

The Saints Go Marching In

By Robotech_Master

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“Why do mornings have to happen in the...well, *morning?*” Olivia groaned, lying back in the plush seat of Lilac’s skimmer-bike form as the skunk RIDE trundled them from home to work.

Lilac chuckled. “A thirty-hour day and you *still* can’t get enough sleep?”

“I was up late studying!” Olivia insisted.

“Oh, so *that’s* what you call that?” Lilac retorted. “It looked to me like you were jamming to old Milli Vanilli tunes all night.”

“I’m doing a paper on them!” Olivia said. “Great artistic frauds of the 20th and 21st centuries.” She shrugged. “Besides, I like the music.”

Lilac snorted. “You would.”

“You’ve got to appreciate the irony. I mean, the lyric of their most famous song going, ‘Girl you know it’s *true*’?” Olivia yawned, stretching. “Anyway, it’s gonna be a great paper.”

“Uh-huh. Well, I think you better put it on the back burner,” Lilac said. “Just got a comm from Mary-Anne. She wants to see us in her office as soon as we get to the creche.”

Olivia sat up. “Really? Uh-oh. Did we screw up again, you think?”

“No, sounded more like she has a special job for us, I

think. But either way, she didn't sound pleased."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Oh, great. If I'd known this was coming, I'd have saved Rob and Fab for another time."

Lilac pulled into the creche's loading circle and converted back to her giant-skunk Walker shape as Olivia hopped off, then followed her through the door. Olivia nodded to the receptionist, then pushed through the doors to the rest of the facilities just as she had that morning when she'd first met Lilac. The difference was that this time she was there as an intern, rather than a civilian.

Although she'd only been on Zharus a few months, her academic record from Earth had been sufficient to get her fast-tracked into Martinez U's new post-graduate RIDE Sociology program after they'd returned from a month-long vacation in Burnside. Even though her first Master's had been in a fairly useless subject, that she had one at all had shown she was capable of serious study, as had her grades. She sometimes suspected her sister Rhianna might have greased a wheel or two, as well. But the upshot was, she'd landed a student internship at the very creche where Lilac had grown up, and they both enjoyed working there.

"Hey, Mary-Anne," Olivia said as she came into the fossa Integrate's office. "What's all the fossa 'bout?"

Usually this would elicit a chuckle, but this time Mary-Anne just snorted and passed over a glowing folder. As Olivia took it, it broke up into individual pixels and vanished, transmitting the information into her implant. "Go over to Uplift Social Services and field this for me, would you? I think they'd react better to a RIDE and human in this case than an Integrate."

Olivia blinked. "But what do you want us to—oh." She

reviewed the information in her implant. “*Oh.*” She nodded. “All right, boss, we’re on it. C’mon, Li.”

“But what is it?” Lilac asked, following her partner out of the office.

“I’ll shoot you the file,” Olivia said, doing so. “Short form is, the Saints have decided they want to adopt...a *human.*”

“...oh.” Lilac paused. “Well, this is going to be interesting.”

The Saints were a pair of St. Bernard RIDEs, Bernard and Nannette, who had opted to raise one puppy between them. They had chosen to ease into parenthood slowly, after the human style, rather than littering as dogs usually did.

In order to fit in with a bureaucratic system that expected everyone to have a surname, Uplift’s newly-emancipated RIDEs had been encouraged to adopt surnames of their own. Some had taken the name of their human partner, while others had made one up. Bernard had displayed the same level of imagination responsible for his given name in selecting “Saint” for himself and his family. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, they had elected to name their son Bernard Jr. He usually went by either Junior or Bernie to distinguish him from his father.

Olivia had met the family several times over the course of her work in the creche. She also knew about them through Rhianna, since they’d both been FreeRIDErs customers since Rhianna and Rochelle had been Ryan and Roger. They were nice, easy-going people, with the pleasant dispositions that were a hallmark of the

St. Bernard breed. And they were also strictly emancipated RIDEs, without any human partners at the moment. As far as Olivia knew, there hadn't been any similar requests by an all-RIDE family to adopt a human before. It wasn't surprising Mary-Anne might consider this the kind of can of worms an Integrate should stay out of.

