slipped out the door as I entered.

Iphigenia shifted in her chair, giving us her undivided attention. “It’s good to see you. Have you made any progress on the case?”

“Some, yes. We’ve been running down some clues, and Tammy noticed something in the logs.” I nodded to Tamarind. “We think we may have an idea of how to catch your vandal, but we’ll need your help.”

Iphigenia laced her fingers together. “If there’s anything within my power, certainly!”

“Have you decided when and where you’re going to hold your next meeting?” Tammy asked.

Iffy shook her head. “No, not yet. Not since the fiasco of the last one.” She grimaced. “To be honest, we don’t actually *need* the meetings to get our business done. We have encrypted comm channels and chats for day-to-day women’s affairs. The meetings are simply chances to socialize and stay in closer contact with one another.”

I nodded. “That’s about what I figured. Well...we’d like you to go ahead and set another one up. Just do it the usual way, as if everything was normal, but let us know in advance when and where it’s gonna be. We’ll arrange to be watching the spots where Mr. Mystery Integrate is most likely to get his gear...and when he does, we can nab him.”

“Or her,” Tamarind put in. “It *could* be a woman, remember.”

“Hmm.” Iphigenia pursed her lips. “After the last one, it could be some time before anyone is realistically willing to chance it again. And we do have Christmas coming up, and then New Years. It seems likely the soonest it could happen would be a couple of weeks.”

I nodded. “That works. We do have that new group to train, after all. So just let us know when and where it’ll be when you set it up.”

“Is there any particular spot you want it? Maybe somewhere isolated, away from civilians?”

“Just the same sort of place you’d usually have it,” Tamarind said. “Given this perp hasn’t done anything overtly violent, I don’t think it’s likely to be a problem having it in an area where people are. We don’t want *anything* about this to give away that this is a setup—and suddenly deciding

to have it in the middle of nowhere could be a tipoff.”

“And needless to say, you don’t let *anyone* else know this is a trap,” I added. “We don’t know where this person’s finding out about the meetings, after all. So, as far as you, and everyone attending, is concerned, this is a real meeting. Heck, assuming we catch the perp and disarm whatever traps they’ve set before they can go off, you can go ahead and hold it *as* a real meeting.”

Iphigenia nodded. “Hmm. It will take some time to settle on a spot and set it up, but I will let you know once we have one scheduled.”

“Well, good.”

Iffy got up from her chair, and Pandora rose too. “Since you’ve come all this way, why don’t I show you around Rosebriar before you have to go?” She glanced to Tamarind. “I do have hardlight projectors you can access in most areas.”

“I’m fine with watching through Jeanette’s implants when I have to, but sure, we’d love to see the place.”

“Excellent! Come with me, then...”

There followed a decent tour of the publishing house from top to bottom. We got to see the meeting rooms where the board ran the company, the offices of readers and editors where editorial decisions were made, the sales department with their charts and statistical displays, and all the other places that are important to running a thriving publishing house.

I was most impressed by the huge industrial fabbers, located on the publisher’s bottom floor. These stood in for old-fashioned printing presses, and were capable of producing thousands of hardcover books at a time. “One of only four publishers with this much capacity on the planet,” Iffy said proudly. “And the only one on Gondwana. We sublet it fairly cheaply to other publishers, but find it handy to have to ourselves when necessary. For obvious reasons.” No false modesty there! But then, I suppose she was entitled to be a little full of herself if anyone was.

“Imagine how many spray canisters of Axe you could make with one of *these*,” Tammy said with a wicked twinkle. Iphigenia looked faint.

We concluded with a private tour through Iphigenia’s own penthouse.

As penthouses went, it was fairly modest—a two-storey home that wouldn't have been out of place on any suburban street. I'm not sure what I expected—frilly pink lace on everything, maybe?—but the feminine touches in the decoration and furnishings were tastefully understated. It felt like a comfortable home—which, of course, it was, after all.

There were even a couple of places that seemed to be marked out for Men. One of the guest bedrooms was furnished in a masculine style, which was no surprise. A lady like Iffy would surely have a lot of gentleman callers, and it would be only polite to make them feel at home.

But there was also a study, with bookshelves, desk...even a meerschaum pipe sitting next to an empty ashtray. “What's this place for?”

“Oh, I actually do much of my writing here.” She blushed just a little. “It's an eccentricity, perhaps, but I like to think it reminds me of my roots.”

That made a lot of sense. And in some odd way it helped make Iffy seem more like a real person, rather than an artificial celebrity. “The way I hear it, you're entitled to your eccentricities. Being a woman and all, without pesky capital letters to worry about.”

She smiled. “Exactly! I do believe you are beginning to understand us.”

I sent to Tammy, *:God help me, I think she's right.:* Tams sent a LOL emoticon back to me.

The tour concluded with us sitting on a balcony facing the most picturesque part of the view, with blue sky overhead and shattered rock giving way to Dry Ocean sand out near the far horizon. Iphigenia sipped a chardonnay, I had a glass of lemonade, and Tams was lying at the other end of the balcony chewing on a virtual impala haunch. “And that's my little world, I suppose,” Iphigenia said.

“It's pretty nice,” I admitted. “Must have taken you a lot of effort to get this far.”

“Years,” she agreed. “Decades, even. But it's pretty nice to be on top. Which is why all these obnoxious pranks and vandalism are so *annoying*. They're not earthshaking, but it's a worry that it could escalate sooner or later into something that is.”

“We'll do our best to solve it for you,” Tammy said. I was glad she

didn't simulate talking with her mouth full. "We think this plan we've laid out has the best chance of success of anything else we can think of right now."

"Just so long as it's doing *something*," Iphigenia Rose said. "At least that will let the rest of us feel better."

## CHAPTER 7

When we got back to the Marshal station, everyone was in the classroom discussing the results of the training exercise. I gathered it had gone pretty well. The new kids were a little sketchy on some elements of tactics, but they'd done allowably well when going up against a bunch of fully-trained Marshals, some of whom were considerably older than they were. Faye sent across privately that she thought the new crew was probably going to work out after all. *:Could use some more time in the field, though.:*

*:Well...we're not going to be able to move forward with Operation: Gurl Cooties until after New Years, seems like,:* I told her. *:Iffy says that's the soonest they can think about doing another meeting without possibly arousing anyone's suspicions. And it's a week and a half between now and Christmas.:*

Tams saw where I was going with that. *:So how about we plan for a week in the field starting tomorrow?:*

Faye sent back a "thoughtful" emoticon. *:Complete with the whole RIDE-as-boss thing?:*

*:That's the idea.:* I said. *:But how should we translate that to Kevin?:*

*:Could force him to give over his root to someone else and take their orders,:* Faye said. *:But it feels a little gratuitous. We Inties aren't really in an analogous situation to RIDE-human relations—especially ones like me and Kev who are fusion personalities. Just as well to pile some more work on him, keep him extra-busy.:*

*:Sounds good to me. You want to clear it with the Dells? Or you want Tams and me to do it?:*

*:I'll take care of it,:* Faye promised. *:Since Tams is the one with the training point on her star, you two should get your heads together and work on plans for the exercise.:*

*:We'll do that in fast-time tonight,:* Tammy said. *:Right now, we should probably all split up again and clear away the last of the one-on-*

*ones before we all go out in the field together.:*

*:That works. I'll wrap up this review session and send everyone to their offices in 15 minutes.:*

We'd each of us talked to four of the others so far, and so there were just three left. For me, those would be Hank, Drake, and Kevin. In keeping with how I'd done the last couple sessions, I decided to chat with Hank first. He was the only RIDE on the team who was actually from Cape Nord, so I figured it would be interesting to see how a Real Man RIDE looked at the foolishness of the organic side.

Or *did* he look at it as foolishness? I knew from some things Shelley had said that RIs could be “templated” to hold certain attitudes; it had messed Fritz up back at the start of things, and they still did it a lot over in Sturmhaven. The templating was kind of like Integrate meme infection, in that it colored their outlook without them even recognizing it—but I found it hard to imagine the Chromes and Sillies would have let something like that fly for a Marshals recruit.

I had noticed Hank's distinct southern accent—kind of like Kaylee's, only a little different. Like Huckleberry Hound out of those old cartoons. Did that come from a past partner, like Kaylee's had from Anny Hewer? His dossier said he'd previously been partnered with a Cape Nord prospector. There were still plenty of pockets of nickel-iron dotting the surrounding landscape, probably fragments of the big one that had left the deposit the Neumonformer had hollowed out for the polity cavern. Given that it was one of very few sources of those metals on this metal-poor planet, plenty of Manly types made a decent living locating those pockets so they could be mined out. The metal was plentiful in the rest of the solar system, but it was cheaper to pull it out of the ground down here than to do it out there and ship it in.

Nickel-iron prospecting wasn't as inimical to life as prospecting for Q, but the extreme cold of the frozen north was nearly as deadly to unprotected humans as the extreme heat of the deep Dry. Either way, it took a special kind of Man (and a few surly women, mostly from other polities) to take on that kind of work—and probably a special kind of RIDE

to partner up with them. As the big ram stepped carefully through the door into the office, I wondered just what kind of a RIDE that was.

“Hey, welcome. Get comfy, however that is for you.”

“Thank ye kindly.” He knelt down on his forelegs, then fully on the floor, legs tucked beneath him. “Now, seeing as how I’ve done this afore, what else do you wanna know, ma’am?”

“These one on ones *were* a bad idea, weren’t they? Boy am I ever gonna get it when I get to Kevin.” I chuckled. “I guess everyone else found you an object of curiosity, too?”

“Well, ah suppose ah ain’t a guy you’d expect t’join the Marshals. Spent twenty-some years roaming the Western Wall, looking for paydirt that weren’t Q. Went through a half dozen partners, none of whom I liked very much.”

“So what brought you here? If you were a human, I’d guess something about signing up with the Marshals being the Manly thing to do, but does Manliness really mean all that much to a RIDE?”

“Nurdy RIDEs help keep score, if you wanna get technical. Plus, ya know, a Man’s expected to get a tough-guy RIDE. Like myself.” He snorted.

“So you just thought you’d make yourself available for any such who happened to want to sign up?”

“After I went an’ got myself emancipated, why not?” He chuckled. “What I was hopin’ was ta find someone I *liked* for a change. And yer ‘Young Guns’ program seemed like t’ having a good shot a’ that. None a’ my other pards had been less than thirty-fi’, and most were pushin’ fifty or sixty. Was curious what it’d be like to have someone who wasn’t all bitter and set in his ways.”

“Seems like you got one of those, then. How’re you and Drake getting along?”

“Drake’s picked the wrong Manly Focus, I think. Other than that, he’s a good kid. But then, I suppose you youngsters often don’t know what you really want to be.”

“The wrong focus? With a build like that, I wouldn’t think there’d be a whole lot of choice. Unless all those muscles are from ‘sculpting.’”

“There’s options. But I don’t wanna push him too hard about it. Not

‘til we know each other better, leastways.”

“I have to say, you’re not at all what I expected in a Cape Nord male RIDE.”

“When I was new I was gung-ho about keepin’ score. It’s how they built me, after all. Kinda fell off the wagon maybe ten years ago.”

“I guess I’ve been exposed to a lot of personality-template cases from the various polities—especially in Alpha Camp where it seems like all the ‘misfit toys’ ended up. Zturmhaven RIDEs mit der thick accents, that sort of thing.”

“Some of us never break out of it. But, that ain’t here nor there. I hear this new ‘creche’ thing has its problems, too.”

“Yeah, and the Integrate Enclaves have their own little odd quirks of personality.” I shrugged. “Speaking of which, what did you think when it came out you-all had one right in your midst?”

“Well, it wasn’t really *my* midst, so much,” Hank said. “Always spent most a’ my time out in the rocks, to where Cape Nord proper was a pretty rare sight. Guess y’ could say it didn’t make a whole lot of difference to me what city folks did. But it seems t’ me I owe Integrates in gen’ral a little debt a’ gratitude, given it was them-all comin’ out that finally got me free a’ the last a’ those pards I never really liked. Seems like I was suddenly an Integration danger.” He snorted. “Fore I could get scooped up by someone else, emancipation came in.”

“And you were free to go off and join the Marshals.”

“Ayup. Me and a little lady I met over sidebands named Raada. Decided to join up together.”

*That* was interesting. “Oh, really? She didn’t mention that. Though she did say you were an old friend.”

“Well, you pro’lly didn’t ask. She’s pretty modest.”

“Pretty lucky, you getting into the same squad. But I guess with Cape Nord wanting to field its own Young Guns seven, maybe it’s not luck so much after all. How’s being on the same squad affected your relations?”

“We know persn’l ain’t the same as important, ma’am.”

“So I should mind my own business? Fair enough.” I grinned. “But I’ve found personal can *be* pretty important sometimes.”

The rest of the conversation tended to cover Marshal philosophies and training, and looped back to touch on a few points of Cape Nord's general outlook on things. I got the sense that Hank might be a good person to ask if I should run up against any aspects of Cape Nord's Man Code I found especially confusing, since he fully understood it but wasn't directly involved in it. Before I knew it, the half hour was up. Exit Hank, enter Drake.

I waved the brawny teen to a seat. "Hey, sit down. I realize by this point you've probably gotten the same questions from about five people so far, and I'm sorry about that, but at least you've only got one more after me."

"Answering questions isn't a hardship, ma'am," Drake said. "And not *everyone* asked the same ones. Just the girls, mostly."

"That's understandable. You're pretty much the only pure 'Cape Nord Man' on the team, so you're definitely going to be an object of curiosity to us poor innocent girls who may never have seen a real Man before."

"Just so we're clear...I'm not going to lose any points for talking, right?" Drake's expression was very pensive.

"Of course not." I managed to resist the urge to pinkie promise, knowing he'd probably take it the wrong way. "I'm trying to get to know the 'real' you, since that's who your teammates will have to depend on in the field. Given all the play-acting that goes on in this place, I want to be sure *you* know who the 'real' you is."

"Well...we're not really told to *hide* it. I mean, if it's something like that hostage situation we went over I'm not expected to *really* put myself or others in danger when Dumb Muscle would really be dumb. We're taught how to keep our Manly Focus separate from our private real selves when we're in grade school."

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. "I can't believe they actually start indoctrinating you into this nonsense in *grade school*." I shook my head. "Ugh...sorry. My prejudices coming out. I'm really trying to keep an open mind about all this, but it just seems so ridiculous from the outside."

"It's, you know, history. A lot of guys naturally fit their Focus, so it's not really an act for them. But for me, well..." he flexed his admittedly

impressive bicep. “I come by all this naturally, for some value of naturally. My grandmother’s from Wednesday, and her ancestor was gene-modded for heavy gravity, and this is how those mods express themselves on a lower-grav world. I didn’t go out and get these sculpted on or something, though that’s what everybody thinks. But when you look like this, there’s only so many role choices available. It was basically either Dumb Muscle or Strong But Sensitive, and it’s a lot easier playing dumb if you’re not than playing sensitive if you’re not.”

“So why go through with it? I mean, surely you could move somewhere else...”

Drake snorted. “Maybe *you* were able to leave home when you were younger than me, ma’am, but that’s just not a realistic option for all of us. Cape Nord is my home, warts and all.”

“I guess that’s fair. Maybe if Nextus had been something more for me than the place where the orphanage was located, I’d have developed a taste for rules lawyering. As it is, the first place I found that really felt like home was Alpha Camp. And if I think Cape Nord’s got a speck in its eye, there’s some heavy timber in Alpha Camp’s. Especially at the time I was there.” I shook my head. “So do you find it hard dropping the act for the Marshals?”

“A little...I mean, you saw me in class. Sometimes it’s just hard. I... kinda joined the Marshals because it’s been getting harder to drop it.”

“Sounds like the best thing you could have done. I expect the Marshals look Manly as hell from the outside, while at the same time requiring you to drop the play-acting on the inside.”

“You know, most guys that can’t take it just give up being men—well, *male* anyway. But that just isn’t something I see myself doing. I mean, no offense.”

“Oh, none taken. Though from what I understand, it also isn’t something a lot of *them* see themselves doing until it happens. But that’s not exactly unique to Cape Nord. I didn’t see myself spending months on four legs, and just look at me.” I grinned. “And speaking of four legs, why don’t you tell me about Hank. How do you two get along?”

Drake immediately brightened. “That guy has so many stories. The last time we Fused he talked about his third partner climbing Mt. Wahoo

just for the hell of it. Fused, of course. But I mean, damn! If I do half of what he's done as a Marshal I'll be happy."

"Yeah, there's something to be said for experience. Tams is that way, too. Had a full career before she ever met me. Sometimes I wonder what she even sees in me to keep me for a partner." I chuckled. "But I gotta admit, we're getting into this at the right time if we want to try to do half of what our partners have done. As the youngest Marshals recruits ever, we've got plenty of time ahead of us."

Drake nodded. "Yes, ma'am, that we do. We surely do."

After that, we chatted some about how Drake was getting on with the Marshals training curriculum, and his plans for life after the Marshals. Like most of the other recruits, he thought it was far too soon to decide on that, but he thought he might not mind trying his hand at a little nickel-iron prospecting himself eventually, if Hank was amenable. "After all, my partner has decades of experience already, and knows all the tricks of the trade." And since it was by nature a solitary occupation, it also wouldn't require him to keep the act up all the time.

But for now, Drake was content to train up and do the best he could as a Marshal. He'd have years ahead for all the rest of that stuff.

Finally, Kevin came in. The "Untouchable" jackal Integrate—kind of appropriate, that, given that as scavengers some old-time religions considered jackals to be untouchably foul. But this particular jackal was sharply-dressed and well-kept—natty, not nasty.

