

Jeanette & Tamarind: The Young Guns

By Robotech_Master

CHAPTER 1

June 12, 157 AL

Another warm summer day in Uplift. Like there was any other kind around here. I woke up in the usual spot—our cozy little corner of the small park behind the hospital, nestled inside the curve of the pickup-truck-sized lioness who was curled up around me. I yawned and stretched as I woke up, and Tamarind reached down and gave me a friendly slurp that left my left side damp and nearly knocked me right over again. “Hey!” I yelped. She just looked as innocent and insufferable as she usually does. Muttering something about half-acre lionskin rugs, I padded over to the stream to slurp up a drink. Once I was safely clear, she got to her own feet and shook herself.

“Morning, hon,” Tamarind said, yawning herself. “Looking forward to the big day?”

“You could say that,” I said, not pausing in my drinking. It was kind of funky to be able to drink and talk at the same time, but I’d kind of gotten used to it, given that my talky-mouth was the comm strapped around my neck. “I wonder if they’re *finally* ready to try fixing my body back.”

“This was the day they said they’d be ready to talk about their ideas, at any rate.” We’d been hanging around Uplift for *months*, ever since we came for the last big battle to help smack down Fritz’s forces. Dr. Sam Munn and the other docs wanted time to poke, prod, investigate, and think about stuff. And if it was taking just as long as my last hospital stay, or longer, at least they weren’t stonewalling me like Dr. Branch had. They kept me up on everything they were doing or thinking, and all the odd theories they were exploring. It was just that nothing like me had ever happened before, and they wanted to be certain before they did anything.

It wasn’t all bad. I wasn’t stuck in a hospital room this time. I got to go hang out with Rhianna, Shelley, and company. Shelley and I had a lot to learn from each other hackingwise, and she was even impressed enough with my implants that she was thinking about getting some of her own. I was flattered, but given what had happened to me I suggested she might wanna hold off a while until we were sure we could get me straightened out. It’s one thing taking a chance on screwing up your own body, but quite another recommending it to someone you look up to.

I also got to go on long drives out in the desert with Tammy, and do more work on Marshals training—both studying up myself, and helping Relena catch up. She was determined to be worthy of partnering up with Katie when the Marshals let her. And speaking of studying, Tammy insisted I get caught up with the high school curriculum I’d missed while on the run from the orphanage and stuck out at Alpha Camp. Though there wasn’t so much of that, and a lot of it overlapped with the Marshals training I’d already had.

But enough woolgathering. I stopped drinking, lifted my head, looked at my reflection in the water once the ripples died away. Little lioness staring back at me. Adult-shaped, cub-sized, but next to Tammy I looked like a mouse-sized lion next to a normal one. Well, maybe a dog-sized lion. Anyway, it was quite a contrast. And while

being a kitty cat was fun and all, after a while I really got to missing being able to walk on my hind legs. I had sort of semi-opposable thumbs on my forepaws, but they were like wearing thick winter gloves when it came to doing much with them. I sure sympathized a lot more with AlphaWolf and his crew now than I had before I'd made Tammy bodyjack me!

"Then what are we doing 'lion around'?" Tammy said. "C'mon!" She padded over and stood above me, then opened the hatch in her belly and dropped down to Fuse around me. With me tucked aboard, she padded off toward the hospital. She couldn't fit all the way in, of course, but she'd project virtually into the hospital room to talk to the docs with me.

When we got there, they were all waiting. Dr. Sam Munn, Dr. Avilia Patil, and Dr. Roderick Clemens were in the conference room where we'd been holding our powwows, and they'd already gotten the display panel at one end warmed up. "Ah, welcome, Miss Leroq!" Dr. Clemens said, flicking the rat ears he'd lately inherited from Fusing with Rattigan. It was still a bit of a shock to see him with RIDE tags, but I was getting used to it pretty quickly.

"Hey, doc, good to see you. All of you." I nodded to the others, my gaze lingering on Dr. Patil especially. I'd had time to get over my fangirl shock at meeting Dr. Clemens, but it had just been a couple of months since I'd met Dr. Patil and it was still amazing to me that I was in the same room with not just Dr. Clemens but her too.