"So what's she want us to do?" Lilac asked as Olivia climbed back on for the trip across town.

"Provide moral support, I guess," Olivia said. "Character references and the like. And see if we think it's a good idea. They've already made it through the preliminary psych tests, financial qualifications, and so on. This is pretty much the final hurdle." She shook her head. "What gave them this idea, anyway? I'd have thought they'd just, y'know, let Bernie find his own partner from someone who came to the creche looking."

"I think they did, sort of," Lilac said. "Remember, there was that orphanage tour visit last week, that day we were in class? It looks like Bernie really hit it off with one of the kids who came by. In fact, I think a few of the other kids did, too. Sideband scuttlebutt is that there may be several more adoption requests depending on how well this one goes."

"Oh, great," Olivia said. "No pressure, huh?"

"I don't think it'll be *too* much trouble," Lilac said. "After all, most people from Uplift are ready to accept RIDEs as people, right?"

"I hope you're right," Olivia said. "I guess we'll see when we get there."

Mary-Anne had called ahead to let Social Services

know they were coming, and as soon as they arrived they were ushered through the building into a conference room which had hastily had the table removed and a desk brought in. It looked lonely sitting at the end of the large room, and the woman behind it looked more than a little uncomfortable. *:Heh. I guess they didn't use RIDE-friendly architecture in here,:* Lilac chuckled. *:One of the few places they never thought they'd ever see one.:*

The rest of the conference room was occupied by three immense St. Bernard dogs, two of them the size of large ponies and one only slightly smaller. One of the larger dogs had a hardlight rendition of an old-fashioned nurse's cap on her head, and the other had a small brandy cask slung around his neck. "Hey, Bernard, Nannette. Hi, Bernie!" Olivia said as they entered. "Uh, hello, miss?"

"You're from the creche?" the woman said. "You are. Good. Now we can get started." Olivia's heart sank just a little as she registered that the woman had the slightly nasal accent common to people from Nextus. She examined the woman thoughtfully. She had no RIDE tags and wore little to no makeup. Her blonde hair was in a simple pageboy cut, and she wore a simple dark cotton blouse and slacks. And she was currently regarding the canine RIDE family with pursed lips and narrowed eyes.

:Well, that's not a good sign,: Lilac sent to Olivia.

"I'm Juliette Hemsford. I'm the caseworker assigned to your request to adopt...Jason Carruthers, thirteen years old." She glanced at the tablet on her desk. "You understand, I trust, that this is a bit unusual."

"There has to be a first time for everything," Bernard said, his low voice gruff but friendly.

“Quite,” Juliette said, fiddling with the tablet in a way that suggested she would have been shuffling papers if she had them. “So...um...tell me about yourselves. What do you, ah, do for a living?”

“At the moment, we’re between jobs,” Bernard said. “I worked for Uplift Search and Rescue for ten years, and my wife worked for a professional nanny service for seven. The back salary they paid us since the Act passed has left us well-off enough not to need to work at the moment. So we’re concentrating on spending time with our family right now.”

Bernard leaned over and gave their son an affectionate lick. He pulled away in embarrassment. “Aw, Dad!”

“Um...I see,” Juliette said. “And you raised your son in the virtual-reality creche?”

“For his first fourteen virtual years,” Nannette said. “We felt that was a good age at which to finish his adolescence in the physical world. He’s been splitting his time between the creche and the Brubeck RIDE museum in the months since.”

“Some RIDE parents keep them in VR longer, others shorter,” Olivia put in. “There isn’t a consensus on what way is best yet.”

“So...why do you want to adopt a *human* child?” Juliette asked.

“This particular human child came by the creche as part of a tour,” Bernard said. “The orphanage had a field trip to meet us last week.”

“We got to talking,” Bernie Junior said. “And, well...he seemed like a cool guy. I was kinda sad for him that he

didn't have folks of his own. So I was talking to Mom and Dad about it, and they said we had room in the family, and...well, why not?"

"He seems like a nice enough boy," Nannette said. "And we think that having a human to take care of will teach Junior some important lessons about responsibility."