"Hey. First off, I should probably apologize for the way this round of interviews shook out. It's only just been brought home to me that you've probably been asked the exact same questions six separate times."

Kevin shrugged, doffing his fedora and tossing it on another chair as he sat down. "It's not so bad. Gave me time to ask some of the same questions to the others. They all look up to you a lot, y'know. Even the RIDEs. Seems like you've had a bit of a tough life, these last couple years."

"Eh...some ways, maybe. But I got through it. What about you? You're from Hellir, then? Where were you from before that? Both of you, if you don't mind talking about that?"

“I’m just a ‘me’ now. Was part of a biker gang called ‘The Jackals’. Believe it or not. We all had jackal RIDEs based on the same personality template. It was like having a half dozen identical brothers when we were new. Even shared the same name. Got really damned confusing at times.”

“How’d you come to Integrate? Are the other Jackals still out there somewhere?”

“Well, the rest of the gang didn’t get nearly as close to their partners as we did. We’d stopped in Cape Nord for a bite. Just happened kinda naturally, I guess. The folks at Hellir noticed instantly and got me away from the rest of the gang. I don’t remember much from those hours. Kinda confusing all around.

“Rest of the gang searched, but didn’t want to attract the Law. They just assumed I left. Not that I was dead or anything. Couple months later Brubeck went public, so I didn’t even get that deep into the Show before that rug was pulled out from under us. Was having a good time, too.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, do you think of yourself as more the human, more the RIDE, or an even mix? I’m always curious about how that sort of thing goes.”

“To be honest, that question really has no meaning for me. I’m just Kevin. It’s really what matters in the long run. It’s who I am now.”

I nodded. “All right then. Who’s Kevin, other than a fan of The Untouchables? What do you want to do with your life?”

“*Beyond* being a badass Marshal? I was kind of a screwup. I want to make up for what I did in that gang. Never did anything too bad. Served time for a couple of misdemeanors.”

I kind of wondered how he could still think of *himself* as having done stuff in that gang if he didn’t associate his identity with either of his parts. But that’s the sort of thing you leave to the shrinks, really. Curiosity isn’t worth diving down a rabbit hole like that. “Okay. Marshals is good for a fresh start like that, on top of the one you already got when you Integrated. So what do you think of the other folks on your team?”

“I’m not an experienced Marshal like Gold Star Tamarind or DeniFaye, but I think we’ve got potential as a Seven.”

I really wasn’t sure what to make of Kevin at this point. Was he just

trying to tell me what I wanted to hear? What was he like when he *wasn't* a Marshal? “Okay, great. But what do you think about them as *people*, being a person yourself? There’s more to life than just Marshalling, you know.”

The jackal tilted his head. “Well, they *seem* like good kids. Jason’s the kind of kid my human part gave a hard time in school, but I like him. Marta’s got a good head on her shoulders. And Drake’s leaning a bit too hard on that Dumb Muscle thing.”

“Raada, Hank, and Argo are all good sports in Nature Range...” he trailed off and shrugged. “I really don’t know what else to say, Miss LeRoq.”

I smiled. “You’re doing fine. I’m just trying to figure out who you are as a person when you’re *not* a Marshal. It can be tricky, especially for Integrates. I don’t even know how serious your ‘thing’ for Untouchables is. Integrate meme-infection, or you just a big fan?”

“Just a fan. Felt like a natural theme for a Marshal anyway. It was either Untouchable or Dances with Jackals. Or maybe Postman.”

“Not ‘Walk Like an Egyptian’? You could have been Anubis.”

He shook his head. “Not...my thing at all. Met another jackal Intie once who went that way. Didn’t sit right with me at all. She’d gone whole hog Egyptian. Just, no.”

I nodded. He didn’t seem too comfortable talking about himself—not too surprising, I guess, given that I basically was sort of like his boss in this scenario—so I decided to turn the conversation in a different direction.

“So...tell me about this ‘Show’ thing? I watched a bunch of episodes of it in fast-time with Tams before coming here, but I’m still not too sure what to think. Is *everyone* in Hellir into that?”

“Mostly. Sure helped us all pass the time. I played a half dozen roles in the few months I had. A couple crossplays. But mostly supporting roles, making sure the Enclave had enough money to keep us in sarium flakes. I was hoping to step up into a more major plotline, but, well, you know.”

“Heh. Once you’re established as a Marshal, I suspect you’ll find a lot of guest opportunities open whenever you’re back in town. Judging from the use Desilu made of us, anyway.” I chuckled. “Which reminds me... what’re your plans like down the road? Thinking of staying in the Marshals long-term, or want to do something else in a few years?”

“Assuming I don’t screw up somehow and get tossed out on my ear, I’m going to be here a while. Nobody knows how long we Inties will live, so I figure I’ll try something else in thirty, forty years. So it depends on what you mean by ‘long term’.”

I nodded. “Well, that’s about all I can think of to ask you. Did you have anything you wanted to ask me?”

“A half dozen questions about being the first uploaded human, but I’m sure you’ve heard them a dozen times already, each.”

“So I’ll have gotten into practice answering them. Go on, ask away. You don’t learn anything if you don’t ask.”

“Well...how did the copying process work? I mean, I can’t imagine how you would do something like that...”

We spent the rest of the half-hour having an interesting discussion about digital metaphysics. He was right, most of the questions *had* been asked before—but it wasn’t as if you could get answers to them anywhere else, so I wasn’t really tired of going over them. Maybe after another dozen or so people asked, I might change my mind.

After he left, Tams pinged me on the comm. *:So, I guess that’s it. We’ve each talked to all of ‘em now. What you think?:*

I propped my feet on the desk. *:They seem to be a likely enough bunch. Not that I’ve got much experience evaluating other Marshals. You’re the one with the training point on your badge; I should probably be asking you what you think.:*

*:Seems like they’ve mostly got well-rounded personalities and different skill sets that complement each other. The one I’m least sure about is that Kevin guy, but I don’t have so much experience with Integrates, and I’ll grant I’ve got a few prejudices there that might get in the way. DeniFaye thinks he’ll do, so I’ll bow to her experience there.:*

I nodded. *:That’s the feeling I got, too. Well, we’ll just have to see how they all work out in further training. And speaking of which...better get packing, pard, ‘cuz it’s time we all took a little camping trip!:*

## CHAPTER 8

With all the interviews wrapped up, it was time for a sojourn in the Great Outdoors. If you want, cue up Bill Conti's "Gonna Fly Now" as you read this part, because it's basically a training montage. Just like from the Rocky movies!

Rather than fly out to the Dry, we took advantage of being smack dab in the middle of some inhospitable rough country in the frozen north. Everybody Fused up, and then we kindly informed them that their RIDEs were in charge for the next week. There was a little surprise, but not too much grumbling. I suspect they'd read up enough on Marshals training to know that something like this was in the offing.

And so, for the next week, we practiced maneuvers out in the real world, interspersed with some wilderness survival stuff. The RIDEs got it pretty easily, and from there it was just a matter of the kids picking it up too. It was pretty fun to run combat exercises, seven versus seven, out in real terrain instead of virtual space.

It wasn't all work and no play, though. Since we were in that neck of the woods, and we had an experienced prospector with us in the form of Hank, we gave heavy metal prospecting a spin on one of our off shifts. We didn't find a whole lot, but Hank allowed as how we didn't do any worse than average for the amount of time we put into it. "You're right lucky if y' hit one really good strike in a week or more," he said. "For a few hours, that's not bad 't all."

We were all pretty glad to make it back to Cape Nord after that, though. After all that time out in the great wide open, I could only imagine what it must have been like for prospectors like Hank and his human who would go it alone for weeks at a time. We took a day or so to unwind and rehash the experience in the classroom.

After that, we all headed our own separate ways for Christmas Day and the couple days surrounding it. The Nordie seven didn't have that far to go to go "home," of course, but our bunch caught a ride on Santa's sleigh—yeah, that's right, Jonesy's suborbital's holiday skin, complete with Santa

outfit on him and the Ice Cream Bunny for a co-pilot—back down Uplift way. There was a parade that wanted us to be in it.

But then, you probably saw that already, in that Totalia Prelude story that covered that Christmas in Uplift. I gotta say, I really don't think much of the jokers who write those. Seems like they're always getting new ideas for interesting side stories they want to chronicle, while the rest of us *really would like to know* just what happened on Totalia while they were gone. But hey, maybe that's just me.

Anyway, one thing you *didn't* see is that right after that parade, Shelley invited Tams and me over to the garage for a little Christmas surprise. Katie and Kandace had gone off to spend some quality holiday time with Kaylee, Rhianna and the rest of their families. Jenni and I were going to be eating Christmas dinner with Relena's family that evening, but we had a few hours to kill. So we headed on over in that direction.

*December 25, 157 A.L.*

The door to the central bay on the garage was open with light streaming out as we pulled up. Rochelle was inside, wearing a santa cap over her grease-smudged "Easy Fuse" coveralls as she pattered with something on a workbench. Rhianna was their main hardware gal, I knew, but Shelley had been putting in a lot of study time lately as well, with the design work she'd been doing on Uncia's new bods.

"Hey, you two! Come on in. Or, well, park in the driveway, I guess. It's a little cramped in here for someone your size. At the moment, anyway."

We pulled to a halt, and I clambered down from the cockpit. "So what's up?"

"Wanted to show you something I've been working on." She nodded to the workbench, on which what looked like several bundles of steel rebar were stretched out. Only, no, on closer look, the metal was too shiny and smooth to be rebar. In fact, it looked kind of like a hollow metal mannequin.

"What is...oh, *heeeey*." A small snow leopard who only came up about to Uncia's thigh padded out of the back of the workshop. "Is that what I

think it is? Another minima shell?”

Rochelle grinned at me. “You really *are* smarter than you look! Yeah, I figured that Crazy Joe and I have worked enough bugs out of the ones we’ve been using that we’re ready to trust other people with them. So Rhi’s been working on one for Paul and Fenris...and naturally, I thought of you two.”

Tammy folded back up into her Walker form, and poked her huge head into the garage to peer at the bench. “*That’s* a fully-functional DE shell? Really? It’s so very...not big.”

“Well, duh? It’s not the *size* that matters,” Uncia smirked, swishing her tail.

“Well, whether you call it *fully* functional depends on what functions you’re talking about,” Rochelle said. “It’s only environment-tight for a few minutes, and it doesn’t have its own Fuser nano tanks. But if you mean is it a genuine triple-mode capable suit that will give you a physical presence in rooms too small for your big fat kitty butt...why, yes. Yes, it is.”

“How does it work?” Tamarind asked. “I mean, I’ve seen you using yours, but never paid too much attention.”

“Well, pay attention *now*, double oh seven.” She held out her arms, and nodded to Uncia. The snow leopard’s fur winked out, leaving a skeletal wireframe cat behind. Then that cat unfolded itself and wrapped itself around Shelley, then the fur winked back on in a humanoid configuration. “Boom.”

I walked around them, examining the miniature Fuser from all angles. “And there’s really room for a core in there?”

“Yep! With some extra armor cladding to make up for the lack of an outer metal skin,” Uncia said. “It’s extra-snug.”

Rochelle turned back to the workbench and did something to the metal skeleton, and with a series of clicks and clacks it folded up into something like a large metal briefcase. “Anyway, it’s as ready as we can make it. The only thing we need to do is move your core over, and modify your big shell to let it dock. If you want to come by tomorrow, Rhi and I can take care of that. Or if you’d rather your Chromium people do it, I’ve made up a complete guide to calibration and such.”

I glanced to Tams. “Your body, your decision.”

Tamarind thought it over. “I think I’d be honored to have you two do the work. I’ll still want those guides for maintenance, though.”

“Of course.” Rochelle held out her arms again, and Uncia unfolded off her. This time, she turned into a sort of hoverboard floating underneath Rochelle’s feet. “Anything else you’d like to know while you’re here?”

“Well, since you ask...about how long can you wear the thing continuously...?”

*December 26, 157 A.L.*

So after that, we headed on over to Relena’s house, got together with folks there, swapped presents, ate turkey, yatta yatta, and a good time was had by all. Then we went back to the garage the next day, when Rhianna was available. When Tams reported in on what was going on, one of the Chromes from the local Marshal station had asked to come along as an observer. Nobody had any objections, and indeed the Marshals might well turn out to be a big customer when the minima tech went on the market. So a Chrome named Brannigan and his hare RIDE Bramble joined us and watched, and Rhi and Shelley were happy to talk shop with them while they worked.

The mods didn’t take long at all—Rhi said that as a general rule, the bigger the RIDE the easier it was, because there was more space available to use—and before you knew it, there we were.

And there Tammy was. Teeny teeny tiny Tammy. It was really kind of a weird experience for me. In the minima shell, she was just about the same size I’d been after Amontillado had made a lion out of me. It was almost like standing there looking at myself.

“This is a different perspective,” she mused. “You’re all suddenly a whole lot bigger. So this is what it’s like being inside a room, huh?”

“You’ve been inside plenty of rooms via hardlight projector, you know.”

“Yeah, but it’s not the same. So, wanna try this?”

I held out my arms the way I’d seen Rochelle do. “Sure, why not?”

So then she Fused onto me, and it was my turn for a new experience. I suddenly had all the same sensations of being wrapped up in and sharing brain space with another person...while still normal size, not twenty feet tall. “This is going to take some getting used to.”

“Here’s something else that might take some getting used to,” Rhianna said. “Since we were making the change anyway, we went ahead and put a tandem core system in that minima, with a blank for the second slot. Nothing says you ever have to use it if you don’t feel like it, but it’s there if you ever want to give it a try.”

I felt Tamarind’s puzzlement. “A tandem core? What’s that for?”

“It’s the kind of system body thieves use,” I said, feeling a little ill. “I could transfer me into that blank core, and then delete me from my implants. Then you could transfer you into my implants’ core structure and be me.”

“Body *swappers*,” Rochelle corrected me. “I already know of a few eager experimenters who’ve found they enjoy *willingly* trading off. Maybe you will, too. Or maybe you never touch it. Either way, you have the option now. You have the implants already, so you might as well.”

“Right,” I said. “Sorry. I’m just a little...oversensitive, I guess, given what people have done with my discovery. That poor doggie guy...”

“Perhaps we could try it sometime,” Tamarind said. “But only if *you* want to.”

I chuckled. “Well, I already *know* what it’s like being a RIDE. So if anyone should get to decide if we try it out, you should. But not while we’re in the middle of an assignment.” I nodded to Rhianna. “Thanks, I guess. It’s not something I’d have asked for, but...I guess it is nice to have the option.”

Rhianna nodded. “You’re welcome, then. So go ahead and put the new shell through its paces?”

You’d probably get bored if I spent the next three pages describing everything we tried out in detail, especially since I’m sure those other guys already covered all that when Uncia and Julius got their minimas, so I’ll sum up. It turned out to be a pretty handy little piece of kit. Not perfect—we did have a few suggestions for improvements right off the bat—and probably not the sort of thing Tams was going to want to spend much time

in, at least 'til she'd gotten used to the size differential. But it definitely had its points.

The biggest drawback was that Tammy's remote control of her big physical body was pretty rudimentary when we were out of physical contact with it. It just worked like a big remote control car, and that was all. Rhi explained that once DINcom was perfected, full RIDE operation via remote control would be perfect, but as it was they kept burning out so fast it was pointless to try for now.

On the other hand, with that thing on, we could actually eat and stuff without all that *Zootopia* awkwardness. For the first time, Tammy was able to really *enjoy* a Milk Bottle Mondae, rather than having to spend most of her attention making sure she didn't poke me in the eye with a spoonful of ice cream. I thought it was worth it just for that alone.

We also liked the way we could switch the hardlight over to imitating an only slightly bulkier than usual version of my leather jacket and badass longcoat Marshals uniform style. That would be useful for undercover work. And with that extra strength for reinforcement, we could up the power on my Desert Eagle gaussmatics so I could *really* put some holes in things.

Brannigan and Bramble were pretty impressed, too, between my trying out the new minima and Shelley and Uncia showing off the one they had. They told Rhi and Shelley in no uncertain terms that the Marshals would *really* like to discuss a bulk purchase whenever they were ready to gear up for mass production. Rochelle allowed as how good relations with the Marshals were something they valued a whole lot, and promised we'd be one of the first names on the list when that time came.

*January 2, 158 A.L.*

So, anyway, that was our Christmas. We spent a few more days with friends and family, rang in the New Year, then moseyed on back to Cape Nord come the second. By then, Iffy had been in touch, with the meeting scheduled for January fifth at a small coffeehouse out toward McKenna Street. So, with the date and time set, we started our preparations in

earnest.

Then I got a comm from Dell and Della asking me to stop by their office. I'd been keeping them apprised on the progress of our plans, of course, but it sounded like they had something specific they needed to discuss. So I headed on up to see them, with a newly miniaturized lioness by my side.

When we got there, Dell was behind his desk, with Della sitting nearby holding a tablet. They nodded as we came in. "Afternoon, Marshals," Dell said. "Looking a little smaller than usual there, Tams. Did you shrink in the wash?"

Tamarind rolled her eyes and chuckled. "You don't know *how* many times I've heard that line in the last week. What's up?"

"Well, it's like this. You've been doing a right fine job with the trainees, and we're really happy to hear that. But we did need to bring up a point or two 'bout the investigation you're running."

Della put in, "Make no mistake, we're happy about the results you've been getting. But concerning this operation you've got planned, we need to point out that you could step on a few toes with that if you don't clear and coordinate it with the local law. And we do kind of like staying on good terms with them."