"We're glad you're doing well," Dr. Munn said. "As you know, we've been researching your case, studying our options, and trying to figure out what the best course is."

"It is a complicated situation," Dr. Patil said. "As far as we know, nothing like you has ever happened before, so there are few similar cases."

"So whatever happens, you get to blaze yet another new trail as we treat you," Dr. Clemens added.

"Okay, great. So what are the options? Going to put me in one of those nano-reset chambers like you used back in the early days of testing?"

Dr. Patil smiled at me. "I see you have done your own research."

"Well, yeah. I read about what happened to Major Hewer—how she got turned almost entirely into a kitty herself—and I thought..."

Dr. Clemens nodded. "Indeed. Unfortunately, there are a number of reasons that wouldn't work. With Major Hewer, we got to her quickly enough that the nanites hadn't fully 'set' yet. We could still reverse them. Even then, there was still some risk. Probably more than even we knew at the time."

"Which is why almost nobody does nano-reset these days," Dr. Munn said. "Since unless it happens when you're in the same facility *with* a chamber, by the time you can get there it's already too late. They're mainly used in hospitals and nano-clinics, for the nanosurgeries we do there."

"And the largest reason is that Kaylee managed to stop the change *before* it could alter Annette Hewer's brain tissue," Dr. Patil said. "When the brain is involved, everything is much more complicated. Of course, since you are running your mind from a qubitite core, rather than the brain tissue, that is a secondary concern. We do not have to worry about preserving the memories intact in the neural tissue, because you actually re-imprint your memories and personality into it when you switch back over. But all the same, we wish to be careful."

“With that said, we still *could* change you back through nanosurgery,” Dr. Munn said. “The thing is, since your change set so long ago, and it was a major body change, you’re looking at the standard extreme-Fuse cooldown period of three years before it’s safe. If not longer.”

“Oh, *great*,” I groaned. “So I’m stuck like this for two and a half more years?”

Dr. Clemens raised a finger. “Not *necessarily*. There is an alternative.”

I felt my ears point straight forward. “Tell me.”

“We’ve been discussing this with our colleague, ‘Eleven,’” Dr. Clemens said. “You haven’t met him yet, but he runs the nano-regen clinic at the hospital. What we would like to try would be to clone an exact duplicate of your old body, and add implants in an identical configuration to your own. Then you could transfer from your implants to the new body’s implants, and ‘wake yourself up.’”

I blinked. “Can that even be done? I thought you could only clone organs one at a time.”

“We *can* do entire bodies,” Dr. Munn said. “Don’t do it often. You mostly only need them when someone’s coming out of a brainbox, or for certain full-body wasting diseases where it’s easier just to make a new body. It’s not really useful for much else. You read bad science fiction stories about people transplanting their brains into new bodies to live forever, but that doesn’t work—the brain gets old too.”

“*Although*, if you do this and it works, that might just change,” Tammy said thoughtfully. “If you can clone someone a fresh young brain to go with their fresh young body...”

“We *had* thought of that,” Dr. Patil said. “I am honestly not sure the galaxy is ready for immortality surgery, or that it will *ever* be ready. Nonetheless, if it can solve your problem, we can worry about tidying up the worms we decant later.”

“I should mention that you do have another choice,” Dr. Clemens said.

“Oh? Hit me.”

“As I have said, your implants are functionally identical to a standard RI core in exploded form,” Dr. Clemens said. “Which should mean that you could transfer not only to another set of such implants, but to an actual RI core, which we could place within the DE shell of your choice.”

I blinked again. “You mean...I could be a RIDE *for real*, not just through linking my implants?”

“Indeed,” Dr. Patil said. “You could even do both, if you like: try operating a RIDE while waiting for your new body to grow. It should only take a month or so.”

“Hey, Doc,” Tamarind said. “If she could transfer herself into a RI core, could a RI transfer into that same kind of implants?”

Now it was Dr. Clemens’s turn to blink. “Ah...theoretically?”