Juliette stared at her for a moment, then shook her head. "Er...I guess that's right. So...er...how will Jason benefit if we allow the adoption to go through?"

"He'll be a part of a loving family!" Nannette said. "Something he *doesn't* have right now."

Bernard cleared his throat. "Let's cut to the chase, Miss Hemsford. You're concerned because we're a family of currently un-paired RIDEs who want to adopt a human."

"Well, I wouldn't say—" Juliette began. Then she wilted under Bernard's steady gaze. "All right, yes, I am. You have to admit, it looks...odd."

"To a human, maybe," Nannette said. "But how is that different from a human family getting a RIDE?"

"It's different because a RIDE is—" Juliette began. Then she flushed and cut herself off. "That's really beside the point. What would your plans be regarding Jason's education?"

"Assuming your department approves, we would send Jason and Junior to the new Montessori school Martinez University is opening for RIDEs and humans to learn together," Bernard said.

"We want Junior and Jason to have the best education they can," Nannette added. "Both of our sons should learn the value of good study and good behavior."

“And where would you be living?” Juliette glanced at the tablet. “Your address is just a post office box.”

“We haven’t needed an indoor living space until now, but we’re looking at a house near the creche,” Bernard said. “It has a good big lawn, plus a roomy interior. Just the right place for a small family.”

“Would Junior and Jason be...Fusing?” Juliette asked.

“If Jason wants to, sure!” Bernie said. “I mean, he kinda wanted to when we talked, but the grown-ups wouldn’t let him.”

“But we would have strict time limits set for that,” Nannette said. “We know that too much Fusing isn’t healthy at that age.”

“And you don’t plan on having any other humans in your family? No partners for either of you two?” Juliette said. “How are you going to handle the lack of opposable thumbs when it comes to doing things around the house?”

“We’ll get by,” Bernard said. “If we have to, we can hire someone, or ask a favor.”

“We won’t need them *that* much,” Nannette said. “Jason’s old enough that he can tuck himself in at night.”

Juliette shook her head, and pinched the bridge of her nose. “So why are you doing this now? Don’t RIDEs usually wait until they’re fully-grown to find a human partner?”

“Not exactly,” Olivia put in. “Until now, all RIDEs have been *made* fully-grown. There haven’t been adolescent RIDEs yet.”

“We don’t want to be tied to the old system,” Bernard said. “It has too much...unpleasant baggage. RIDEs only exist for the convenience of humans, so *they’re* the ones

who choose.”

“But it sounds like all you’re doing is turning that around,” Juliette said. “Talking about teaching your son responsibility—that’s how people talk about having *pets*.”

“Well, I never!” Nannette said. “Jason would be a part of our family!”

“People say *that* about pets, too,” Juliette said darkly.

“Seems to me like there’s not a lot of difference between how humans treat their kids and their pets,” Lilac said. “They both get sent to school, given strict rules to live under...they’re both potty-trained, too. And grown-ups always talk to them both like they don’t understand a word they’re saying.”

“But they also take good care of them both, and if they don’t someone comes along to take them away,” Olivia said.

“You’re oversimplifying,” Juliette said.

“Seems to me like kids can learn responsibility by helping take care of little brothers, not just pets,” Lilac said. “So what if they’re talking about treating him like a brother and you’re hearing them talking like he’s a pet?”

“That’s absurd!” Juliette protested.

“That’s as may be,” Olivia said. “But you know, there’s one person we haven’t heard from yet. Why don’t we ask Jason what he thinks?”

“That’s a great idea!” Bernard said.

“All right, I’ll have him sent in.” Juliette tapped her tablet. “It’ll just be a few minutes.”

“You know, if you *really* want to know what they’re thinking, and they’re willing, there is a way,” Lilac said.

“Have you ever Fused a RIDE before?”

Juliette shot her a sidelong glance. “What are you suggesting?”

“Hey, that’s right!” Olivia said. “If you Fuse, you can tell what each other is thinking. You could be *certain* what Nannette’s reasons are.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Nannette said. “I don’t have anything to hide.”