Tammy snorted. "You do realize the women couldn't get 'em to do a damned thing about this problem they've been having, and that's why they sent for us?"

Dell nodded. "True enough. But this *is* Cape Nord; you know how important appearances are 'round here. If something does come of it, the Law won't take too kindly to being shown up by a bunch of women."

As the only non-Gold in the room, I definitely felt like I was out of my depth. But I was the nominal boss of my Seven, so I had to say something. "What do you need us to do, sir? Ma'am?"

"It's not a big deal, really," Della said. "Just let 'em keep up appearances. Go downtown and talk to someone in the Law 'bout your planned operation. Get their go-ahead, and make sure *they* know not to step on *your* toes by mistake."

"Point a' fact, I think that guy Selleck who's been working with the

Hellir bunch on their Show would be at just the right level of authority to okay it,” Dell said. “Gather you met him there, the day you got in.”

I shrugged. “If by ‘met’ you mean I said ‘howdy’ to him, and he grunted at me, I guess that’s right.”

“Maybe check with Desilu on the best way to approach him,” Della suggested. “Anyway, you should talk to him. Pulling data from fabbers is one thing, but actually setting up to run down a perp on his turf is something else altogether.”

Tammy nodded. “Well, the last thing we want to do here is make things harder for you after we leave. Want me to let Faye know she’s got the class for the rest of the day, Jeany?”

“Yeah, I think that’d be best. And comm Desi and see if she can meet with us on the way downtown.” I glanced to Dell and Della. “That work for you, sir, ma’am?”

“Sounds like it’ll work just fine,” Dell said agreeably. “Just let us know how things turn out.”

## CHAPTER 9

It was mid-afternoon by the time we got to McKenna Street. The Hooters was pretty empty, as the lunch rush had cleared out some time ago but the after-work crowd was still a couple hours away. There wasn't any trouble finding a corner booth.

Desilu was there waiting when we walked in. We had the minima shell on, projecting normal street clothes, but clearly Desilu's Integrate senses picked up on it right away. "Oh, I see you've acquired one of the same mini-shells Julius had when Joe Steader stopped by a few months ago. You know, those add a considerable degree of flexibility in costuming and even disguise. I could imagine some interesting roles becoming possible for the two of you." The wheels were clearly starting to turn as she fingered a much-gnawed pencil.

"That's great, and I'm sure it'll make for some interesting discussions down the road when we have more time. But we're here on business today, Desi."

Desilu smiled ruefully. "Of course. 'Focus, Desi, focus.' How has your investigation been coming along?"

We paused the conversation long enough to place orders—I had a small hot wing plate, while Desi had an iced tea—then I said, "Pretty well, actually. We've gotten at least one promising lead, and we're going to follow it up in just a few days."

Desilu raised an eyebrow. "Right about the time of the next 'sewing circle' meeting? That one's close by, so I was planning to attend."

I bit my lip. "Well...I don't really want to say much more than I have. We still don't know who's behind this—and even if the Integrate they're using isn't known to Hellir, there could still be a connection. They don't *seem* to know we're onto them yet, and keeping mum on what we're doing seems to be the best strategy right now."

She nodded. "I understand. But there was a reason you wanted to see me?"

"Oh, yes...well. It's been brought to my attention that if we want to

operate without stepping on any toes, we need to coordinate with the local Men in blue. And the name that came up is Willard Selleck...the guy we met briefly on the warehouse thing the other day. The Dells suggested I should see if you had any tips on how to approach him.”

Desilu blinked. “Oh. Oh, *my*.” She giggled. “I do hope you’ll allow us to use that footage, after the investigation concludes. To view it, at the least. I can only imagine how that conversation will turn out.”

That seemed to call for an eyeroll. “As bad as all that, huh?”

“Well...maybe not. Since he was confirmed as a True Nordsman, and is effectively beyond being scored by the Man Code, Selleck *has* loosened up considerably. All the same, he has his pride. Knowing him as I do, the explosion that will occur when he is faced with a fully accredited law officer who isn’t even old enough to drink yet, and female besides, could be legendary. I wouldn’t put it past him to refuse to cooperate simply because he can—especially given the low importance the Law Men put on the matter you’re looking into.”

“Oh, joy.”

Desilu smiled slyly. “But I *may* just have a trump card I can offer you. Listen...”

We continued the conversation over my wings and her iced tea. She had some pretty good suggestions, though I hoped we wouldn’t have to resort to some of them. Then, since we had the time, we discussed some other possibilities for subplots involving our Sevens, and possible alternate guest role options if I had the time.

I also discovered that eating in a minima shell meant I didn’t need napkins—to wipe my hands, at least. I just had to point my hands down at the plate and drop the hardlight gloves, and any grease or sauce that had been sticking to the hardlight just spattered right back onto the plate. Pretty nifty. I wondered if Shelley had ever thought about maybe patenting hardlight projector dining gloves? She could make a fortune.

Anyway, once we were done there, we hit the road for the police station downtown. The Cape Nord Police Department’s Main Precinct wasn’t hard to find, and it wouldn’t have been even without the signs. The

darned place looked nothing like any police station I'd ever seen. Glass, statuary, more columns than the New York Times's archives, fountains and reflecting pools, and so on. "The hell? What do they think this is, *Superfriends?*"

"Hey, I think they've added a few more fountains since last time I was here. Pretty impressive, don't you think?"

"Hmph. That's *one* word for it."

I reassessed my initial plans to leave all my sidearms and the minima shell with Tams in the parking lot and play it nonconfrontational. As this vast facade just reminded me, playing it nonconfrontational in Cape Nord was a good way not to get noticed, especially if you were female and expected to be nonconfrontational anyway.

So, I went the other way. Not only did I go the whole nine yards with the minima shell configured into my Marshals style uniform and my bright shiny copper badge right there on the breast, I made sure my guns were nice and polished and sitting in the holsters on my hips, then I added spare mags, handcuffs, mace, baton, and even a couple of flash-bang grenades from the weapons locker. I considered adding a couple of bandoliers with even more spare mags, but that would have been overdoing it. I was trying to come off as a supercop, not Pancho Villa.

Thus, so loaded I nearly jingled when I walked, I headed on into the precinct. When I stepped through the doors, if I'd been just any civvie packing that much heat, it would have been like that metal detector scene in *The Matrix*. Alarms everywhere. But one of the functions of the copper star was to broadcast my credentials via RFID.

So, before I'd gone two steps in the door, the building's master computer had done a quick query of the Marshals comps, determined I was a fully accredited law officer, and went, "Meh, seen better." Maybe a light lit up on someone's console somewhere, but if they sounded klaxons every time an armed cop walked into and out of a cop shop, they'd all have needed earmuffs. No one even so much as looked up when I entered. Which was fine with me. If they'd had an actual person on duty at the door, they might have had to challenge their Manly preconceptions of what a "law officer" was supposed to be, after all.

So, anyway, first hurdle crossed. Now for number two: the portly donut cop sitting at the reception desk, attention on one of the comm's display screens. *:Good God, he actually has cheetah tags. Seriously?:*

Tammy snorted. *:I'd love to know what came first...the choice of RIDE, or Crazy Joe doing that theatrical release of Zootopia last year.:*

Mr. Donut Cheetah Cop didn't look up, even when I approached nearly close enough to pluck the donut out of his hand. So I just unclipped my badge and tossed it onto the desk next to one of his monitors, which immediately lit up with the near-field download of my credentials and vital statistics. "Y'know, you oughtta pay attention. You never know when something unexpected might happen."

The cop glanced to the other monitor, glanced up, glanced back to the monitor, and stared at me for a moment, before saluting. "Uh...er...welcome to Main Precinct, Marshal Leroq! How can I be of service?"

*:Heh. That's gonna cost him some Man Card points, y'know...:* Tams said.

*:Well, he should have been paying attention.:* Aloud, I said, "I need to see Chief Selleck. He's not in a meeting right now, is he?"

"No, uh...but...that is..."

"Is he busy? I can wait..."

"Uh..."

Poor guy. Losing points by the second, he was. I took a little pity on him. "I'll just go on up." I nodded to him and headed for the elevator. Tams already had the right level from the station's on-line directory. A few moments later, we were standing in front of the door with the frosted-glass window reading "Chief Willard Selleck, JD, TN." There was kind of a discolored spot just to the right of the "TN." A closer look showed that the word "(pending)" had been scraped off.

*:Shall we beard the lion in his den?:* I asked.

*:Hmph. He ain't no lion, and really, we're more gonna sort of Manly stubble him in his office. Let's go.:*

So I pushed the door open and walked in. And there was the Man himself. He was in his shirtsleeves, with a shoulder holster on and his badge on his belt. At the moment, he was bent over his desk, fiddling with

papers, unlit cigar dangling from the corner of his mouth. He didn't even glance up. "I already bought six boxes of Thin Mints last week."

"Fraid you're got the wrong girl, Chief."

Then he looked up, and his eyes widened. "Who the sam hill are *you* supposed to be?"

Once again I pulled my badge off and slapped it down on the reader on his desk. "Copper Star Marshal Jeanette Leroq, Young Guns division." I could also have brought up the Gold Star RIDE who was accompanying me, but we'd both decided it was best not to confuse the issue.

He stared at me, then stared at his screen, then stared back at me. "This is legit? You're *really* a Marshal? It's not more Hellir play-acting foolishness?"

"Yes, it is and I am, and no it's not. We Marshals can take a joke as well as the next gal, but we take our credentials dead seriously." I retrieved the badge and put it back in place. "I needed to talk to you about a case."

Selleck crossed his arms and glowered at me. "Really."

"Yeah. The pranks someone's been playing at women's social club gatherings."

He snorted. "That nonsense? Just a bunch of foolishness. Boys will be boys."

"It may be penny-ante to you, but we were asked to look into it. And that also makes it a great training exercise for our cadets."

"Yeah? You shouldn't even be here, missy. This is Cape Nord's jurisdiction. We don't need outsiders coming around and poking their noses in."

"With all due respect, Chief, this involves Integrates, which could make it an inter-polity crime. Which would make it *our* jurisdiction. And we're better equipped to investigate Integrate activity anyway."

"Inter-polity? Hah. So what is it you want?"

I laid out our plans for a surveillance and sting operation to coincide with the next meeting. "With any luck, we should be able to get solid answers as to who's doing it and put a stop to it immediately."

"Are you kidding me? Mounting an operation like this in the middle of a city with untested amateurs? Do you know what sorts of things could

go wrong? No way! Not on my watch. If this is really so important, then let *us* do it. You could send an observer. But I'm not letting a bunch of teenage cop-wanna-bes run around causing havoc in my town!"

"We'll be happy to work with you to whatever extent we can to minimize any collateral damage, but this is our operation and we're the ones who are going to run it. We're not *all* teenagers here, and we respect the advice of our elders."

He crossed his arms and shook his head. "Nuh-uh. Nothing doing."  
*:Looks like we're gonna have to put "Operation: Henpeck" into play, : Tammy sent to me.*

I sighed inwardly. *:Yeah. Didn't wanna, but he's not leaving me any choice. Send it.:*

A couple of moments later, the comm on Selleck's desk started ringing. Selleck glowered at me again, looked at the comm, back at me, then did a double-take to the comm. "What in the...?" He picked up the handset. "Honey, I told you never to call me at...what? No, that's....how do you even *know* about...no...no, I *know* the couch is perfectly comfortable, but there's really no need...but...but...no, I mean...yes...yes..." As he listened, his jaw clenched progressively tighter—until he bit right through the cigar, and it fell in his lap. (Good thing it hadn't been lit.) He sighed. "Yes, dear."

He slammed the receiver down, then glowered at me with redoubled fury. "I don't know *how* you did it, but *that* was dirty pool. I just found out that if I don't give you whatever it is you want, I can look forward to a month of sleeping on the couch."

I managed not to look smug. "I'm sorry that was necessary, but I tried to be reasonable."

"What does my wife even *care* what you want?" he fumed. "It doesn't make any kind of sense!" He spat the butt of the cigar into his ashtray.

I considered. I wasn't sure how much it was safe to say to a Cape Nord Man, but I did kind of feel like I owed him something for having just brought the wrath of his wife down on him. "She probably owed a favor to some other woman who was affected by the pranking," I said. "I asked one of them for a favor before I came down here, so she probably called someone who knew someone until it got to your wife."

“Well, that’s just great,” Selleck grumbled, pulling another cigar out of his desktop humidior. “All right, fine. I don’t mind sleeping on the couch, but I’ll be damned if I do it for something *I* didn’t even do. What do you want.”

“Just what I said—a little cooperation. Help us set up our operation, and we’ll coordinate with you to step on the fewest toes.”

Selleck growled and scribbled something on the top leaf of a notepad, then tore it off and slid it across the desk to me. “That’s Lieutenant Jordan’s number. I’ll let him know what you need. Work through him, and don’t bug *me* anymore.”

“All right. Uh...and please tell as few people as possible about our op? We don’t know whether there’s a leak in your staff...”

He glared at me again. “Don’t teach your grandmother to suck eggs, kid. Now get the hel—*heck* out of my office.”

I knew about the non-inspection of gift horses’ dentition, so I beat feet while the getting was good. Best all around not to push our luck. (Though I won’t pretend I wasn’t tempted to poke my head back in and say, “While I’m here, did you want to buy some more Thin Mints?”) :*That went better than expected.*:

:*Yeah. Though you know, you owe Desi a favor now. I’m sure she’s already thinking up some clever subplot for us to use that minima shell in.*:

:*Ah, but I like Hellir play-acting. So that wouldn’t be a hardship.*: I chuckled. :*C’mon, let’s get on back to base and give the Dells the good news.*:

*January 4, 158 A.L.*

“Okay, here’s how it’s going to go down,” Tamarind said. As senior Marshal on the team, she’d taken charge of tactical planning of the operation once it had been finally approved. I didn’t mind, since it meant *I* wouldn’t personally be on the hook if something went wrong. Besides, she did have much more experience at this kind of thing. So, the rest of us listened attentively as she outlined where we were going to be and what we

were going to be doing.

Until she got to the part where the Cape Nord Seven's three human members, plus me, were going to be stationed in Guys and Dolls, a trendy nightclub just across the street from one of the fabberies we thought our mystery Intie would be. Relena and Jenni would be at a coffee shop near another one. Meanwhile, our RIDEs would be elsewhere, getting in position to tail the Intie after he or she was done fabbing and setting the traps.

"Wait," Marta asked. "Why aren't we gonna be with our RIDEs? And why are you planning to tail them instead of just nabbing them?"

"Firstly, this is an Integrate. They're *dangerous*, folks, and you three aren't even fully trained yet. We don't want to risk something happening to you. Jeanette's going to be along to keep an eye on you. Second, we want to put you in position to move in and secure the fabbers once they've been used, so we can keep the evidence as fresh as possible. We don't anticipate needing RIDEs for that."

*Keep an eye on them, huh?* I eyed Tammy suspiciously. Given Drake and Marta were already dating, this seemed suspiciously like a setup for a double date—especially given Relena and Jenni were going to be stationed somewhere else, rather than any of us.. Then Tams winked at me, and my suspicions were confirmed.

"As for why we're not going for the capture, it's like this," DeniFaye put in. "An Integrate can delete their own memories if they need to. For all we know, this one might have it macroed to a fast-time command, and they could wipe away any useful evidence instantaneously—and then what have we got? Just because this guy's been working on his own so far doesn't mean they've not got backup who hasn't stepped in yet so as to limit their exposure. If we can find out who this is *without* letting them know we're onto them, then we can put a watch on them, subpoena any useful digital records, and so on. Maybe we can even catch them meeting with co-conspirators, if any."

"So what're we supposed to do at the nightclub while we wait?" Jason asked.

"If you don't know what to do at a nightclub, maybe you're not the Man I thought you were." Faye grinned.

“Oh, y’know. Just...act natural. Dance, eat, drink, be merry—though do keep your drinks virgin even if you’re old enough for booze. You’ll be on duty, after all.” Tammy smirked. “And find a seat where you can keep an eye on the place across the street. Keep at least one pair of you there watching at all times.

“Oh, and there’s one more thing.” Tammy glanced at me. “Given that our seven has actually appeared on the news before, we’ve lined up a temporary biosculpt for Jeanette as a disguise.”

*What the...?* I blinked, then dropped into fast-time VR with Tamarind. “Now hold on just a minute here. This is the first *I’ve* heard about a temporary disguise!”

Tams gave me that same smug smirk. “I was keeping it for a surprise.” She showed me the specs for the biosculpt. There were some facial feature and skin tone changes, but the most notable “adjustment” was that it hewed to the Cape Nord standard of female beauty—a body shape every bit as cookie-cutter as the standard for female leads in Hollywood movies of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. I was fairly slim, even after going through puberty, and I liked me that way. But Cape Nord women...weren’t. (Just another sign that Men ostensibly ran things around there.)

I glared at her. “You were snooping on my conversation with Marta, *weren’t* you. You know what happened the *last* time I got ‘sculpted,’ right?”

Her face fell. “Oh. I wasn’t thinking of it that way. If you don’t want to, of course that’s fine. This is just a temporary biosculpt, using fast-dying nanos so it can be easily reversed. You certainly don’t have to if you don’t want to; it’s probably unlikely you’d be recognized in any event. I just thought you might find it fun to try a different look for a while.”

I pretty instantly felt bad at that. I knew Tammy still felt guilty about what her nanos had done to me under Amontillado’s influence. I certainly hadn’t blamed her for it, but she still blamed herself a lot. Reminding her of it had probably been a low blow. And anyway, it’s not as if *I* really regretted having been turned into a kitty for a while, since they’d gone ahead and changed me back.