“So a RIDE could try a *human* body?” Tamarind suggested.

“Well, there is the matter of the autonomic nervous system...” Dr. Clemens pointed out. “But on the other hand, Jeanette seems to have managed the equivalent trick with RIDE background processes...huh. This does bear some consideration.” He stared off into space for a moment before a gentle nudge from Dr. Patil’s elbow brought him back to the here-and-now.

“Wow,” I said. “We’re just getting into a whole weird area here...”

“That is something we should probably investigate for the future,” Dr. Patil said. “But for the present, what do you think of the idea of cloning a new body for you?”

“Um...” I said. “I’m kinda not sure. What would...happen to *this* body afterward?”

“We would like to continue to study it, for the clues it might give us in dealing with other Amontillado victims,” Dr. Clemens said.

“Or, we could stick it in cryo for you,” Dr. Munn said. “It’s *your* body after all. You can switch one way as easy as you can switch the other. Maybe you might want to be a cat again someday. Of course, any time it spends in cryo doesn’t count toward the three-year cooldown on changing it again.”

“Okay.” I thought about that for a bit. “And how much is this gonna cost me?” I had a small fortune coming to me as my mysterious yearly stipend, but I didn’t know the going rate for cloning, let alone how much something this far outside the box might run.

“Don’t worry about that,” Dr. Clemens said. “It’s coming out of the hospital’s research budget.”

“All right, but remember what I said about patents,” I told him. “If there are any, I get a piece of the action.”

Dr. Clemens nodded. “You have my word on that.”

I took a few moments to think about it *seriously*. I wanted my human mitts back, but did I really want to do something this extreme? Swapping over to a whole new *body*?

In a word, *yes*. “Great! So let’s get started!”

They took me down to the nano-clinic to meet with ‘Eleven.’ Nice guy, a little intense. Had made himself over to look like Matt Smith, the actor who played the 11th Doctor, hence the nickname. He got the cloning process started, using the genetic data Tammy had taken when we’d first Fused, and he explained that what he was doing was not exactly cloning by the truest definition of the word.

“It’s more like construction,” he said. “We’re not so much putting a sperm in an egg and letting it grow as we are using nanites to build the DNA blueprints from scratch. Same thing they do back on Earth, but without our qubitite it takes much longer and costs a lot more. Which is why cyber-arbitrage is so profitable, when you get down to it.”

I thanked him for the help, and then we headed out. We had a date with Katie’s partner Relena for some more Marshals training study. She was coming along pretty well, but still had a few weeks to catch up to where I was.

As we pulled into the lot, a sleek lynx bounded out to meet us, followed by Relena. “Hey, Katie!” I called out, climbing down from Tammy’s cab. “They let you out of the zoo today?”

“I’m on furrrrrlough,” Katie said, waving her stubby tail happily. “My worrrrk with Alpha Camp is overrr. It went verrry well. But now it’s time for something new, with my partnerrr.” She rubbed her head against Relena’s side.

It took me a moment to notice that Tammy wasn’t switching back to her Walker form. “Hey, what’s up, Tammy?”

“Oh, just a little surprise,” Tammy said. “We’ve got a Marshals sub waiting for us at the aerodrome. I’ve already gotten permission from your parents, Relena.”

Relena blinked. “They didn’t say anything to me.”

“We wanted it to be a surprise, dear,” Relena’s mother said, coming to the door. “Enjoy your trip, and we’ll see you tonight!”

Relena grinned, and hugged Katie. “Oh wow! Let’s go!” Katie transformed to her sleek skimmer form, and Relena climbed aboard. I got back into Tamarind’s cab. “So

what's the surprise?"

"If I *told* you, it wouldn't be a *surprise*, now would it?" Tamarind purred happily. "You'll find out soon enough!"

"I *could* just hack your core and find out," I pointed out.

"Uh-huh! But you won't!" Tamarind replied.

"Yeah, I won't," I admitted. "So what is it?"

"Marshals business!" Tammy said. "Wait and see!"

"Hmph," I grunted. But I grinned all the same, all the way to the aerodrome. Any day I got to take a field trip with Tammy was a *good* day, surprise or not.