“If that’s what it takes to convince you, sure,” Bernard said. “We’d even cover the cost of removing the tags afterward.”

“I’ll...keep that in mind,” Juliette said, looking away.

:Why do they even have someone from Nextus here for this?: Lilac sent privately to Olivia. :I mean, shouldn’t it be someone from Uplift who knows RIDEs are people?:

:Maybe she took this job ‘cuz she thought she’d just ever be dealing with humans,: Olivia replied. *:And maybe they want to make this first try as hard as possible so they can be sure they get it right.:*

:I guess that’s one possibility,: Lilac said in a doubtful tone.

They sat there for a couple more minutes in awkward silence, until the office door chimed and the subject of the discussion was ushered in.

Jason was an average-looking teenager, slim but not beanpole skinny. He had short light brown hair, brown eyes, and a few freckles. He was wearing sneakers, blue jeans, and an “Uplift Domes” grav-ball team windbreaker. He glanced curiously from one to another occupant of the crowded room. “Hey, Bernie, Mr. and Mrs. Saint. What’re you doing here?”

“They came because they want to adopt you,” Olivia

said.

“Really? So I could leave the home and come and live with you? That’s great!” Jason glanced at the foreboding expression on Juliette’s face. “So, um, what’s the problem?”

“Miss Hemsford is...concerned over the lack of any other humans in the household,” Lilac said.

Jason blinked. “Really? What’s wrong with that? Plenty of human households get RIDEs without having other RIDEs in them.”

“It’s not the same thing,” Juliette said. “I’m just worried that RIDEs might not be the best possible parents for a human.”

“She thinks we want to treat you like some kind of *pet*,” Junior said darkly.

Jason looked at him. “Do you?”

“Of course not!” Junior insisted. “I wasn’t you to be my friend, and my Fuse partner! I’ll prove it to you—Fuse with me right now and you’ll see!”

“Absolutely not!” Juliette said.

“It’s medically safe,” Lilac said. “Lots of kids that young do it. And we’d pay for tag removal if he didn’t want them afterward.”

“While Jason is under my care, it is my duty to protect him from even the slightest risks,” Juliette said firmly.

“And that includes Fusing. I’m still unconvinced it would be a good thing for his mental state.”

“Hey, I’m right here, you know,” Jason muttered.

“So what can we do to prove we’d be good parents?” Nannette asked. “I’ve given you my references—all the human families I’ve served, and the children I helped care

for. What more can you want?”

“I would think *any* family would be better than not having one at all,” Lilac said.

“Yeah,” Jason agreed. “I mean, the Home is nice and all, but it isn’t, well, a *home*. If the Saints can give me that...why should I care if they’re RIDEs?”

“It’s not that simple!” Juliette insisted.

“Why isn’t it?” Jason asked. “At least *they* want me. Babies go just like that, but nobody wants us *old* kids.”

“You know...there might be a way around this without anyone having to Fuse,” Olivia said thoughtfully. “RIDEs can share memories with other RIDEs.”

“Hey, yeah!” Lilac said. “You must have someone here with a RIDE. Or an Integrate would work, too. Get ‘em here, and if the Saints are willing to give ‘em read access...”

“We would,” Bernard said solemnly. “For Nannette and myself, at least. Junior is too young for that kind of thing.”

“It’s a huge invasion of privacy, and I’m not happy about it, but we knew coming in that it might take extreme measures to convince anyone,” Nannette said. “As long as they follow the standard RIDE testimony protocols and erase any memories they download afterward, we’ll agree.”

Juliette blinked, then stopped to consider it for a moment. “That actually sounds...reasonable. I’ll have one sent in.” She tapped the tablet on her desk.

“You really should have had one here to begin with,” Lilac said.

A few moments later, a grey burro walked carefully into the room, hooves making muffled clicks on the carpet. “You wanted to see me, Miss Hemsford?” he asked politely

“Yes, Henry,” Juliette said. “We wondered if you might be willing to—”

“They just filled me in over the comm,” Henry interrupted. He looked over at the Saints, then Olivia and Lilac. His eyes narrowed, his ears flipped back, and he snorted. “Honestly, I don’t know if I’m really the best one to ask for this,” he said. “I harbor certain...philosophical differences with the way they’re doing things.”