“Meh. It was just a surprise is all. I guess I can stand it for one night. I guess I’m gonna use the Marshal base’s ‘sculpt chamber for this?’”

“Right, I don’t want to risk my Fusers messing it up. But I can change you back afterward myself.”

“All right, fine. When should I get started on it?”

“Soon as we finish the meeting, I expect. The program will take a couple of hours to finish.”

“Great. Guess I’ll catch up on my reading.”

Back in the real world, I had the satisfaction of seeing Jason stare at me, then blush. Well, I *think* he blushed. It was hard to tell with his skin tone. Apparently he’d just worked it out, too.

“Looks like Marta just got her double date after all,” I observed. True to form, the girl in question giggled. And Jason blushed harder. Or at least shuffled his feet a lot.

“The rest of us will be in position to follow the Integrate once they show themselves, switching off every few blocks. We’ll use hardlight disguises and transponder code changes to try to disguise the fact the same vehicles keep moving in on them.”

“You can follow him even if he’s invisible?” Drake asked.

“Very few Integrates can do *true* invisibility,” DeniFaye noted. “With most of them, the way they bend light around themselves can be noticed pretty easily if they’re moving against different backgrounds, like the buildings along a street. It’s just in the middle of a big featureless blank, like against the sky, that they really disappear. And guess what? You don’t *have* any sky in here.”

“Our sensors know what kind of patterns to look for. Once we find him, we should be able to keep track of him pretty easily,” Tams said.

“I hope you didn’t just invoke Murphy,” I said.

Tamarind snorted. “Oh, come on, that only happens in stories. This is *real life*.”

*Boobies!*

Or...Meditations for Two Hours in a Bodysculpt Coffin.

Seriously, that was the direction my thoughts turned to while my body for the evening cooked. I was getting a sculpt to match the Cape Nord ideal of feminine beauty, after all. Trying it out for a while was something of

a rite of passage for many tourists, though they did it in public ‘sculpt clinics rather than a private installation in a law enforcement headquarters, but the principle was the same.

And, needless to say, the Cape Nord ideal of feminine beauty included a considerable degree of what I considered *extra padding* in two particular areas. Nothing too extreme—it had to be said, the ideal was more or less perfectly proportioned to a given body type. Even though Zharus had been on the metric system since it was colonized, nonetheless the numbers “36-24-36” were well-known in these parts. (Probably in no small part thanks to that “Dirty Deeds” song, but still.) Somehow “91-61-91” just isn’t the same.

There was room for variation, though, which was good, because the temporary sculpt nanos only worked on soft tissue and, to a limited extent, cartilage. There wasn’t much they could do about my skeletal structure, and I was built along slimmer lines than the “traditional” Nordie gal. But *certain parts* were going to be a trifle larger than usual for a few hours.

And that was what led back to my meditation. Why the hell are Men so fond of breasts? They’re an erogenous zone, sure, but they’re not *their* erogenous zone. *They* don’t get any extra thrills out of them no matter what size they are on their partner. And it’s weird, but so many of the same Men who are fond of playing with them on someone else suddenly change their tune when they crossride and it’s their turn to haul that extra weight around.

I’d almost be tempted to crossride myself, just to see if it made any more sense when I actually had male parts and all that testosterone surging through my veins...but I have a sneaking suspicion it wouldn’t, and then I’d be stuck waiting three more years to change back.

What it all came down to was Men. They were the ones who decided how The Perfect Woman should look. If not the Men of Cape Nord now, the men (little-M) of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Hollywood who set the look down in celluloid for Crazy Joe Steader and his ilk to dig up and the Men in the Man Cave to latch onto. So, yeah.

And while the Men of the Cape weren’t going around *forcing* anyone to conform to their cockeyed vision of femininity—really, almost half the

women in Cape Nord *don't* conform in one way or another; the “majority” who do is really a rather slim one, and probably wouldn't be enough to get a law passed in whatever world or country's congress or parliament you care to consider—many Nordie girls and women think nothing of forcing *themselves* into that mold if they think it'll help them get ahead in the game. After all, it's not like it's hard to do or anything. There's a nano-sculpt clinic on almost every street corner.

But look at me, getting all over-excited about that stuff. Really, I should be happy that I live in a world where changing the shape of my body and the features of my face for an evening's entertainment (and, technically, my job) is a matter of just a couple of hours in a nano-chamber. In bygone centuries, people had to spend huge amounts of money and get their bodies all cut up and patched together again, just so they could fit themselves into someone else's unhealthy idea of a perfect body image. Here on Zharus, it hardly costs anything except a little irritation. But then, I guess nobody ever really appreciates how good they have it now compared to life in a time they've never personally experienced.

So, anyway, fulminating about boobies didn't take up all my attention during the two hour 'sculpt process. Really, I got it mostly out of the way after the first fifteen minutes or so. I spent the rest of the time going over the ops plans for the stakeout. I looked at them from every angle, analyzing the preparations that went into them, because I wanted to be able to do this for myself someday rather than rely on more experienced Marshals like Tams and Faye.

It seemed like there were a number of things that could go wrong, but given that we knew so little about what was going on, a plan like this was the only way to come across some much-needed information. And given that it *apparently* was a relatively minor matter, there didn't seem to be much point in investing the sort of worry into it that we would if lives were on the line.

So, finally it was done. Some wag had set the “process completed” sound effect to a clockwork egg timer “ding!” and so that's how I greeted my new look. I stepped out of the change coffin and peered at myself in the full-length mirror thoughtfully erected across from the door. Still same

height and same approximate build, though the chamber had added some padding all along my body, not just in the two most obvious parts. I guess I've always been a bit slimmer than the average. It's kind of funny, given that some people feel the Cape Nord standard of female beauty is anorexic itself, but I just have that sort of build. I suppose I'll probably plump up in middle age. Unless I decide to make some more permanent changes via biosculpt.

My skin tone was a little darker—bronzed, essentially, as if I spent my days on the beach, but without the skin-cancer-causing effects of UV. My face...ugh. They made me look like a goddamn Barbie doll, in my opinion. Dimples and everything. But that was the Cape Nord standard in effect. And whatever else you might say about it, it didn't look like the *real* me, which was the point of the exercise.

My hair was still jet black, but now it went all the way down past my waist. I tossed my head experimentally to see how it moved. I suppose the program left it the same so it could keep the shoulder-length locks I already had and just add to them. More length for the same amount of time. In any case, I usually keep my hair short because that way I don't have to bother myself with learning how to braid it or otherwise take care of it. I have other things to mess with. (If you get right down to it, I imagine I could probably have begged a shot of Shelley and Uncia's special Fuser nanos if I really cared to fuss with my hair. But it just wasn't all that important to me.)

*:So that's the new "you," eh?:* Tammy sent, piggy-backing my optic nerves through my implants to take a look. *:What do you think?:*

*:Meh,:* I sent back. *:It'll do for one night, I guess. But it's just not "me.":*

*:Maybe so. But I'll bet you give Jason a nosebleed.:*

I sent a "snort" emoticon. *:What do you think this is, an anime?:*

*:Well, we have the "giant robots" part down, so why not?:*

I headed out of the chamber room into the anteroom, which was set up as a private dressing room. There were some clothes laid out for me on the bed, sized appropriately to my new body: panties, a black dress, stockings, and black high heels. There wasn't a bra, but I discovered that

the dress was one of those skin-tight off-the-shoulders sorts that has that kind of upper chest support built in. I peered at the dress and high heels dubiously. “Really?” It was all more *girly* than I was usually accustomed to. I mean, I don’t have any trouble with girly stuff, sometimes, but it’s not something I go out of my way for. I usually dress practically, and a lot of these girly clothes are impractical for anything but looking nice.

But sometimes, I guess, it’s not so practical to be practical. I figured out how to put the stuff on. Happily, the dress included an automatic zipper, so I didn’t have to go find someone to zip me up. The high heels were a little awkward at first, but then I remembered I could download a skill chip for walking in them into my RI core, and from there sync it across to my grey matter. And boom! I was walking in them as if I’d been born to it.

Which isn’t to say everything felt completely natural. My weight being distributed in different places was giving me a bit of an awkward time adjusting to my new balance. Not just the new boobs, but there was also my hair. There must have been at least a kilogram of new stuff now hanging from the back of my head. If you spend ten years growing it out that long naturally, I guess you have time to get used to it gradually, but it felt kind of like a constant, low-grade tug backward, like someone was constantly pulling gently on my hair. It felt weird.

Last but certainly not least was a thigh holster where I could carry a small pulse pistol and my Marshals badge. If I needed it, I could get to it through an invisible zip-seal in the dress. I didn’t expect *to* need it, but better to have it for just in case. Better to have and not need, etc.

After I finished dressing, I stepped back to look at myself in the full-length mirror again. You know how they say “you won’t know yourself”? Well, it was true: right then, I *didn’t* know myself. But then, it wasn’t exactly my first experience getting stuck in a body that didn’t look right. And at least it was just for one night this time. Maybe Tams was right, maybe it *could* be fun to try being someone else for a while. I guessed I’d just have to see.

## CHAPTER 10

“Lookin’ good there, pard!” Tammy said cheerfully as I stepped out of the barracks.

“Hmph. You don’t wanna *know* what *I* think I look like.” My heels clicked on the pavement as I headed over to the truck and climbed into the cab. “The others already headed out?”

“Yeah, they’ll be waiting for you at the club. I’ll drop you there, then get into position for the op.”

“Right.” I crossed my arms. The gesture felt weird, now, with all the extra chest material getting in the way. I uncrossed them and let them fall to my sides again. “You really think this is a good idea?”

“If you’re going to be a Quantum, you need to get used to the idea of going undercover. I’ve seen a lot more extreme ‘sculpt disguises than that in my time.”

“Maybe, but this all feels a little gratuitous. It’s not as if there’s really even anything to be undercover *from*. This is just a way to stick us kids somewhere ‘safe’ while you all go off and do something risky.”

“Any practice situation where you know it’s not real will seem ‘gratuitous,’” Tammy said. “But that’s what practice is. Doing it when you know it’s not real, so you’re used to going through the motions for when it is.”

“I still think this is all just a big excuse for playing matchmaker ‘cuz you think we’d make a cute couple.”

Tamarind chuckled. “Maybe that’s just a fringe benefit.”

A few minutes later, we pulled in at the “Guys and Dolls” dance club. The facade paid lip service to the golden age of Hollywood, but happily things were more modern on the interior. There was a bar along one wall of the dim club room. A dance floor in the middle was surrounded by tables, their built-in holographic projectors showing videos or just pulsing in time to the music. The tables across the dance floor from the bar were positioned against plate glass windows looking out onto the street. The three cadets were waiting at one of the tables there.

“Enjoy yourselves, and keep your comms tuned!” Tammy said. “See you later.”

I headed over to the table where the others were waiting. “Hey, you lot.”

Marta looked up. “Jeanette? Is that you? Ooooh, you’re *gorgeous!*”

“I guess our ‘sculpt tank does good work, huh?” I rolled my eyes. “Well, here I am, then.”

“Great!” Marta turned to Drake. “C’mon, hon, let’s get up and dance, and let these two get to know each other better!” She giggled and got up, taking Drake by the hand.

“Uh, guess I’ll see you later?” Drake said, and let Marta drag him away. A moment later, I was alone at the table with Jason.

Jason looked up. “So, hi there.”

I slid into the seat across from him. “Yeah, hi. So...what do you think of the temporary ‘new me’?”

He gave me a long, thoughtful look. “There’s not really any safe answer to that question.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if I say I like the ‘new you’ better, I’m a shallow sexist creep, and if I say I prefer the ‘old you’ then I’m ungrateful for the effort you put in to change it.” He grinned. “So I think I’m just going to have to say you look really nice either way, and not express a preference. Definitely a nice dress, though.”

“Well, thanks for that, anyway.” I tried to figure out what to do with all this hair I now had. Let it hang down over the back of my chair and brush the floor? Or put it in my lap? I decided on the latter, just because it wouldn’t pick up dirt that way. “So what do Cape Nord people do on their nights out?”

“About the same kinds of things as people anywhere, really.” Jason chuckled. “Some drinks, some dancing...though not so many drinks for us, given that we’re on duty and all...”

“And I’m not 18 yet. But anyway, here we are.”

“Yep, here we are.” Jason glanced off toward the dance floor and I followed his gaze, to where Drake and Marta were dancing together. Or at

least “together” in the sense of “across from each other,” as the music playing right now was club dance—“Dare” by the Gorillaz, not the sort of thing meant for dancing arm in arm.

“Those two seem to be enjoying themselves.”

“They do get along pretty well, don’t they?” Jason chuckled.

“You think there’s anything serious there?”

“How do you define ‘serious’?” Jason shrugged. “I think they enjoy each other’s company a lot. Don’t know if they’re ‘in love’ or anything, but as long as you don’t do anything stupid about it, you don’t have to be.”

“Mmm.” I nodded. “From how smirky everyone’s being, it feels like they think you and I are supposed to be ‘enjoying each other’s company,’ too.”

“Well, that is the cover story, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said, giving him a hard look. “It is.”

He raised his hands. “Whoa, you don’t think *I* had anything to do with it, do you? This was a surprise to me, too. Though I suppose it probably shouldn’t have been, given Marta.” He rolled his eyes. “She *likes* to matchmake, that one.”

I sighed. “Yeah, and I suspect Tams is *just* as bad.” I rolled my eyes. “But I shouldn’t take it out on you. Anyway, at least for this op we’re basically at the same rank, so it’s not as if there’s a chain-of-command issue. I guess we should just try to enjoy ourselves.”

“Yeah. And you never know, maybe we’ll fall in love by the end of the night or something.” He grinned. “But I won’t hold it against you if we don’t.”

That provoked a snort from me. “Gee, thanks.”

As the song currently playing ended, he got up and offered me a hand. “We’ve still got time before we have to have someone stationed here to keep a lookout. What you think, wanna go enjoy ourselves?”

“Uh...sure, I guess.” I took his hand and got to my feet, letting my hair fall back down behind me.

He raised an eyebrow, noticing my hesitation I guess. “Something wrong?”

“Well...I guess it’s just that I’ve never actually *been* clubbing before.

Until a year or so ago, I was in an orphanage...and after that, I was living in a lion in Alpha Camp. The little niceties of civilization like this have kind of escaped me up 'til now."

"Don't worry, it's easy once you get the hang of it." He chuckled. "It's largely a matter of pretending you know what you're doing."

"Well, I'm an undercover Marshal, so I guess pretending *should* be something I'm good at."

"If you don't want to, that's fine. I'm the last guy to try to force anyone to do anything they don't feel like."

"Nah, I'm good. I'll try anything once!"

"Then c'mon, let's hit the floor."

We got onto the floor just in time for the music to shift to a slow dance—Smokey Robinson's "One Heartbeat at a Time"—so it was arm-in-arm time. The bright side was that, at least with all the skill chips I'd internalized, I didn't have the excuse of not knowing how to dance. But on the downside, with all the skill chips I'd internalized, I didn't have the excuse of not knowing how to dance.

It was a little awkward, nonetheless. This was, after all, the first time I ever actually *had* danced with anyone. And just because my feet knew the steps didn't mean the rest of me was used to doing this sort of thing. But maybe the most disturbing thing was that after the initial awkwardness passed, I found I rather enjoyed it—being there with a handsome male body close and warm against mine. In that moment, I could sort of see the attraction of the whole Cape Nord woman thing.

"So..." I murmured as we moved. "Is there some particular way I'm supposed to act? Something I'm supposed to do to make it look like I'm from here?" As we turned, I caught a glimpse of Marta and Drake over Jason's shoulder. "Good God, I hope I'm not supposed to be acting like *that*." Marta was really playing up the girliness thing—cooing, giggling, simpering. It was like she was an entirely different person from the level-headed Marshal who I'd watched shoot second place in our combined squads on the firing range.

Jason chuckled. "Didn't Iphigenia Rose tell you that women can act

pretty much however they want to? It's we *Men* who have to chafe under restrictive codes of conduct—that we make for ourselves, so who knows; maybe they *are* the sensible ones.”

“If that's the case, why's *she* acting like *that*? It's like she's setting the clock of women's lib back by several centuries.”

“Well, that's the other side of the coin. If you're free to act however you want to, you're free to act however you *want* to.” Jason shrugged. “Maybe this is just her way of blowing off the steam she doesn't get to when she's keeping her Marshals self-discipline.”

“I guess I can see that.” What I couldn't see was why anyone would *want* to act that way, but I guess it's the old different-strokes-for-different-folks thing.

Anyway, we danced a couple of songs, then Marta tapped me on the shoulder. “Let's let the boys take up watch at the table and you and me go powder our noses, shall we?”

I didn't personally feel like my nose particularly needed any buffing, but she was the native here and I was the outsider, so why not. When in Cape Nord, after all.

So I followed her off the dance floor to a “powder room.” Like a ladies' room, only a good bit swankier. In addition to the section with toilets and stuff, there was also a section with a lit mirror and seats. It seemed to be a fairly un-busy time of the night, as we were the only people in there at the moment. So we took seats near the end, and Marta dug out a compact, unfolded it, took a powder brush out, and so help me she actually *did* powder her nose.

I blinked at her. “Seriously?”

“What, you didn't bring any cosmetics? There's a vending fabber right over there.” She nodded at the wall, where the appliance was disguised as a somewhat more feminine version of those condom vending machines you used to find in men's rooms. “Never underestimate the utility of a good nose powdering.”