We pulled into the Marshals section of the aerodrome to find a sleek lifting-body shuttle waiting for us—a lot fancier than the other Marshals ship I'd seen, the one that took us back to the Cave of Wonders base after the virus attack. The ship's name, *Acme*, was emblazoned in bold block letters along the side.

"Oh great, they sent Jonesy!" Tammy said. "I love that guy."

"Jonesy?"

"The pilot of this bird," Tammy said. "C'mon, I'll introduce you." We drove up the ramp into the ship's cargo area. Relena and Katie were already there. As I climbed down from the cab, the forward bulkhead hatch opened and we were greeted by...a roadrunner. Well, Fused roadrunner RIDE, anyway. With a green-tailed Iridium Shooting Star badge in hardlight on his chest.

"Hey, kids!" the roadrunner said. "Chuck 'Jonesy' Steader. You're all that's coming?"

"That's right," Tammy said. "Ready to take off at any time."

"Great!" Jonesy said. "I'll just go out back and light the fuse." He pulled a RIDE-sized Zippo lighter out, then walked past us down the ramp.

I watched him go. "Wait, what?"

"It's just a little thing he does," Tammy said. She sent a feed from one of the tower cameras to my implants. The shuttle now had a giant red hardlight cartoon rocket—labeled "ACME," of course—strapped to its back, with a fuse dangling down behind. The roadrunner RIDE stood beneath it, flicking the lighter. Finally the fuse "caught," and the roadrunner quickly ran back up the ramp, which sealed up behind him.

"You kids c'mon up front and strap yourselves in!" Jonesy said. "We're cleared for takeoff in two minutes...or whenever the fuse burns down, whichever comes first!"

"I see it's Looney Tunes time," Relena said. She and Katie followed the roadrunner through the bulkhead. I climbed back into Tammy's cab, and she Fused back into her lioness form around me. My mini-lioness bod wasn't really made for shock couches.

I tapped into feeds from the flight deck camera and the nose camera to watch our takeoff. The fuse burned to the end, and the rocket fired its cartoony rocket thrust. We streaked down the runway and into the sky. As we passed through the dome, the rocket's thrust fizzled out. "Uh-oh," Jonesy said. Then there was a big cartoon explosion, which left the shuttle covered in soot for a moment. Then the soot flickered out, leaving the ship as clean as it had ever been.

"Cute," Relena said.

"I see why you like this guy," I told Tamarind.

"Never a dull moment," Tammy agreed.

"And oh what heights we'll hit!" Jonesy sang over the intercom. "On with the

show, this is it!’ Hang on tight. Meep meep!”

“You know, I could have sworrnrrrrrrroadrrrrrunners can’t fly,” Katie said.

“Oh, you *had* to go and invoke cartoon physics, didn’t you?” Jonesy said. The shuttle abruptly went into free fall, and the artificial gravity cut out so we could experience the full effect of zero gee.

“Whoa!” Relena yelped. In the nose cam, the horizon rose up as the ship headed down.

The gravity came back on. “Sorry ‘bout that, kids,” Jonesy said, chuckling. “We were at the apex anyway, it was too good to pass up. This is a pretty short hop, we’ll be down in a few minutes.”

“Down where?” I asked. The ZPS readout put our landing point a couple thousand clicks west of Nextus, right about where the real Dry Ocean began.

“You’ll see when we get there!” Tammy said cheerfully. The nose camera picked out a cluster of buildings, half-buried under dust and sand.

“Is there really somewhere safe to land down there?” I wondered. “I don’t see a strip.”

“Jonesy could land this thing on a postage stamp,” Tammy said. “Anyway, it’s got the standard Dry Ocean hardlight field protection. We’ll be fine.” She sent a frown emoticon across our link. “This is annoying. I’d been told the Chromes would have this place unpacked and ready for us by now, but it looks like they weren’t able to make it out yet. Oh well. It should be an adventure.”

“Looks like there’s another shuttle down there already,” Relena said. “It’s set down just west of those buildings. They’ve got landing beacons out for us.”