“What do you mean?” Juliette asked.

“I tend to believe RIDEs should be made the way we always have been,” Henry said. “No point in us pretending to be human when we’ve had better ways of making ourselves since the beginning.”

:Oh, great, a Mechanist,: Lilac grumbled to Olivia.
:Gotta love rubbing shoulders with people who think you shouldn’t exist.:

Juliette looked at Henry for a moment, then shook her head. “We’re just concerned with whether they would make good adoptive parents for a *human* child. Do you think you can make that determination?”

Henry cocked his head at Juliette and considered for a moment, ears flipping back and forth. Then he nodded his big wedge-shaped head. “That’s a new one on me, but I guess if they’re willing, I am too. From what I’ve heard, not surprised you’d take some convincing.” He turned to face them, ears swiveling directly forward. “All right, go ahead.”

Jason and Junior exchanged worried glances as Henry locked gazes with first Bernard, then Nannette. Lilac, Olivia, and Juliette waited patiently. *:That can’t be easy,:* Lilac sent. *:I don’t know how Mom and Dad’s*

generation can be so willing to just...share all their memories so easily. I mean, it's letting someone into your whole life. That should just be for your partner, maybe your family, and no one else.:

:It's how they were made, I guess,: Olivia sent back.
:The subconscious idea that you're an appliance first, a person second if at all. And even then, they did say they didn't want to do it.:

:I know,: Lilac said. *:But still, ugh.:*

At last, Henry turned back to face Juliette's desk, regarding her solemnly. "What did you find?" Juliette asked.

"Much as I disagreed with their decision to raise a pup in the first place, I can't deny they've done an excellent job of it," Henry said. "Don't see any reason to expect they wouldn't do the same with a human child."

"I...see," Juliette said. "But...what about the differences in biology? Isn't RIDE child-rearing different from the human kind?"

"I don't claim to be an expert in that," Henry said. "But Nannette is. And she seemed to treat the humans she worked with about the same way as they treated Junior, and judging by what public records I can look up on them, they all turned out fine."

"Love is love," Nannette said firmly. "Caring is caring, no matter what you're made of."

"And you didn't see any indication that they might be inclined to..." Juliette began, then paused as she looked for a word.

"Take revenge for decades of RIDE slavery by making a human into a pet?" Henry snorted. "Please. You've been

reading too many centi-mu dreadfuls. The most ‘iffy’ thing I could say about their reasoning is that they feel like humans and RIDEs just *go* together, so they want to have one child of each. But that’s just a side benefit in their thinking, not the main reason.”

“And what is the main reason?” Juliette asked.

Henry flicked his tail. “It’s like they already told you. They like the kid, and so does their kid, and the kid likes them.”

“I...see,” Juliette said again.

Henry snorted. “No, ma’am, I don’t believe you do.” He turned his head to regard her squarely out of one side-facing eye. “You’ve never partnered up with a RIDE, and you come from Nextus, where they think we’re overgrown pocket calculators. You *tell* yourself we’re people and that you have to treat us like people, like a good Uplift liberal, but you don’t *think* of us as people deep-down, because you’ve never had that experience. So your problem is, you end up seeing these RIDEs want to adopt this boy and you run up against your own prejudices. You really need to get a grip on those.”

Juliette stared at him. “But that’s not...I’m not *prejudiced!*” she insisted. “How can you say that?”

“You called me here for my advice, so I’m giving it,” Henry said. “You should go find a RIDE to partner with, if you can find one such that both of you can live with each other. If nothing else, she’ll be here to read the memories for you *next* time you have to do this,” Henry said. “As for the Saints? Sure, let ‘em adopt. I’ve seen a lot of human parents do worse. So have you.” He turned back to face the St. Bernard family. “Been an education meeting you. After

seeing what you showed me, I might almost be ready to change my mind about things. Maybe.” He nodded to them. “Good luck with it.”

“Thank you,” Bernard said. “To you as well.”