“My nose is just fine, thank you.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself.” She examined herself in the mirror,

nodded, and put the brush and compact away. “So, what do you think of Jason? Dances pretty well, don’t you think? Of course, he is a Geek, so naturally he’d have memorized all the dance steps...”

“We’re having a good time, if that’s what you mean...”

She giggled. “Same here, in fact! Drake is *such* a hunk. It’s fun to daydream about how I might help bolster his career in the Marshals, then after a few years when we resign, I can take up my duties as a Cape Nord housewife and stand behind my Man as he builds on his Marshal rank by running for the City Fathers. I help him land the position, and then my own rank in the Sewing Circle is assured.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that just a little, y’know, *mercenary*?”

“It’s just *daydreaming*, silly. I can daydream about whatever I want to.”

“Yeah, but I mean, is there any reason why you *wouldn’t* follow through with that, in the longer term? It sounds an awful lot like what the women in the Sewing Circle said about how they got to where they are.”

She shrugged. “Well, maybe Drake and I don’t hit it off down the road. If he turns out to be a big jerk after all, I’m not gonna stick with him just for the sake of my own ambition. I mean, where’s the fun in *that*? There are plenty of nice guys out there.”

“And if you *do* hit it off?”

“Well, if we do, and he’s agreeable to running for the City Fathers, why not? But I’m not gonna force him to do anything he doesn’t want to do. If we ever get to that point, we’ll talk about it.” She shrugged. “Really, we’re actually *not* all evil manipulative bitches here. Even if sometimes we *pretend* we are, because it’s fun to pretend. But you have to know where the line is between pretending and real life.” She peered into the mirror, adjusting a lock of hair that had fallen out of place. “Really, I think that’s the whole problem with Sturmhaven. Nearly all the Valks, and some of the Gaias and even the Athenas—they take it much too seriously. They’ve forgotten that they’re supposed to be *playing a game*, for the sake of having a good time. What’s the point of letting it take over your entire life and keeping you from being the person you want to be?”

I could see her point, but something about it didn’t quite ring true.

“Isn’t that what the Men here do too, though? Taking a silly game too seriously? With cards and points and all that?”

“Well, sure—but they’ve got us women to kick them in the nads when they need it, because we’re secretly the ones in charge. Or at least we *pretend* we are, and it amuses the Men to honor that pretense. So, if the Men go too far, we can usually drag them back into line.” She nodded, then turned to grin at me. “But what ‘mere male’ in Sturmhaven could stand up to a Valk without getting his own nads cut off and fed to him?”

“I suppose you’ve got a point there.”

“Of course I do. I’m a woman, so I’m always right.” She winked. “Well, let’s get back to the table and see what trouble those silly boys have gotten themselves into without us there to keep them in line.”

We headed back out toward our chosen table. The dance floor was clearing off, as the DJ was taking a ten-minute break so people had a chance to relax and chill for a bit. And that was why it was clear enough that I noticed the new arrivals as they walked into the room.

I’m not sure what it was about them that caught my eye. Maybe it was just that I happened to be looking that way at the moment. Either way, I did happen to see them. There were three young men, and they were dressed like what the Man Card literature calls “Young Turks.” Basically a specialized sort of teenage Tough Guy, based on idealized Hollywood depictions of street gangs. Really, it was kind of overdone. I halfway expected them to start snapping in unison and singing “When You’re a Jet.” (Would that make me Officer Krupke? Feh, Cape Nord makes my head ache when I think too hard about it.)

Anyway, the big thing that caught my attention was one of them was showing the other two something on his comm—and they were looking in the direction of our table, where Jason and Drake were sitting and watching the street. And then the three of them started moving in that direction.

I gave Marta a quick tap on the shoulder. “Something’s up with those three.”

She glanced at me. “What should we do?”

“Hmm...I’ll take the lead, but be ready to back me up.” I leaned right

and forward, swinging that ridiculous mane of hair around to hang down my right side—quite handily covering the zip-seal in my dress. *Huh, maybe there is a good use for all this hair after all.* I slipped my badge off the holster strap and passed it to my left hand, but didn't draw the gun yet. One of the first things Tams had driven home to me was that you don't escalate as your first step.

We didn't hurry, so we were just wandering up as the threesome loomed over the table. "...think you're in our spot," the lead tough guy was saying. He had a leather vest, spiky brown hair and an earring in the heterosexual ear. He was the one who'd been showing the comm to the others.

Drake looked up, and snorted. "Yeah? No reserved tables, bucko. And there's plenty of empties. Why don't you just mosey on?"

"But we want *this* table," the second guy said. I mentally tagged him as "Beavis" because he had blonde hair and that same kind of weaselly look about him.

The third guy was bigger and dumber-looking than either of the first two. Sort of a Drake-in-the-making, I guess. He just smacked a fist into a palm and said, "Youse guys don't want any *trouble*, right?" Yeah, that's right. He actually said "Youse." Too many Warner Brothers cartoons in his upbringing, I guess?

So, when in Cape Nord, do as the Cape Nordies do, right? So I put on my most winsome (and probably most phoney) smile as I sauntered up. "Scuse me, boys, but this *is* our table too, and we *like* this table. And we were here first. Why don't you take one of the other ones?"

And here the guy favored me with one of those classic Cape Nord smarmy mansplaining smirks. "Well, now, we never said *you* couldn't keep right on sitting here. Why don't you ditch these losers and hang with us?" Behind his back, I saw Marta rolling her eyes and doing the classic "gag me" finger-in-mouth gesture.

It didn't look like I was going to get anywhere with the polite approach. So I held up the badge in my left hand. "All right then, how about this? As a duly appointed Gondwana Federated Marshal, I'm asking you to get off our backs."

The guy snorted. “What cereal box did you get *that* out of? You’re a bit young to be a Marshal, miss.”

So I slapped the badge down on the table, where the built-in near-field reader grabbed the credentials and the projector threw them up in the air. Name, badge number, file photo, et cetera. I was interested to see that the photo now featured my current look, not my pre-sculpt. I guess that was a benefit of using a sculpt tank hooked into the Marshals network. “Yeah, I *am* a bit young. That’s why they call us the Young Guns. You wanna tell us who commed you asking you to come over and hassle these guys?” Under the hair, I moved my right hand to my gun, just in case I’d need it.

It was a little hard to tell under the dim club lights, but it looked like the guy’s face lost several shades of tan. “Uh...ya know, I think this wasn’t our table after all. We’ll just be...going somewhere else now.”

“Yeah, you do that,” I muttered, as they moved on and I put my badge back under my dress. As an afterthought, I triggered my implants to reach out and hack the guy’s comm. It wouldn’t be useful as evidence, but at that point I just wanted any clue I could get as to what was going on. It was pretty clear someone *had* sent the guy a picture and told him where we were gonna be, and not a lot of people were even privy to that information.

And I had it before he was even halfway across the room. An email from an anonymous remailer service, with photos of Drake and Jason on the street outside the club—shot with an extreme telephoto lens, looked like. Could have been taken from anywhere, including a drone or skimmer car in mid-air. There was a directive to pick a fight with them, and a payment code for a few hundred *mu* in an anonymous cyber-currency. *Well, isn’t that sweet?*

Of course, that naturally led to the question, why them? And the natural supposition was that someone, somewhere, had found out about our involvement—and our plan to keep an eye out for trouble tonight. And that, in turn, might spell trouble for the other half of the operation.

I quickly pinged my implant and sent a comm call. *:Tams, I think we’re blown.:* I included a quick memory summary of what had just happened. *:Someone knew we were going to be here. In light of that, I don’t know if they’re even going to continue with the sabotage op at all if*

*they know we're watching for 'em.:*

*:That's a good point, but we also don't know they won't,:* Tammy replied. *:Keep on keeping an eye out, and comm me if anything else turns up. I'll let you know if anything happens out here.:*

That seemed to be about the best I could hope for under the circumstances. I told the others what Tams had said, and showed them the email I'd gotten from laughing boy's comm.

Drake snorted. "Well, that's great. So we don't even know if we're needed here anymore?"

Marta frowned. "If that's the case...if the saboteurs have maybe changed their plans...don't you think you'd better let Iphigenia Rose and the other women know? Because I think this shows not only do the bad guys know we're on the case, they also know where we are right now. Which also means they also know where we *aren't*."

"You think they might escalate to an actual physical threat?" I asked.

"Honestly, I don't know *what* they'll do. But y'know, this seems like a lot more than just 'boys being boys' now."

I nodded. She was right. Really, I should have thought of that myself. I had my implant place a call to the private comm line Iffy had given me... and it rang and rang and went to voicemail. "That's weird. I'd think Pandora would have picked up if Iffy wasn't available..."

Marta's eyes narrowed. "You're right; as a RIDE, Pandora should be always available. Unless she's indisposed..."

"Okay. New plan. We're going to head to the Rosebriar Building. I'll comm Tams and have the others meet us there with our gear. Maybe it'll just be Pandora had her ringer off...but somehow I don't think so."

**CHAPTER 11**

As we headed out to the front, I commed Tams again. “Pick us up and let the others know to meet us at Rosebriar. Something’s up, and I don’t like it.”

“Will do. Should be there in a...what the—?” There was a crash of static.

“Tams? You okay?”

I had a heart-stopping moment or two before she answered. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. Someone just kamikazed an empty air car at me. Missed me, but there’s a big traffic pile-up and I need to hold down the scene until the cops get here. You all better take a cab. I’ll catch up to you.”

“What about the others? If they hit us and you, there might be more ambushes in store.”

“I’ve already warned them to stay off the streets. We’ve got access to the maintenance tunnels and other hidden passages where they’ll find it harder to get at us. See you at Rosebriar.”

I commed for a cab as Marta caught up to us. Somehow she’d found the time to braid her hair and tuck it out of the way. “How did you do that so quickly?”

“My hair? Oh...practice. Lots and lots of practice. Something you learn, growing up in Cape Nord. You never learned?”

“Not really. Grew up in an orphanage, never had anyone to show me, and didn’t usually have my hair long enough it was an issue.”

“Hmm. Well, let me take care of that for you for now. I can teach you myself later.” She moved behind me and took my hair into her hands.

“I dunno if there’ll be a ‘later’ for that. I was thinking of getting it lopped off again tonight or tomorrow.”

“After you only just grew it out? Seems like a waste to me. You should try it for a while and see what you think.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially, so as not to carry to Drake and Jason. “And Men just love playing with the stuff. It’s like petting a cat or dog for them, I guess. I know you said you’re not in the market for romance right now, but even so, it’s

another weapon in the arsenal.”

Her hands moved my hair back and forth as she started braiding it. I wished I had one of my drones so I could see how she was doing it. Or at least a couple of mirrors or something. She worked fast—even as long as the stuff was, she was halfway done by the time the cab arrived.

The boys took the front and Marta and I got in back, and she sat next to me and continued as we headed off up the street. At least now I could see what she was doing, since she’d gotten far enough down to hold it in her lap while she worked. Her hands moved quickly and surely as she wove three locks of hair between and around each other, like she was making a rope. “Wow, you really are good at that.”

She smiled. “Like I said, practice. It’s like riding a bicycle or tying your shoe. After a while, you get to where you can do it by feel.”

“I think I will have you walk me through it a little later, when we’ve got more time. Right now, though—thanks for helping me get it out of the way.”

“No problem at all.” She pulled a few hairpins out of a pocket, and then coiled the braid up and pinned it into place on the back of my head. “There...that’ll keep it from getting caught on anything. And most RIDE helmets can adjust to make room.”

I had to chuckle. “Not too much of a worry, when your RIDE’s the size of Tammycat.” I moved my head back and forth experimentally. The added mass of braid on the back changed the center of gravity in a way I wasn’t used to, but I thought I could adapt. And more importantly, it wouldn’t get in the way or get caught on anything if we saw action.

“Right, so!” I said, speaking louder. “Did everyone bring their badge and a sidearm of some kind?” There were general affirmative responses. “Good. Any other specialized equipment?”

“Just my Leatherman,” Drake said.

“I’ve got a small tool wallet I never go anywhere without,” Jason said. “It’s a Nerd thing.”

“I’ve got my makeup kit!” Marta said.

“And hairpins, obviously.”

She nodded. “Obviously. I’m pretty good at picking locks with them,

too, by the way.”

“Handy talent to have. Well, it’ll have to do until our RIDEs catch up with us.”

The cab pulled up in front of the Rosebriar Building and let us all out. I pulled my badge off the thigh strap and pinned it to the front of my dress as we entered, and noted the others putting theirs on as well. So when we stepped up to the front desk, the security receptionist glanced up at the badges and nodded. “Marshals—did the cops send you? We just called them...”

“No, we came on our own,” I said. “We tried to contact Iphigenia Rose but weren’t able to get through to anyone, and thought something might be up. What’s going on?”

He scratched his head. “Not rightly sure, to be honest, ma’am. We’ve lost contact with all our security stations and staff above the 45<sup>th</sup> floor, none of the businesses or offices we’ve commed up there have answered back, the elevators aren’t responding, and we haven’t heard back from anyone we sent up the stairs either.”

“That seems suspicious,” Drake observed.

Then all our heads turned as we heard a “DING!” Marta was over by the elevators—she hadn’t come to the reception desk with us, so she hadn’t heard what the guard had said. “Hey, guys, I’m gonna go on up and see what’s up in Iphigenia’s office!” she called, as she stepped into an open elevator.

“Marta, wait—!” I began, but I was too late. The elevator door *slammed* shut immediately after she had crossed the threshold, and the indicator started ticking upward at express speeds. “Well, crap,” I muttered. “I am so putting a black mark on her evaluation for that one.”

Jason had his tools out and the elevator switch plate off in a matter of seconds. Meanwhile, I reached out to the building computer with my implants and entered the Marshals override code. That should have granted me full access to all building functions, including the elevator, but instead I got an implant display full of “LOCKED OUT” notifications.

Of course, I *am* one of the best hackers in the Marshals, but hacking takes time—even at fast-time speeds. And speaking of which...

*:Tams, we need you here pronto. Are you on your way yet?:*

*:I want to be, but these cops seem to have some other ideas.:* She favored me with an eyeroll emoticon.

*:The situation just got worse. Get up here, and let Dell and Della field any complaints.:* I sent her a quick memory burst of the last couple of minutes.

*:...she did what? Seriously? Right, I'm on my way. And the others should be there within a few minutes, too.:*

*:Got it.:* I turned to the guard. “Show me where the building ‘frame is hosted. I’m going to need direct access to the hardware. Jason, do what you can from here and let me know if anything happens. And if another elevator shows up, *don’t* go in.”

“What’re we gonna do?” Drake asked. “We can’t just...let them take her!”

“We’ll do as much as we can. But we can’t do a whole lot without the others. Wait out front for them, fill them in on what’s happened, and have Tams send her mini-shell down to the computer room when she arrives.”

He saluted. “On it, ma’am.” Then he headed for the door, though not without throwing one last glance over his shoulder to where Jason knelt by the elevator door.

The guard led me down a couple flights of stairs to a security door with “authorized personnel only” signs. His badge didn’t open the electronic lock, but fortunately there was a keyed backup, and he had the key to get it open. The building’s main computer was there, as well as a few terminals. Technicians were fussing over a couple of them, but the one at the end was free, and when they saw my badge they gave me a wide berth.

I slapped my comm into the interface, and used the near-field link from my implants to get into the system. It was about as I’d expected. Not only was it locked down tight, there were signs of Integrate “dandruff” from at least three individuals. One of them was on record in the Hellir database, but registered to someone on the IT staff in this building, so they *probably* weren’t involved—but I made a note to check up on their location anyway, just in case they were serving as an “inside man.” The others were

unknowns, though one of them was the same one that had shown up at the fabberies.

Luckily for me, it's not like it was in the old days before DINsec. Inties aren't magical, once you take away the advantage of their basic nature. There are a few talented hackers there, but most of them are effectively script kiddies. There are even ways to hack Integrates themselves, if you have access to the hardware, as I learned from Rose and Nora out at Alpha Camp.

Not as luckily, though, a cursory examination showed I was up against one of those few talented hackers this time. But that was okay, because *I'm* talented, too. And thanks to the implants, I was one of relatively few human hackers who could also hack at fast-time speeds. (Of course, given how far and wide "RIDE-sharing" has spread, there are probably thousands and thousands of fast-time human hackers by now. Sometimes I look at me in the mirror and think I have *so* much to answer for. But I digress.)

The first step, obviously, was to secure access to the physical hardware. If the Integrate wasn't *right here in this room*, he had to be tapped in via one of the building's comm lines. And there were ways to disable their access in the hardware. A quick check of the computer's manual and I found the dip switch panel that shut those conduits down. I was just opening the panel and flipping the switches as a pocket-sized lioness padded into the room.

"Hey, pard. Nice do. What's the sitrep?"

"Oh, you know, same-old same-old. Part of the building's under control by nefarious forces, and they apparently just abducted my hairstylist." I held out my arms for Tams to Fuse over, which she did. True to Marta's words, she was able to adjust the helmet to make room for the extra mass on the back of my head. "First step is to lock this computer down—which I'm working on right now." I flipped the last of the switches with one of Tamarind's claw-tips.

"Right. Now that we've locked the bad guys out of this, let's see if we can get the elevators back on...wait." As I turned my attention back to my own connection to the 'frame, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck start to

prickle. Whoever this enemy hacker was, I *hadn't* locked him out after all. Which, by the process of elimination, could only mean—

“Everybody, *hit the dirt, now!*” I called to the other technicians, as I pulled the heavy-duty plasma blasters mag-clamped to Tamarind’s hips. It took them a couple of seconds to recognize I really meant it, but then they dived for cover. And Tams cranked up the sensor package on the minima, looking for the first time into the dark corners of the room.