“Mighty thoughtful of ‘em,” Jonesy said. “Looks like a good spot, too. Kicking in the air brakes!” As the lifters fired, he played a screeching brake sound-effect over the comm. The ship slowed to a hover and lowered into the landing field marked out by the beacons.

“Righto, here we are,” Jonesy said. “Velox’s and my orders are to loiter for a few hours and fly you cats back to Uplift this evening. So we’ll just be staying put and playing solitaire. Comm if you need us.”

“We’ll do that,” Tamarind said. “Relena, Katie, Fuse up and come with us.” The cargo ramp lowered, and we padded out into the hot desert sun.

As we hit the sand, we were met by another Fused lynx, similar in appearance to Katie. “Aunt Kandace!” Katie said. “This is a pleasant surrrrrrrrrrise! And Jenni’s with you?”

“I sure am!” another teenaged girl’s voice said. “When I heard what you-all were planning, I *insisted* on being part of it! Hi, everyone!”

“Hi,” I said. “Nice to meet you.” I actually remembered Kandace from our time at Alpha Camp. She’d flown with us on that Marshals transport to the Cave of Wonders—with Jenni inside, come to think of it—right after we’d caught the Amontillado bug, though at the time I’d been too distracted to pay much attention to her. I wondered what Jenni was like. I’d spent some time tutoring Relena, but hadn’t had the chance to mix with many other kids my own age. The being-a-lion thing kind of got in the way of socializing.

“Looks like the gang’s all here!” another familiar voice said. Brooke Thompson trotted around from the other side of the other shuttle’s landing gear. She was in her deertaur form, the form she’d usually worn when visiting me in the hospital.

“So what *are* we doing here?” I asked.

“Gather ‘round, everyone. Team meeting,” Tamarind said. Her voice carried an authority that made it clear this was more than just a suggestion. So, everyone gathered around to face us, and we listened.

“So, everyone, now that we know Jeanette’s getting a new body in another month or so, I think it’s about time we talked about everyone’s prospects for completing training and going into the Marshals full-time,” Tamarind said. “Or at least, full-time part of the time. We’ve been talking it over with the Qube ever since we all kicked Fritz’s butt, and we think we’ve got a good plan.”

“You’ve got me curious,” I said. “Spill.”

“We’ve come up with an idea for a sort of Marshals youth auxiliary,” Tammy said. “We’re calling it the ‘Young Guns’ initiative. Kind of like the Boy Scouts, only with more bite. We’re thinking of making up a Seven to test the concept.”

Katie made a show of counting everyone present with her fingers. “And I’m guessing that Seven is the seven of us?”

“Right. I’ll be the team’s trainer, boss, and I guess den mother,” Tammy said. “B’s going to be our seventh at least part of the time. There’s someone else we...might be working with from time to time, too.”

“Oh? Who’s that?” I asked.

Tammy hesitated. “Well...DeniFaye,” she said. “We’ve been sort of coming back and forth, and we figured it might be worth giving working together another try.”

“Tammy, that’s great!” I said. “It’ll be terrific working together with her.”

“We’re switching off ‘cuz we both wanted the chance to work with you-all,” Brooke said. “If Fennie tags along, too, I guess we’d be a ‘7.1’ at that point. Like surround speakers.”

“Heh.” I grinned. “So what-all are we gonna be doing? Training together?”

“Until we get you up to speed, yeah,” Tammy said. “After that, we’ll probably do some patrols, search-and-rescue work, and run backup for other teams. It’s not gonna be the most dangerous stuff in the world, but it’s not make-work either. Beyond that... we’ll see what happens.”

“Sounds great!” Jenni said.

“You’ve cleared it with everyone’s folks, right?” Brooke asked.

“Yes. It was a little tricky getting a message through to Jenni’s mother on the cruise ship, but with the might of the Marshals and a little help from the Munns, we managed it,” Tammy said. “Luckily, she said yes right off. If we’d had to try to talk her into it, we might still be waiting to hear back.”