The burro turned and clip-clopped back out of the room, leaving its occupants eying each other uncomfortably. After he’d left, Olivia broke the silence. “Well! That was...productive, I think. Now we’ve got some independent verification, anyway. Miss Hemsford?”

Juliette was silent for a long moment, looking down at her desk in concentration. Then she looked up. “Oh. Um, right. Well. I guess in light of what Henry said, there’s no reason not to allow the adoption, at least on a provisional basis.”

“Yay!” Jason said, hugging Junior around the neck. The giant St. Bernard licked his face happily.

“But no Fusing yet,” Juliette said. “I’d like to ease into things.”

“That’s fair,” Nannette agreed. “It’s always better not to rush.”

Juliette tapped some spots on her tablet. “I’ll send you the paperwork. He can go home with you as soon as it’s filled out, and as soon as you’ve got a place for him to sleep.”

“Great!” Jason said. “I’ll go pack my things.”

“We’ll be monitoring you pretty closely, at least the first few weeks,” Juliette continued, recovering some measure of aplomb. “After a month or so, we should have seen enough to decide whether to make the placement permanent.”

“Good.” Bernard nodded. He approached the desk and

offered a paw. “Thank you for your time, Miss Hemsford.”

“Um...you’re welcome,” Juliette said, hesitantly taking the paw and shaking it.

“We will beam the paperwork back shortly, and now that we know for certain we will be needing it, we can close on the house right away,” Bernard continued. “We will be in touch.”

“All right...” Juliette shook her head, as if still a little dazed.

Jason gave Junior one final hug, then let go. “See you soon, Bernie!”

“See you, Jason!” Junior said. The three dogs left by one door, and Jason by another.

“I guess every dog is going to have his day,” Lilac said. “And it’s still morning yet. But sooner or later it’ll be a three dog night!”

Olivia bapped her. “I think that went pretty well, on the whole. It was going to have to happen sooner or later anyway. And there will be a lot more before long if that works out.”

“I suppose I’ll be seeing more of you, then,” Juliette said. “Well, it was nice to meet you, I’m sure.” Her professional veneer was firmly back in place.

“Same to you,” Olivia said. “And...um, listen. Maybe it’s none of my business, but I think Henry was right about some things. You should try to find a RIDE partner, at least for a while. It’ll help you understand some things better. My sister can help—stop by her garage.” She sent a V-card with the contact information.

“Thank you, Miss Stonegate,” Juliette said. “I will take that under advisement.”

“Good enough. See you later. C’mon, Lilac.” Olivia left through the same door as the Saints.

Once they were on the other side, with the door closed behind them, Lilac paused to turn back and stick out her tongue. “Beeeee!”

Olivia chuckled. “Feel good to get that out of your system?”

“A little!” Lilac shook her head. “Geez, I mean, come on! What were they thinking? I mean, they have to know how she feels about RIDEs. Even *Henry* said he’d heard it.”

“I think it’s like I guessed earlier—they want to make it as hard as possible the first time ‘round,” Olivia said. “Make sure they want it hard enough to fight for it, and it’s not just a passing fancy. I’ll bet it gets easier each time.”

“Guess I can see that.” Lilac shook her head. “Humans. What won’t they think of next?”

“And you never know,” Olivia mused. “Maybe they meant to teach Juliette Hemsford a lesson, too. You know, force their stodgiest RIDE luddite to have to deal with a whole family of ‘em. Next best thing to making her just Fuse outright.”

Lilac giggled. “Well, I think it certainly did that! She took a good hard whack to her worldview, there. No one likes to be told they might be a racist.”

“You think she’ll seek out a RIDE?” Olivia asked as they emerged from the Family Services building into the bright dome-filtered sunlight.

Lilac shrugged. “One swallow doesn’t make a summer. Or a sandwich. But you never know. If she’s gonna be the one checking up on Jason, she’s gonna get a *lot* more

exposure.”

Olivia chuckled. “Right. Well, let’s head on back to the creche. We’ve got a fossa to fill in on how it went.”

“Right!” Lilac flopped forward, shifting into her skimmer form. Olivia straddled the seat and they sped away.

THE END