“Well, well. You’re smarter than you look.” A shimmer of air stepped out from behind the mainframe, resolving into...a lynx Integrate. He was wearing a saffron yellow robe, like he was some kind of zen mystic or something.

“You’re one to talk about looks, going around wearing a bathrobe,” I said. “You’re under arrest. You have the right to remain—” I was interrupted by the necessity to dodge an energy blast he sent our way, which left a fairly large hole in the wall behind us.

“I think not,” cat-boy smirked. “Really, you think you can tangle with the likes of me, wearing just that little tin-foil raincoat? You’ve got spirit, I’ll give you that.”

We rolled behind one of the consoles, more for the visual cover than any expectation it could protect us from a blast like that, and came up shooting. “If your next words are that you *like* a girl with spirit, there’s going to be some police brutality in the offing.”

The lynx raised one hand and deflected the shots, like he was some kind of furry Darth Vader or something. With the other hand, he stifled a yawn. “Really, I expected a little better level of repartee from one of the vaunted ‘Young Guns.’” He fired another blast back at us, which we again barely dodged. The property damage was really starting to mount up.

I frowned, and sent to Tams, *:We need to lure him out of here. They won't thank us if we totally fry their mainframe with a stray shot. That thing's expensive.:*

*:On it. And I got reinforcements coming.:* Tammy fired off a couple more blasts, then threw us into a backward roll that took us through the hole he’d blown in the wall behind us. We crouched and fired again, keeping the aim to where the big computer wasn’t in the direct line of fire.

“Give it up!” I yelled. “You’re completely surrounded. There’s no way you’re walking out of this.”

The lynx sneered. “I don’t have to walk. I’ve got lifters; I can *fly* out of it. But not before I pot at least a couple of nosy Marshals...”

“*Rrrreally* not cool, *brrro*,” Katie said. Fused with Relena, she was standing in the entrance across the room, pulse gun at the ready. “Mom is going to be *so* disappointed in you, *Rrreggie*.”

“And, for a wonder, so is your Dad.” That was Kandace. She and Jenni were behind one of the holes he’d blown in another wall. “If you’d asked a few months ago, I wouldn’t have thought it was possible to give *Fritz* a bad name. Worse one than he’d made for himself, anyway. But at least he’s *trying* to clean up his act.”

And with a shimmer, DeniFaye faded into visibility inside the room, right behind the lynx—Reggie, Katie had called him. “I get a line here, too,” she said, before grabbing Reggie in a headlock.

“Nngh!” Reggie grunted, squirming for a moment before grabbing Faye’s arm and throwing her over his shoulder with a judo move. “You know what? Screw this noise.” He threw something to the ground, and there was a bright flash, followed by a lot of static. When my vision cleared again, the lynx was gone.

“Ow!” Kandace yelled. “The hell was that?”

“Intie-tech EMP flashbangs,” Faye got slowly to her feet, rubbing her eyes. “Is everyone okay?”

“I think so.” The number of spots dancing before my eyes were gradually fading, and I could see the technicians helping each other up. Luckily, they hadn’t caught any stray blasts, but they weren’t exactly interested in staying around. I couldn’t blame them. I shook my head, but that didn’t seem to clear it any faster. Then I replayed events of the last few moments, and caught something. “So, you...know that guy?”

“*That* was my *jerrkass* brotherrr,” Katie said. “Kandi’s nephew. Anotherrrr memberrr of the lost litterrr who turrned up last yearrr.”

“Integrate and overall bad seed,” Kandace added. “He’s following that Intie superiority group that popped up after we put away Fritz.”

“Oh, of course.” Now it was Tams’s turn to shake our head. “I

should've realized. He was in the appendices on Fritz's personnel file. Well, I guess we *know* Appa is involved in all this now."

"Then we'd better go shut the rest of it down." Faye frowned at the computer. "Is that thing still on-line? Can you get the elevators back on?"

"It is, and I can, but I don't think we should trust them." I pulled up the hacking interface and verified that, in Reggie's absence, it was now fully clean. "Just because they can't control them doesn't mean they haven't booby-trapped them or set up an ambush. And they've taken all the security cams in the affected floors offline."

"Great. What're we gonna do?" DeniFaye rolled her eyes. "We don't want to let this devolve into a hostage situation."

"Appa's crowd don't really seem to be the sort to take hostages," Tammy said. "They tend to go in more for grand gestures. I'd expect them to set up bombs to blow the top off the Rosebriar Building before I'd expect a hostage situation."

"And isn't *that* a cheerful thought," Relena said.

"I've put in a call to the Marshals for reinforcements, but this could be time-critical. We're gonna have to go with what we've got," Tamarind said. "The good news is, we're not seeing any indication they're here in any kind of large numbers. They wouldn't have hired rent-a-thugs if they had enough people to attack us directly."

I nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense. So what're you thinking?"

"Hey, kitten, remember that time I busted you out of the hospital?"

I had to grin. "You flew right up the side of the building, hardlight guns looking as threatening as possible?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Looks like we may be gonna get to do that for real. Let's round up the trainees and see about going to the rescue."

## CHAPTER 12

Of course, if you thought we were going to take the trainees right into battle, you've got another think coming. They *were* just trainees, after all, not battle-hardened veterans like we older folk. (All right, so I'm being a *little* facetious. Still, we did have more experience than they did, so it wasn't the best idea to take them straight into danger.) So the assignment for them that made the most sense was to guard the mainframe room just in case Laughing Boy decided to show up again.

"Uh, I won't be much good for that without Marta," Raada pointed out. "I'd like to be in on the rescue."

"Us, too!" Drake insisted. "C'mon, let us back you up!"

I had it in mind to turn them down, but...on the other hand, I couldn't see myself hanging back if Tammy was in trouble. "All right, you three are with us, but Jason, Argo, Kevin, I want you three guarding that server room. I don't want to find that lynx snuck back in again when we weren't looking."

Jason nodded. "You can count on us."

And with that, the rest of us headed outside. We formed up in front of the building. We'd considered surrounding it, but if we stayed close together DeniFaye could use some Integrate hardlight magic to make us at least somewhat invisible from inside, and that seemed like the best way to go about things. Besides, we knew what side of the tower the penthouse was located, and if we went in by that route we wouldn't have to cause further property damage by blasting our way through a window.

So, I climbed into Tammy's cab, and up we all went. We kept our active sensors powered down, to avoid drawing any attention, but had our passives on high sensitivity, mapping out every heat and sound source

"What do you think the point of all this is?" I wondered. "Taking over Iffy's office, kidnapping Marta?"

"Who knows what the point is of anything a crazy person does?" Tammy snorted.

"Still, she is a fairly beloved figure here," Faye said. "So anything they

do to her could have a pretty profound effect. Especially given the current ambivalence about Integrates due to Hellir. If they wanted to kick off some antagonism between humans and Integrates, this would be the way to start.”

“I can’t really see that working, though,” Relena said. “While we were on our own stakeout, I had the chance to ask a few Men and women on the street what they thought about Hellir and Integrates in general, and they seemed to be okay with the place.”

“There’s been enough news coverage over the last few months that Integrates are no longer quite so strange and mysterious,” Jenni added. “They’re just another kind of people.”

“So what you’re saying is, any attempt to try to throw shade at all Integrates over this will probably backfire?” I asked.

“Dunno about backfire,” Kandace said. “But not work like they want it to. Instead of blaming all Integrate-kind, they’ll probably just get mad at Appa’s crowd.”

“At least, we can hope it worrrrks that way,” Katie said. “Given what a small numberrr of bad apples did forrr Islam’s rrrreputation back in the early 21<sup>st</sup>, I’m not surrrre I’m as optimistic about human naturrrre as you arrre, Aunt Kandi.”

“The one bright note is that we haven’t heard about any incidents where they actually wantonly *killed* anyone yet,” Tams said. “Near as the wonks can make out, at the moment they seem to be building their strength, and don’t want to court the sort of burn-’em-to-the-ground outrage those twencen terrorists were after until a little later on. Hopefully this isn’t going to be the time when they change their tactics.”

“Hopefully...” Raada agreed.

We rose along the west side of the house, angling for the balcony on Iffy’s penthouse where we’d had lemonade that day we visited. It was large enough for everyone to land on, even Tammy, though that was about as far as Tammy was going to be able to come in her full-sized shell. We’d have to park it out here and go in with the others in the mini.

We were just touching down when I got a comm ping from Jason. “Hey, guys...I think you better see this.” He called my attention to one of

the video broadcast channels, normally used for local news. “They’ve somehow managed to hack in and pirate the feed. Kevin’s on comm with Desilu now; they’re trying to see how they did it and if they can shut it down.”

The transmission was showing a clinical setting, with a number of fixtures I recognized from my own recent experience—commercial bodysculpt tanks. They were a little different from the industrial model I’d used at the Marshals station, but otherwise unmistakable. “That’s the Pygmalion’s on the 97<sup>th</sup> floor,” Jason supplied. “They’re a local chain of ‘sculpt clinics.’”

“Tams, the schematics?”

“On it.” One of the cab displays lit up with a wire-frame diagram of the skyscraper, and a spot along one side of the building marked. “There. Just 13 floors down from the penthouse, along an outside wall. The outside view from the ‘sculpt tanks is reportedly part of the appeal of having it done there.”

In front of the tanks, a tall and unmistakably female timber wolf Integrate stalked back and forth, tail lashing with agitation. Then she looked to the camera and growled, in an accent distinctly Sturmhaven. “Hello, women of Cape Nord! This is your wake-up call. Wake up and throw off the chains of the patriarchy! Take back your polity and stop letting these so-called Men make fools of you!”

Tams shared a “facepalm” emoticon. “Oh gods, not *another* one.”

“For the sake of some additional *inspiration*, I have a useful example for you.” She nodded to the two tanks immediately behind her, and the camera moved in. Through the faceplate of one tank, I could see a fairly cross-looking Iphigenia Rose. In the other was a panicked Marta Cardoza.

“Marta!” Raada yelled. “We’ve got to get down there!”

“Well, the good news is, it doesn’t look like they’re going to kill them,” Kandace said. “They wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble.”

“Thank goodness for small favors.” I shook my head. “Okay, new plan. DeniFaye, you lead everyone but me and Tams down there. From the passive scans we got on the way up, it looks like the stairwells are clear. They don’t have a large force with them, and what they’ve got is probably

concentrated in the ‘sculpt shop. Still, the cadets should bring up the rear and stay out of combat. When you’re ready to bust in, let me know. Tams and I will do the ‘Blue Thunder’ hover-outside-the-window thing and distract them while you hit ‘em from behind.”

“We’re going to be too late in any case,” Drake groaned. “Look!”

The wolf-woman raised a hand, and the cycle lights on the tanks went on. “Here we have a pair of class traitors to all womankind!” the wolf continued. “Iphigenia Rose, one of the ringleaders of your ‘Sewing Circle,’ whose sole purpose is to keep women distracted while the Men run the show! And Marshals cadet Marta Cardoza, another tool of the patriarchy. Well, if they like the patriarchy so much, they should *join* it!”

DeniFaye facepalmed. “If it weren’t so serious, it would be downright comical how badly they’ve misread this place.”

“You’ve got your orders, Marshals. Let’s go!” Tams and I rose back into the air, and hovered down to wait just out of sight above the ‘sculpt clinic’s windows while the others headed inside. I dropped back into RIDE link to watch the video feeds from their cameras and the TV transmission simultaneously. It was just as I’d expected—the stairs were pretty much clear.

Once they’d abducted Iffy and Marta, the Integrate malfeasants had apparently relocated their operation to the bodysculpt clinic without leaving any guards—not even a lookout on the penthouse balcony. Maybe that wasn’t the smartest of moves—but if they didn’t have the manpower to spare, there wasn’t much else they could do. It was seeming more and more likely there were just two or three of them, not counting Reggie. Which in turn raised the question of how so few of them had been able to bypass all the security forces in the top thirty floors of the building, but that could be looked into later. Intie magic, most likely.

And so there we hovered, as I watched the feeds and got progressively more nervous. On the TV broadcast, the wolf was strutting self-importantly back and forth, occasionally checking the readouts on the ‘sculpt tanks. I guessed that they must have disabled the “dead man’s switch” interior controls to prevent Marta and Iffy from interrupting the process. Legally, you weren’t *supposed* to be able to do that—but hey, Intie magic. I had to

shake my head. Of all the dumb things to happen...

In the other camera feeds, I got multiple shaky views of people rapidly descending the stairs, with varying different numbers of people in front of each one depending on how far back the viewpoint was. The stairwells were empty, for the most part, but there were a few people huddled against the walls here and there, perhaps hiding from the building invaders. They glanced up from time to time as the Marshals passed by. Fortunately, lifter tech and RIDE-scaled stairwells being what they were, there was plenty of room for our folks to get past—though that didn't stop them from scanning carefully for any hidden weapons, just in case.

At last they came to the 97<sup>th</sup> floor landing. Katie and Kandace took up positions to either side of the door, then DeniFaye dived through and rolled, coming up with arms at the ready to work any necessary Integrate magic. The hall was empty. “Not even a guard on the stairs?” Faye muttered over the comm. “Sloppy.”

“This has the look of an op planned and run on the fly,” Kandace suggested. “Pure improv can get you pretty far if you stay fast and light, but it falls down when you have to come out into the open and plunk yourself down in one spot.”

“Move in, but be careful,” Tams ordered. “The main clinic entrance is around the first corner to the left. There are also some maintenance corridors that will take you in from the side; I'm having Jason and Kevin unlock those for you now.”

DeniFaye nodded. “Drake, Hank, Raada, you stay at the stairwell 'til we call the all-clear. Katie and Relena, slip in through the maintenance corridor. Signal when you're at the door to the clinic. Kandace, Jenni, and I will take the main entrance. Tams, we'll give you the high sign when we're ready to move.” Katie nodded, then the Fused RIDE and passenger moved off to a door in the side of the hall that had just popped open.

“Got it. We're right above the outer window,” Tammy replied. “All we have to do is cut the lifters and drop about twenty meters and we'll have a good line-of-sight on the capsules and the she-wolf.”

“Rrrrready,” Katie commed.

“Then let's do this thing. Tams, get in position. Once they've seen you,

make up with the distraction. We'll go in when we hear the racket."

"Roger. On it." I felt a brief moment of free-fall as Tams and I dropped into place. We had a good line of sight through the plate-glass window. That wolf-woman was stalking back and forth in front of Iffy's capsule, saying something that wasn't coming over the broadcast feed. Out of curiosity, I activated Tams's "Blue Thunder" shotgun mics to eavesdrop.

"—*ten years* I waited," the wolf was gloating. "Three of them as a *man*. Bitch. The woman I had *thought* was my best friend added me to her harem. Said she was doing me a *favor*. Well, we'll see how she—or, rather, *he*—likes it now. And we'll see how *you* like it now."

"Omigod," Tammy breathed. "Is it...is that really...?"

It only took me a moment to put two and two together. Comes from having a pocket calculator inside my head, I guess. "You think that's...that nutbar you ran into back in the day? That 'Hera' person?"

"If she is, she's a whole lot furrier now." Tams sent a "headshake" emoticon. "But enough woolgathering. Let's go in and *ask* her." And Tams spun up her pintle-mount gatlings and put a targeting interface over everything. The gatlings weren't actually *real*, any more than they had been that time Tams had sprung me from the hospital. They were a bit too prone to causing collateral damage to be useful in most civilian peace-keeping applications, so the only times we'd ever mounted them for real were during Domefall, or for the occasional live-fire drills. But the hardlight simulations thereof were nicely distracting, and that was what we were here for. They were even *more* distracting thanks to the low-powered lifter pulse Tams used to blow the window inward when she "opened fire."

As the shards of glass flew inward through the air, the wolf turned, staring at us—and her eyes narrowed. "*You!!!*" she snarled, throwing up a hardlight field that parted the glass around her. "You, here, now? This *must* be my lucky day."

"You just keep right on thinking that," Tamarind said, hovering there as an object of attention.

"Young Guns, go!" In the vid feeds I was watching out of part of my brain, DeniFaye moved forward, Kandace/Jenni at her side, rounding the corner as they charged the entryway with the big "Pygmalion's" sign

overhead. In another vid feed, I saw Katie/Relena's leg lash out to kick the service door in as she dived and rolled through.

Everything was a bit busy to pay full attention right at the time, but from what I could reconstruct later on, this is about what happened. There were a couple of fuzzy rodent Intie people-things in the front waiting room of the clinic. I couldn't make out what they were, but Tams told me one was a chinchilla and the other was a capybara.

Beats hell out of me why anyone would even *want* a chinchilla RIDE, but when I mentioned it to her later on, Rhianna Stonegate told me there was a big fad a few years back for rich-person RIDES based on the fur-bearing animals that used to be harvested for rich-person fur coats. Said she knew someone with a mink RIDE from the same days. Well, whatever, I guess. That doesn't explain the capybara, but maybe some people are just weird.

Anyway, they didn't seem to be expecting serious resistance, and they certainly weren't anything like what you'd call soldiers, or even good fighters. They had Intie shields and hardlight and stuff, and that kind of brute-force approach might have worked against ordinary cops, but we Marshals are trained for that sort of stuff. Faye could probably have taken 'em all by herself, but with Kandi and Jenni there to help she bore down on the chinchilla, while leaving the capybara for the others. As it turned out, Kandace had capybara capability and then some.