“Glad that’s sorted,” Kandace said. “And I’m really glad to be working with you’uns. Beats the heck out of my night job as a bouncer back in Aloha.”

“Anyway, it looks like we’ve got our first mission ahead of us,” Tamarind said. “For our HQ, we’re reactivating an old mothballed Nextus military base, dating all the way back to the Nextus/Sturmie war. This was one of the rear-guard early warning stations, meant to provide some warning if the Sturmies tried a sneak-attack out of the Dry. It wasn’t needed after the war, so they shut it down. We were *supposed* to have had a team of Chromes out last week to blow out the mothballs and get the hardlight dome up and running, but it looks like they got sidetracked and couldn’t get to it yet. So we’ll just have to go in and do it ourselves.”

“Sounds great!” Relena said. “I’ve always liked old military facilities. They have

character.”

“We haven’t had any reports of bandit activity this close to the coast, but we’ll pretend we have,” Tamarind said. “We’ll treat this as a training exercise for operating in hostile territory, so I want everyone on full alert. We’ll take point. Katie, Relena, left flank. Kandace, Jenni, right flank. Brooke, rear guard. Move out!”

We padded forward into the cluster of buildings, burning brightly under Zharus’s midday sun. There was a central dome, like an observatory or radar tower, and several smaller buildings and quonset huts spaced around it. Sand was piled high in drifts against some of them, almost burying a couple. I pulled up the schematics of the place from Tammy’s files. “The hardlight generator should be in that central building,” I said. “We have the access codes to get in, right?”

“Everything’s powered down, so there will be physical locks,” Tamarind said. “Luckily, we know how to deal with those.”

“Won’t there be Q dust contamination?” Relena asked.

“The doors were sealed airtight, and there was no ventilation, so hopefully not much got in,” Tamarind said. “We’ll still have the Chromes give the place a through going-over, when they can get around to it, but we should be able to make it at least livable for now.”

We changed modes to Fuser form, and stomped up to have a look at the door. Luckily it was on the shielded side of the dome, so the sand drifts weren’t bad. There was a hasp with a huge padlock on it holding the door shut. “We got the key to this?”

“Believe it or not, we do,” Brooke said, stepping forward. “Allow me—my hands are closest to the right size for this.” She produced a key, stuck it in the lock, and turned it. Or at least tried to turn it. “Gah. Was afraid of that. Looks like dust’s gotten into the mechanism.”

“No worries. Move aside.” Tammy waited for Brooke to back out of the way, then reached out and took the lock and the hasp in thumb and forefingers of both hands, and very carefully broke it in half. “There. Now let’s see...” She carefully shoved the door open. With a grating sound, it slid slowly along the track, revealing a dark opening...that was about half the size of Tammy.

She knelt down so we could peer inside. “Ah, there it is. Hardlight dome generator circa 122 AL, and the polywell fusion power cell they used to run it. We just need to get someone in there and bring it up again.”

“I could do that!” Relena said. “That generator looks very similar to the replica at the Martinez U museum, and Gina showed me how that one worked half a dozen times.”

“All right, then get on it,” Tammy said. “I’ve got the manual on board and can talk you through any parts that don’t match.” She moved aside to let Relena and Katie through. “Brooke, Kandace, overwatch.”

“Got it!”

We moved to cover the rest of the encampment, each of us taking a 120-degree field of view, as we heard Relena and Katie pattering around inside. After a while, we heard a loud thump, followed by a deep bass rumble. “That did it! The polywell is powering up!” Relena reported. “Now for the hardlight dome...okay, there.”

We felt our fur stand on end as the hardlight dome pushed outward around us, scooping up and carrying away dust and sand as it passed. The dome stabilized with a perimeter just outside the buildings, about halfway between us and the shuttles, ending up with drifts of sand several meters deep against the outsides. The paved walkways

between the buildings were visible, and all the entrances were clear.

“It’ll still take an hour or so for the Maxwell’s Daemon to bring the temps down to livable outside the buildings,” Relena reported. “With base power, we can start the ventilators to cool the buildings down a little faster than that.”