Meanwhile, Katie had made it into one of the storage rooms through the service door, and from there she had a good view of the room with the biosculpt tanks in it. So she should have had a good clean shot at that wolf—Hera, or whoever—from behind. But just as she was setting up to take the shot, a shimmer in the air gave her just enough warning that an Intie was about to clobber her for her to break off and duck out of the way. Lucky for her and Relena, that Donizetti bod had reflexes darned near as good as your average Intie by themselves.

They did a quick roll back to their feet, by which time they'd pinpointed the shimmer and peppered the spot with blasts from their pulse miniguns. The Integrate's shielding was good enough to deflect them, but not good enough to keep him invisible while so doing—and surprise

surprise, the bobcat-in-a-bathrobe flickered back into view. (Yeah, yeah, I know, lynx, but that's not alliterative, is it?)

"So, kicking yourrrr stubby tail *once* today wasn't enough, brrrrro?" Katie purred. "Serrrriously, how do you think this is going to end?"

"It's not too late for you to join the *winning* side," Reggie said. "Integrate! Join us! It won't be long before we're going to take this world by storm, you'll see!"

Katie snorted. "Oh, rrrreally? How? By kidnapping and crrrrrossing rrrromance novelists? Does Appa rrrreally think this kind of thing is going to help him?"

Reggie rolled his eyes, sauntering around Katie as he talked. "Oh, puh-*leeeeee*. These saps aren't even on Appa's radar. To be honest, they were causing too much of a distraction back home, so he told me to try to make 'em useful. If this little escapade gets them out of the way *and* helps stir up the kind of dissent that will bring more Integrates over to our cause, it's two birds with one stone."

"Do you even carrre about anyone or anything? What's wrrrrrong with you?"

"What's wrong with having a little fun while you fight for a good cause?"

"Good cause? What does Appa even think he's going to accomplish? If he thinks he can throw a few billion humans and RRRRIDEs off this planet..."

"Oh, he's not thinking *that* big, just yet." Reggie smirked. "But just you watch. In a couple of years, Rodinia will be all ours. After all, the humans aren't doing anything with it..."

Katie shook her head. "You're drrrrreaming."

"Maybe so..." Reggie stopped strolling, shrugged, took a step back. "But I'm not the one on the wrong side of the emergency fire bulkheads." A split second after he spoke, the half-meter-thick metal doors slammed down into place, cutting Katie—and Kandace and Faye, who'd just finished dealing with their rodent problem—off from the room with the she-wolf and the biosculpt tanks in it.

And us peeping into it. Of course, at the time I hadn't internalized the

little drama that just went on across the room from us. I'd seen the cats talking, promised myself to look back into it later, but was focusing on tall, dark, and wolfy over there. But I did notice those fire doors slam into place.

Tams said what I was thinking. "The heck was that?"

"That alleged brotherrrr of mine." Katie sighed in exaspurr—uh, exasperation. "Distrracted me just long enough to drrrrrop the fire doorrss."

"Jason's working on getting them back up," Faye said. "Might take time, though. We'll come around. Stall them until we can get there."

"Stall them," I said. "We can't even fit in there—and they damned well know it."

Speaking of which, the she-wolf—Hera, I guess she was. Or Hera-something, or something-Hera, or whatever variant Integrate naming scheme she used—was smirking at us. "Are you going to keep trying to scare me with those fake cannons of yours? Perhaps risk a shot from a *real* gun? Of course, you might damage..." She waved a hand at the biosculpt tanks. "But then, who knows...maybe I'll damage them myself anyway."

Looking at the situation, there didn't seem to be a whole lot of choices at that point. :So,: I sent across to Tams. :*You up for doing something really stupid?*:

:*What, like charging a full-power Integrate in a tin-foil jumpsuit?*: Tammy sent back. What she said next...well, it'll sound all maudlin and stuff, but it reminded me why we were such a great team. :*Born ready, partner. Quick-fabbing some of your drones for support. Once we launch, the big bod will drop away on autopilot.*:

:*Roger. You've got the reins for now, so fire when ready.*: I relaxed and waited, so as not to interfere with Tams when she moved our minima into position.

:*In three...two...one...*: The cab roof opened, the mini-shell's lifters kicked in, and the truck just...fell away from us. It was like an eject seat, but in reverse. Another surge from the lifters threw us forward, through the shattered window and in. Behind us, my lifter drones spread out, peppering the area with low-powered pulse-fire—just strong enough to sting, but not to penetrate the capsules Marta—Marty?—and Iffy were in.

And there we were, with a closer view than I'd ever wanted of a rabid timber wolf. Well, timber wolf Integrate, and not "rabid" in the literal sense. But she'd been foaming at the mouth for some little while now, and it was just about time to put her down.

"Well, well. *This* is new." She smirked, yellowed wolfy teeth showing. "I'd been going to say something about cutting you down to size, but it looks as though someone beat me to it." She raised her hand, and a hardlight scimitar was suddenly in it. "But that doesn't mean I can't cut you down some more. I've been waiting *ten years* for this..." She lunged.

Luckily, we were well-equipped in that regard too. Our own hardlight longsword came up to deflect. And while swords aren't my thing like they are Relena's or Jenni's, and I probably wouldn't ever make a Sturmie duelist, I had still gone for some training sessions with Lilibet and Guinevere out at Alpha Camp. So I knew a bit more about it than "the pointy end goes into the other person."

So there we were, sparks flying off our blades and stuff in the clinch, then Tams goosed our lifters and shoved, and she went stumbling backward. Didn't take her long to recover, though. She growled something in Russian, then was at us again. But before too long, she had to duck for cover herself. My drones had gotten an angle on her without the biosculpt tanks in the way and were able to switch up to heavier stuff. She growled and fired some pulse blasts that knocked a couple of them out of the air, but they had good random-walk dodge patterns built in so most of them kept the pressure on.

"Enough!" she growled. One of her arms started glowing, like maybe she had a cannon in it like Fritz's...and my suspicions were confirmed when she started to point it toward the biosculpt tanks. So we just put our shoulder down and poured on the lifter power, and slammed right into her collarbone, throwing her backward. The blast, whatever it was, discharged out the open window.

"Now what made you think we were going to make it that easy?" Tamarind put in. "By the way, you're under arrest."

The wolf rolled away, staggered back to her feet, shaking her head. "I very much doubt that." She shrugged. "But no matter. I've done what I

came here to do. I do believe it's time I—”

“Time you were under arrest,” DeniFaye said, as she, Katie/Relena, and Kandace/Jenni rose into view out the window, weapons trained. “Well, as I live and breathe, it's my old buddy Hera. Or whatever you're calling yourself nowadays. I see Integration agrees with you.”

The wolf growled, tensed...then relaxed and raised her arms. “Very well, I suppose you caught me.” She shrugged. “Not that it matters. As I said, I've done what I came here to do.”

Then my sensors pinged an urgent warning. There was some kind of charge building up—on the wolf! “She's got a bomb!”

“On it!” Katie streaked forward, body-slammng the wolf to the ground. She rolled her over, then grabbed at something. Straps holding a small cylindrical object to Hera's back broke, then Katie turned and threw as hard as she could. A moment later it seemed like the whole cave shook as the explosion reverberated back and forth.

## CHAPTER 13

Luckily, nobody was killed by our sudden need to get rid of a bomb. What with the hostage sitch going on at Rosebriar, police had already cleared the air of all traffic. So nobody got knocked out of the sky. The shockwaves did break pretty much every window for several city blocks around, and a few people were hit by flying glass, but by and large we got off light. The bomb wasn't a nuke, but it was one of the more powerful Integrate modifications to a mining explosive compound, and if it had gone off in the clinic, there would have been dozens, maybe even hundreds of casualties. Not least of them, *us*.

Hera basically shut down after that. She'd been ready to kill herself—and with that taken away, it didn't seem she had much desire to stay conscious any longer. Or maybe she just wanted to give us as much trouble as she could moving her inert body down to the perp wagon. “Should just toss her out the window and let gravity do its thing,” DeniFaye muttered. But instead, we got Tams's truck bod back up by remote control and shoved her into the back of that. Faye went along to keep an eye on her, just in case she was going to wake back up in a bit and try to get away again.

Speaking of getting away, apparently Reggie had vamoosed right after dropping the fire doors; we didn't find hide nor hair of him left behind once we finally got everything settled down. It was probably just as well. We had quite enough to deal with at this point without another awkward family reunion.

With the she-wolf out of the way, and once we'd managed to get the fire bulkheads unsealed, it was time to decant Cape Nord's two newest Men. Luckily, they hadn't taken any harm from their sojourn in the sculpt tanks—beyond the obvious—but they were both pretty mad by the time we figured out how to crack the seals.

It was weird opening the can I'd seen had Iffy in it just a few minutes before and being presented with a naked, hairy, Manly chest. Atop it was a clean-shaven, square-jawed face, with more rugged versions of the same features I recognized from Iffy earlier. His hair was still blond, but now in a

shorter cut. I guess if the female Iffy had looked like Romance Novelist Barbie, the male version now looked like a fricking Ken doll. “Are you all right, If...uh...what *do* we call you now?” I asked.

“Looks like I’m back to plain old Alan Baker again.” His voice was a pleasant baritone. “Kind of funny, really. She thought she was doing the worst possible thing to me she could, but to be honest, I’d been thinking about going ahead and pushing the button again anyway. Pandora was the only thing holding me back. At least this time I’ll be able to use my real name.”

“How is Pandora?” Tamarind asked. “Is she okay?”

“Last I saw her, yes. They just put her in passive mode and left her in a corner.” He shook his head. “Said they didn’t have any beef with her, just me. But that could change if I didn’t come along quietly. So...” He shrugged. “But what about Marta?”

“I guess it’s ‘Marty’ now.” The other tank opened, revealing someone who—coincidentally or not—looked a little like a young Michael J. Fox himself. “Boy, don’t *I* feel stupid. ‘Oh, hey, there’s the elevator!’” He rolled his eyes. “Maybe *I* should go for Dumb Muscle. I’ve already got the ‘dumb’ part down; the muscles can be added on.”

“Oh, Marta...” Raada sighed. The impala had come in once it was cleared, and by now the other members of the trainee team had come up from downstairs. “What *are* we going to do with you?”

“This *is* kind of awkward, isn’t it?” Jason shook his head. “How’re we gonna move forward with the Seven with mismatched RIDEs?”

In the background, Drake and Hank were leaning in close to each other, holding a murmured conversation. Now they straightened up. “If Raada’s willing, that doesn’t have to be a problem,” Drake said. He swallowed. “I *really* don’t wanna break up the team. I mean, we’re all friends here and everything. So...uh...if Marta’s gonna have to be a guy for three years...” He turned to Raada. “Uh...you get what I’m saying?”

Raada cocked her head. “I think I’m starting to.”

Marty blinked. “Really? You’d...you’d give up your Manhood...for me?”

Drake shrugged. “Well...why not? It’s not like three years is forever. I

was kinda getting tired of the whole Reindeer Games thing anyway. And it'd keep the team together...even if two of us might have to get used to new partners for a while." He chuckled. "Besides...you're gonna need a good woman to keep you in line, Man that you are now, and I really don't feel like making this a threesome."

"And in the meanwhile, Marty, if you'll have me, I'll be happy to partner you up 'til the cooldown runs out," Hank said. "Or longer, if y'all decide you prefer it this way."

Marty blinked, dabbing at an eye. "I...I don't know what to say."

"Then just wait a moment and say hi to the new me." Drake turned to Raada. "Could you...uh...do it now? Before I have a sudden attack of sanity?"

Raada cocked her head. "If you're sure..."

"I'm Dumb Muscle, I'm not smart enough to be sure about anything." He chuckled. "Go for it."

Then it was back to the Marshals base for a debrief. We were debriefed by pretty much everyone—senior Marshals, Chief Willard Selleck...even Desilu and Lenora Richmond took their turn, on behalf of the sewing circle. Not everyone was exactly happy with the outcome—especially all the property damage resulting from the bomb—but even Chief Selleck had to admit he had to shoulder a share of the blame, too, for not taking the whole thing seriously at the outset.

There was a little doubt over whether the Young Guns program was going to be able to continue if this was how its missions were going to go, but Tammy and DeniFaye were able to serve as voices of reason and point out everything had gone just about as well as could reasonably have been expected under the circumstances. So they just shrugged a lot and said they would have to give the matter further consideration.

Speaking of further consideration, we still had to settle on what to call the new "Drake." She was quite a looker, as it turned out. She'd opted for the usual Cape Nord Woman physique, and long brown hair to match. She still kept the musculature of her Wednesday heritage, only in the female form it made her look more than a little like a Sturmhaven Valkyrie. Bit of

irony there, I guess.

She made the mistake of wondering aloud that, given that a drake was a male duck, what was a female duck? It turned out, the answer to that was “a duck.” It looked as if everyone was going to start calling her “Duck,” but she put a stop to that in a hurry.

“Well, whatever it is, we’re going to have to call you *something*,” Jason pointed out. “You’re no longer a man, Drake.”

“Huh,” the newfound woman said. “Mandrake...uh...how about ‘Mandy’?”

“You realize that’s going to make you an alliterative couple, right?” Argo said. “Marty and Mandy?”

Mandy shrugged. “I guess we can live with that.”

The next day, Mandy and I cornered Marty for a little help. Given that I’d grown up in the orphanage, and Mandy had grown up a man, neither one of us had much experience at braiding hair—but there was one person we knew who could help us.

Marty blinked at us. “Uh...you want *me* to help you learn to braid your hair? I could show you, but that’s...not exactly Manly, is it?”

“Well, even leaving aside we’re on a Marshals base, so it doesn’t count,” I pointed out, “as I understand things, the Man Rules have an exception for doing things some woman asks you to. If it helps, I could bat my eyes at you?” I assayed what I *thought* was batting my eyes in the time-honored manner.

Marty *rolled* his eyes. “I think you need some batting practice. All right, then, come over here and sit down and I’ll show you how it goes...”

*January 6, 158 A.L.*

A couple of days after that, Tams and I had occasion to visit the Rosebriar Building once more. This time, we left the truck parked in the garage, and pocket-sized Tams and I took the elevator up to the penthouse level together. I was kind of amused to see the way Tammy kept looking around at everything as we went. It was a little hard to recall sometimes that she’d never actually been inside a human-scaled building before

outside of a hardlight projection, so it was all a brand new experience for her.

Alan met us at the elevator. “Hey, thanks for coming over. It’s good to see you.”

“Uh, same here,” I said. “How’ve you been...uh...adapting?”

He shrugged. “About the same as usual. There are always a dozen different little things I forget all about, until I’m confronted with them again. You should try it sometime.”

“I, uh, will consider it.”

“But not very hard?” He chuckled. “By the way, that’s a *great* look on you. Finally went native?”

“Oh. Uh...well, a little.” I’d actually had most of the sculpting reversed shortly after getting back to base—but I’d kept the hair. For some reason, it seemed like the Cape Nord Men were a lot friendlier to me this way.

Near as I could figure, not many women outside of Cape Nord wanted to put up with the fuss of long hair, even in this era of nanotech to make caring for it easier. (Even I had finally gone with a can of “Ultra-Clutch” brand nanite hairspray—sort of a low-rent version of the nanites Shelley and Iffy had to keep theirs in order.) And a lot of Cape Nord Men didn’t want to risk approaching some tourist and having their manners misunderstood. But if you did wear your hair that way, it was a sign that you were probably “with it” enough to know what was going on—or else you were open to the experience. Either way, they were a lot less hesitant...and actually, I found that kind of charming.

“Well, I’m glad to see it. The hair is one thing I kind of miss when I’m like this. I don’t quite have what it takes to pull off a ‘Fabio’ look, sadly.” He chuckled. “And that’s even after the Cape Nord Manly biosculpt. You should’ve seen me back in the teens, before they revoked my Man Card for the first time. The classic ‘98 lb weakling’ stereotype? That was me.”

“Sure wouldn’t know it now. I guess the ‘sculpters do great work.”

He nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

We walked past the office, where I saw Lenora Richmond at the desk, Pandora curled up behind it in her old place—but oddly enough, now Lenora had Pandora’s fox tags. “So those two are paired up now?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes.” Alan nodded. “What’s more, she just popped the question to me. Or, well, as close as a Cape Nord woman gets to it, which is to say, makes it clear to the Man that if and when *he* pops the question, it will be well-received.”

“Oh-ho!” Tams said, chuckling. “Was wondering when that might happen. You two were pretty close even back last time Denise and I were here.”

Alan Baker nodded. “Mm-hmm. We did have our relationship the last couple of times I was on this side of things, but it wasn’t really something we could make public. She hadn’t really felt like crossing. But thanks to this circumstance, I’m finally free to make an ‘honest woman’ of her. And she’s free to give me the kind of gentle behind-the-scenes guidance that every Man needs, poor benighted souls that we are.”

I had to blink at that. “Uh...seriously?”

He grinned. “Well, not *seriously*. I mean, we both know how things really work around here. I will, of course, *pretend* not to for public consumption, but nothing says we have to keep that pretense up in private.” He chuckled. “Besides, if she really *can* ‘manipulate me with her womanly wiles,’ after having known each other all these years, then I’d say she deserves whatever she can get out of me. In any case, this is going to be a new experience for both of us, what with my crossing being open and above-board this time.”

“Uh...how does that even work, anyway? I mean, didn’t they *force* you to become a woman because it was un-Manly to write romance novels?” I asked.

“Well, there are certain exceptions made for people who are still in cooldown, especially if they were crossed over unwillingly. We get a certain amount of leeway, with the Manliness tally held in abeyance until the cooldown is up.” Alan shrugged. “Even then, I *could* still be exiled if I take it too far. Which is why I publicly announced that I’ll be suspending my romance writing for the duration of the cooldown period. Have to obey the rules like a good little citizen if I want to stay in my home polity, don’t I?”