“We can do that from the ops center,” Kandace said. “I seem to recall from my own Army days it would be that one right there.” She pointed to a low concrete building at one end of the base.

“Sounds right,” Tamarind said. “Since we’re too big to fit into *that one*, too, the rest of you guys go get it started. We’ll wait outside and follow you via AV feeds.”

“Have fun in there, you guys,” I said. “Hurry up and flip the switches so I can come in, too!”

“Sorry you’re missing out on all the fun,” Tammy said privately to me. “Downside of being great big.”

“Hey, I’m having plenty of fun just being out here,” I assured her. “And getting to watch everyone else work without actually having to *do* any of it myself? That’s pretty fun right there.”

Tammy chuckled. “I’ll have to remember that when it comes time for evaluations.” Then she popped up our VR setting and threw up screens showing the camera feeds she was getting from the others. They were making their way through dingy grey corridors lit by grimy orange emergency lighting plates.

“Pretty spooky-looking in here,” Jenni said. “Feels like one of Giger’s aliens should jump out from behind the next corner.”

“Maybe we should tell ghost stories?” Relena suggested.

“Sounds like fun,” Brooke said. “You know any?”

“Oooh, I’ve got a good one,” Tammy said. “Passed down to me from some war vet RIDEs I knew back in the service.”

“Oh?” Katie asked. “Aunt Kandace and I werrrrre both in that warrrr too. Wonderrrr if it’s one we know.”

“Might be,” Tammy said. “The Frozen Battalion?”

“Oooh, that’s a good one!” Katie said. “Go on, tell it!”

“Hmph,” Kandace said. “Never had much patience with ghost stories myself...but I know Jenni wants to hear it. So go ahead.”

“The Frozen...Battalion?” Brooke asked.

Tammy settled down outside the entrance to the bunker and crossed her paws. “The story goes that in the waning days of the war, Nextus started to get a little worried about what might happen next time war broke out. When that war started, they basically had to build a whole army out of nothing in no time, without any prior war-fighting experience. So someone cooked up the bright idea of maybe freezing one of their best battle-ready battalions in a bunch of cryo-tubes left over from the colony ships, and thawing them out to build an army around if it happened again.”

“Kinda like leftovers after the big meal,” Kandace said dryly.

“So they did it. Floated a cover story about the battalion being entirely wiped out in an ambush, then tucked them and their RIDEs away in a bunker somewhere,” Tammy said. “Hooked up to a long-term geothermal power sink, with plenty of automation to keep everything repaired without needing humans around. ‘cuz after all, it’s hard to keep a secret when you got people around fixing stuff all the time. Just one teensy little problem...”

I thought I saw where this was going. “They *lost* them, didn’t they?”

“That’s Nextus bureaucracy for ya!” Tammy said. “Yep, somewhere in the great paperwork purges after the war, when they got rid of classified documents they didn’t want leaking out, somehow the location of the secret bunker where they kept the corpsicles got lost, too. Could be anywhere. Might even be right here.”

“Oooooooh,” Jenni and Relena said together.

“So keep an eye out for mysterious sealed hatchways to lower levels that aren’t on the official blueprints,” Tammy said. “Because hey, you never know.”

“We’ll...do that,” Jenni said.

Kandace sniffed. “Of course, like most of those stories, it doesn’t hold up if you look closer at it. Most of the cryo capsules from the colony ships went back with the ships to pick up more colonists, or else got recycled. And there aren’t any records of a whole battalion getting wiped out in an ambush from the war.”

“But maybe that’s just what they *want* you to think,” Tammy said, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “Maybe the cover story was intentionally faked to keep people from looking at it too closely when some of the details leaked out.”

“Oh, *now* you’re just being silly,” Kandace said.

“Hey, I think we’re here!” Relena said, pointing to a doorway just ahead. “It says it’s the ops center.”

“Let’s check it out,” Katie said, pushing the door open. They entered a room full of rows of indistinct shapes draped in plastic.

“Hey, what’s all this?” Relena asked.

“Protective coverings for the command consoles.” Katie grabbed one of the cover sheets and yanked it off. Beneath was a featureless black glass slab.