“Ooooh, you *didn’t*,” Tams said. “That’s just *evil*.”

I could see a distinctly Iphigenian twinkle in Alan’s eye as he grinned.

“Isn’t it just? So now every Man in Cape Nord who’s got a wife, mother, daughter, sister, cousin, aunt, niece, secretary, and so forth who enjoys my work will be getting it from all sides. I give it a week before the Man Cave passes a special rules exemption on my part, in light of my ‘long and distinguished career’ and ‘importance to the public image of Cape Nord’ and other folderol like that. And I’ll be free to go on writing Iphigenia Rose novels for as long as I want—even *after* the cooldown is up.” He chuckled. “Which isn’t to say I won’t change back at some point. But there’s no need to rush—especially since Lenora’s not really keen on the idea of crossing herself yet. And she and ‘Dora are getting along well, too, so that’s another worry out of the way.”

“You know...there is a loophole you could use,” I said. “The one that got me into this body after my old one got Amontilladoed into looking like that one there.” I nodded to teeny-tiny-Tams. “Just get a clone made in the right sex, use implants like mine to scan you out into a RI core, then transfer to similar implants in the other one. You could even keep the one you’re not using on ice and switch back and forth whenever you wanted.”

He actually turned and stared at me. “Really? That sounds...*ghastly*, actually. I mean—no offense, in cases of medical necessity like yours, I could see the technique being very useful. But...using it to get around the rules of the Reindeer Game? It stinks to high heaven of the sort of cheating that would cause even a Nextus bureaucrat to turn up their nose. Perhaps the worst part of it is that it’s something that would only be available to the super-rich, like me—we could switch back and forth at the drop of a hat, while ordinary people would still have to wait three years.”

I considered that. “I suppose you’ve got a point there.”

“In fact...” He frowned thoughtfully. “It may well be that’s the reason I was really looking for. Excuse me a moment.” He stopped and jogged back to the office door. “Lenora? Would you comm Mr. Hendricks and tell him that I *am* interested after all? I’ve just come across something that’s too important to leave to chance. I’ll explain later.” With that settled, he turned to catch back up to us.

“What was that all about?” Tams asked.

“Oh...well, one of the Man Cave representatives for this district was

planning to retire at the end of the month and switch back to the other side of the game for a while—and since the incident, I’m suddenly eligible to replace him. He wondered if I’d want to have a go at it for a term or two.” He shrugged. “I’d been on the fence, but what you said about implant body-hopping decided me. I need to get our Rules updated to forbid using that kind of workaround here before someone with money actually decides to give it a try. And the best way to get that done is to see to it myself.”

Alan led the way into his study, settling down behind his perfectly masculine desk. I had to admit, he looked right at home there now. Like a picture out of some old twencen magazine: the Man, in his natural habitat. I still felt bad about the whole thing, and I had to say so. “I’m really sorry about all this. That we didn’t twig to what was going on in time to stop it.”

He shrugged. “It’s a lesson learned for all of us, really. And in the end, maybe what happened isn’t so bad. As I said, I’d been *wanting* to cross again anyway, and this way I get to have my cake and eat it too, since it *obviously* wasn’t my choice.”

“And you’ll be able to just...go back to writing? Without any changes to mindset or anything?”

“When it comes to writing, the body *isn’t* the plaything of the mind.” He chuckled. “It’s all a matter of putting yourself in other people’s heads, even people you’ve never been before. There’s nothing magical about it. You don’t *have* to be a woman to write from one’s point of view. Even in first person. It just takes some empathy.”

“So how *did* they manage to defeat the security in this building, anyway?” Tams wondered. “It seems like just a handful of Inties shouldn’t have been enough—even with a hotshot hacker like Reggie around.”

Alan shrugged. “Who knows? We’re reviewing all the security procedures to see if there’s anything we missed. Including double-checking the background of all Integrate employees, just in case.”

“I hope this isn’t going to lead to more friction between humans and Integrates,” I said. “I mean, Hellir is just starting to get some acceptance here. I’d hate for all that to be set back.”

“It won’t if I have anything to say about it,” Alan said. “I know perfectly well that everyone from Hellir was blameless, and there are far

more Integrates who just want to get along than jerks who don't. We just have to keep striving for the right ones to win.”

As we were on the way out, I noticed Tammy seemed...rather distant. Which is kind of odd for someone who is capable of thinking a thousand times faster than humans. You'd think if she wanted to think something over, she'd just do it at speed and I wouldn't notice. But then, maybe the look was a signal that she wanted to be asked about it. So ask I did. “*Centimu* for your thoughts?”

“Well...it's probably nothing, really, but...” Tammy shook her head. “It's just...what he said. Things really worked out *amazingly well* for ol' ‘Alan Baker’ there. Nobody really hurt, and he gets to go back to being a guy again, all square and above-board. Gets to run for public office. Even goes and gets married to her-slash-his longtime friend and sweetheart.”

I blinked at her. “So...what're you saying, she somehow *planned* this?”

“Planned? No. I think Hera was exactly what she seemed to be—totally off-her-nut Integrate who wanted revenge. And there were certainly elements Iffy wouldn't have countenanced if she'd known about, like crossing Marta or that bomb Hera was packing. But...” Tammy rolled her eyes. “...remember, the women here are *really really good* at pulling strings, and turning whatever situation pops up to their own advantage. It's no accident Iffy was at or near the top of the pyramid. I wouldn't have put it past her to have somehow kept tabs on Hera all these years, learned what she was planning, and have made her own plans to take advantage of those. Maybe we'll find one of the hench-rodents was secretly reporting to some unknown third party through a cut-out, though I'd expect they were paid to delete that part of their own memory if they got caught. Like I said, they *did* get around building security awfully easily.”

“You're saying she'd go to all this trouble just to engineer a public crossride? Couldn't she just have a biosculpt accident or something? Or get cross-bodyjacked?”

Tams shook her head. “That might work for an ordinary citizen, or maybe even a Man Cave rep like Hendricks—but celebrities have it

different. As many public eyes are on ‘em, threadbare excuses won’t do, or it’d turn into a great big scandal. It’s gotta be something spectacular and dramatic, in keeping with all the drama swirling around ‘em already. And you gotta admit, this certainly fills the bill.”

“Seriously? You think Iffy—*Alan*—is some kind of master manipulative chessmaster, pulling strings from behind the scenes?”

“I think that if I thought about the whole thing too hard, I’d probably give myself a sarium-powered migraine.” Tammy sighed. “I do *like* her-slash-him, as a person. And nobody was really hurt, and it would probably be impossible to prove anything, especially to the standards of Cape Nord. So maybe it’s best just to let sleeping foxes lie. It’s just another little reminder of why Cape Nord is a great place to visit, but I think I’d go nuts if I had to live here.”

## CHAPTER 14

*January 10, 158 A.L.*

For the last few days of our winter break, things got pretty much back to normal at the Marshals base after that. Even though two of our number had new genders and new partners, it only took a little drilling for things to settle back into the old routine. Mandy got the customary Sewing Circle induction, and allowed as how it didn't entirely surprise her and things seemed to make a lot more sense now. Meanwhile, Jason swore he was going to make a Nerd out of Marty, and Marty seemed amenable to giving it a shot.

Tams and I decided not to tell anyone about her suspicions about Iffy stage-managing the whole thing. As she said, it probably couldn't be proven, and there wasn't a lot of point in potentially pissing Marty off against one of Cape Nord's most powerful citizens. We didn't bat an eye (I'd gotten in more practice at that by now) when the request came in on Iphigenia's rose pastel stationery for the Marshals to show lenience toward Hera, since she couldn't help her cultural conditioning and all. We just shrugged and passed it on; her fate was out of her hands now anyway.

As the break rolled on toward a close, I looked at myself in the mirror more and more often. To my surprise, I did kind of like the long hair, after I got used to it. It did look nice on me, and I also didn't mind the appreciative looks from Jason. (Too bad I couldn't do anything about those looks, given that as his trainer I was still technically his superior, but that wouldn't be a problem next time we met up!) There was just one little problem with it, and the problem was probably just me. I'm a bit old-fashioned about some things, weirdly enough.

It just kept coming to me that, back in the day, it could take as much as ten years to grow this much hair. And someone who'd gone to all that trouble back then could know, when they felt that tug on their scalp or the weight of it in their hands, that this represented ten years of time and effort on their part. For me to have it just from a couple hours in a 'sculpt

chamber kinda felt like, I dunno, stolen glory or something.

(Not that I'd ever accuse Iffy or Shelley or the 99% or more of long-haired Cape Nord women who decided to get it that way of "cheating" or anything. Like I said, it's a personal thing.)

So in the end, I decided to have Tams lop off about half of it for me, so I ended up with it about halfway down my back. I figured that if I *had* started growing my hair out a few years back (and not been a kitty for part of that time) that's about how long I could have it by now. And there'd still be enough of it to give me practice braiding and stuff. (I'd gotten to where I could do the whole long length in fifteen minutes or so, though nowhere near as fast as Marta had been with hers.) I'd put it back on when visiting Cape Nord, since that was a special case, but the rest of the time, I'd keep on growing it out and see how long I could get it to on my own.

(Until and unless I got tired of it all again and chopped it all back off. Which could happen. I do change my mind about things from time to time. Meh, whatever.)

And that was pretty much that. Our training wrapped up just in time for the end of break, and I thought it had gone pretty well. Of course, I'm not the one whose opinion counted in that—Tams and DeniFaye were the professionals—but they were pretty much of the same opinion. So we held a big ol' graduation ceremony where we pinned on their Coppers, before it was time for them to disperse back to their schools and our Seven to head back to Uplift to the last semester of school for the three of us humans.

"Wow, I can hardly believe this!" Mandy said, looking down at the gleaming badge affixed to her chest. "I've made it into the big leagues!"

Martin nodded. "It's certainly not a mermaid's badge, I'll give it that."

Raada chuckled. "And you'd be one to know."

Kevin grinned. "Nice."

"Of course, you lot still have school to finish," Hank pointed out. "But that's okay. Time for even more training there."

"And intensive research," Jason added. "After all, the Marshals didn't have a Young Guns Seven until last year, and now they've got two. We should figure out the best way the Marshals can make use of us."

“I suspect that’s going to be what our superiors are doing,” Argo noted.

“Yeah, but there’s no reason we can’t help.”

And that was that. Once the ceremony was over, the Nordie Seven headed back into town to get ready for the next semester. We packed our gear to await Jonesy’s suborbital. (What was it going to look like *this* time? Marvin the Martian’s spaceship?) But fate had one more surprise in store for us, it turned out.

The seven of us were out on the drilling grounds, getting in a bit more target range practice before time to go, when a comm call came in from the Stevens asking us to meet them in one of the base’s conference rooms on the double. The phrasing was not quite “this is an emergency,” but serious enough to indicate it *was* double-plus important, not to mention formal. So we all turned up, dressed to the nines in our disuniform Marshals uniforms, to find three old friends waiting for us.

I knew all three of them, as it happened. The two scientist-types were the ones who’d helped thrash out the bugs with getting me stuck back in the right body again, which made it no surprise that their official charge as Marshals wardens made up number three. I’d last seen *him* from my and Tams’s front-row seat when Kaylee and our own Katie kicked his scrawny bobtailed butt after Zane had softened him up.

So, yeah, there they were: Dr. Patil, Dr. Clemens, and—

“*You*,” Kandace snarled.

And him.

“Hiya, sis,” Fritz said. “Hey, Katie. You’re lookin’ good, kid. The Marshals suits you.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Katie sighed. “To what do we owe the honorrrr of this visit?”

“Not to put too fine a point on it, another member of your family,” Dr. Patil said. “Reggie.”

“This isn’t the only time he’s shown up in field operations,” Dr. Clemens said. “A few months ago, he attempted to hijack Uncia and Rochelle Seaford’s shuttle in orbit. He’s been seen a number of places since

then, though this is the first time he's actually entered a polity."

"I spared the rod *way* too much," Fritz sighed. "Now it's time to round up that spoiled child, ya dig?"

"We believe that, now he has seen two members of his family are working together in the Marshals, he may be drawn back to your vicinity in the future," Dr. Patil said. "And we might even be able to sweeten the pot if we can bring in others from your family to help."

"The Gendarmes are willing to assign Benjamin to liase with you, for one," Dr. Clemens said. "And we're in touch with several of the others—including Kaylee and Rhianna, of course."

"I'm certainly not objecting," Tammy said. "But when's this all going to happen? We just got done with an op here, and the kids need to go back to school."

"There's no *real* hurry at this point," Dr. Patil said. "We don't believe Appa will be making any moves for a number of months at least. He seems to understand the value of patience."

"All the same, we want to be ready ahead of time, just in case Reggie should decide to enter Uplift while your three human members are in school," Dr. Clemens said. "So we've come up with a plan."

"I'm calling it 'Operation: Kid Brother,'" Fritz smirked. "No one's used that name in a few hundred years, so I'm entitled, right?"

Kandace's eyes narrowed. "And we have to work with *that*? No offense, but I don't see why we need his help for any of this."

"Your wayward nephew is, in part, a problem of Fritz's making," Dr. Patil reminded her. "And he has been doing his best to clean up those problems."

"Among others," Fritz put in. "Busted three RIDEnapping rings over the summer, including one that would've put three dozen on a freighter to Kepler two days later if we hadn't smashed it up first."

"Hooray for you," Kandace said flatly. "I still don't see the point. But I suppose I'll go along with whatever the rest of you decide."

Dr. Patil and Dr. Clemens traded glances. "There is...one more thing," Dr. Patil said. "The operation to entrap Reggie is only one of *two* in which we will be wanting you to work with Fritz after the next semester is over."

Kandace rolled her eyes. “Be still my beating coolant pump. What’s the other one.”

Fritz looked around. “I’d...thought maybe I should wait on this ‘til the two of us could be alone.”

Kandace snorted. “Fat chance. Only reason I’d want to be alone with you is to rip your throat out.”

“Yeah, I grok that. Okay, don’t blow your jets. Here’s the deal.” Fritz looked down. “Thing is, the ringleader of that third smuggling ring I mentioned...the one that was sending RIDEs to Kepler. She got away, and we need to track her down again.”

“Yeah? Why?”

“It was one of your and Franz’s kids, Kandace. It was Kristy.”

The ride back to Uplift was pretty somber after that, and even Jonesy’s antics couldn’t quite lift the mood. Kandace, of course, wanted to get on looking for her kid right away, and Jenni was in favor of it, too. But orders were, for the present, to stay in Uplift, in the hope of drawing Reggie in. Meanwhile, Fritz and other Marshals forces were going to be busy trying to pick up Kristy’s trail.

“There’s nothing you can do about it until we find out where she is, regardless,” Dr. Patil had said. “If we find her, we will do nothing against her without you, and that is a promise.”

“It can’t be her. Just can’t be,” Kandace muttered. “Not my Kristy. She wouldn’t do something like that. It *must* be the human. She must have fetters on her or something.”

“We don’t know that for surrrre, Aunt Kandi,” Katie said. “Frrrritz nevrerrr got close enough to be able to tell.” She sighed. “And, as Rrrrreggie should amply prrrrove, or Frrritz himself forrr that matterrr, just because they’rrre family doesn’t always mean they know rrrright frrrom wrrrong.”

Jenni ran a hand down Kandace’s neck reassuringly. “Whatever it is, we’ll work it out somehow. And whatever you need me to do, I’ll back you up.”

“We’ve gotten through everything else they’ve thrown at us so far,” Relena said. “We’ll get through this too. You can count on us.”

Tams and I headed on up to the front, figuring to give the lynxes and their humans a little together-time to talk it over. DeniFaye was already on the flight deck with Jonesy and Velox.

“So this is what it looks like in here, huh?” Tamarind said.

“You’ve seen it from my memories, y’know,” I said. “I’m pretty sure.”

“Yeah, but there’s a difference seeing it with your own optics.”

“How’re they doing back there?” DeniFaye asked.

“It was a shock, but they’ll get by,” Tams said. “We’ll all get by.”

The hyena nodded. “Yeah. Speaking of getting by...I just wanna say... it’s been good working with you again, Tams. The part of me that...well, that part’s missed you a lot. And is glad you’ve picked up another partner. You’re at your best when you’ve got someone else with you.”

“Thanks. I...I’m glad I was able to work with you, too.” She smiled sadly. “Guess all we needed was a little time.”

“Yeah.” Faye nodded. “And Jeanette, same goes for you. I think you may be an even better match for Tams than I was.”

I blushed a little. “Oh...I dunno about that, but I’m glad you approve. So I take it you’re gonna keep working with us for the time being?”

“Yeah...it may be a while before Bernie gets free. I don’t know all the details, but it seems like he’s gotten involved in something pretty hush-hush, the last month or so. We may not be seeing him again quite some time.”

I shrugged. “Well, I’ll miss him—or her—but I think we’ll get by. Like you said, we work well together.”

“Then I guess it’s just a matter of seeing what the future has in hold.” DeniFaye chuckled. “Something tells me that the operative word for the near-future is going to be ‘family.’”

I glanced back toward the rear of the ship. “Well, at least some of us have one.”

Tams gave me a quick headbutt. “You’ve got one, too, y’know. And I think a little time settling back into school is just what this family needs.”

I grinned. “Thanks, Tams. Yeah, I think you’re right.” I relaxed into the flight deck seat and let Jonesy’s shuttle carry us on back to our new Uplift home.

**THE END (for now)**