“Where are all the buttons?” Jenni asked.

Kandace chuckled. “Damn. I’d forgotten how Nextus control interfaces used to look back in the day. There aren’t any buttons, kid. It’s all touch-panels and holograms. Which...aren’t terribly useful without any power. We need to find the breaker box for the room and light it up.”

“Back herrrrre,” Katie said, making her way to the back. “The schematics say it should be in this corrrrnerrr...ah, there.” She flipped open a metal box on the wall and started throwing switches. The breakers CHUNKED into place, soft lights in the ceiling came on, and Nextus boot logos appeared across all the panels in the room, including the big display screens on the walls.

“Give it a minute for everything to start up, and we can interface with the computers and bring it up,” Kandace said.

“Aw, it’s no fun if you just do everything by direct computer link!” Jenni said. “Show me how these controls work!”

“Yeah, I’d like to see that too,” Relena said as Katie walked them back up to the front of the room. “If this is going to be our base, we should know how it works.”

“We can get those panels ripped out and replaced with more current stuff, that’s no problem,” Tammy said.

“No way!” I put in. “Old stuff rules! Let’s keep them just as they are.”

“I’m kind of curious myself,” Brooke said. “Everything else I’ve seen since I got here has been all twentieth-century-flavored. I’ve never had the chance to see what you guys used before that happened.”

“It’s not really all that interesting,” Kandace said. “Well, unless you’ve never seen

it before, I guess.” She stepped in front of the uncovered control bank at the front of the room. “You’ve got your basic haptic touch-panel interface here. These icons at the top are for the different panel functions. They’re all programmable so anyone could sit anywhere. I’m gonna call up environmental control, since that’s where the thermostat is.”

The panel layout changed, projecting a holographic map of the base above it with temperature gauges superimposed over all the buildings and sliders for thermostat control. Kandace reached over to a master slider off to the side and slid it down to 23 degrees Celsius. A moment later, the background silence was broken by a deep whirring as long-unused cooling systems activated and ventilation fans came to life.

“I don’t get it. Why’s everything holographic?” Jenni asked. “There’s even a qwerty keyboard floating in the air...” She reached out to touch it, and her fingers went through it. “...that’s not really there.”

“That’s just how the interface had evolved,” Kandace said. “They didn’t have hardlight emitters small or efficient enough for control panels, the way we do now. And they hadn’t gone back to twencen thinking yet, with physical controls. So they used touch panels and holograms with motion tracking. Anyhow, in a lot of ways all this panel stuff was just a backup. For really getting stuff done, they used these.” She reached under the panel and brought out a pair of oversized wraparound glasses.

“Are those interface specs?” Brooke said, reaching out to take them. She held them up to her eyes and peered through them. “Wow, this interface looks...dated.”

“Forget the interface, those glasses are a *fashion* nightmare!” Jenni said. “They look like something from a bad twencen ‘future’ TV show. Ugh.”

“Because they’re *from* the ‘future,’ duh!” I put in. “Fashion is cyclical, remember? The twentieth century is ‘in’ right now...so the ‘future’ is the distant past.”

“Anyway, the temp’s dropping. Give it a few minutes and it’ll be safe to de-Fuse, and for Jeanette to come in,” Brooke said.

“Cool. Looking forward to seeing the place with my own eyes,” I said.

It wasn’t too long before internal temps were low enough for me to come in. Tammy poked her head into the airlock and spat me out like a hairball. I had a quick blast of desert heat before the door sealed, then the temperature dropped to just a little stuffy and I padded inside. When I got to the command center, Katie and Kandace had already de-Fused.

Relena had on a pair of the old ‘specs, that gave her a distinctly bug-eyed look. She was reaching out and manipulating things in the air that the rest of us couldn’t see. Jenni was sitting at one of the consoles, tapping at the controls with interest. “Hey, Jeanette!” Jenni said. “Take a look at this crazy control scheme, huh?”

I put my forepaws on the console’s bezel and peered at it. The screen was a crazy quilt of touch panels and displays, like Windows 8 crossed with *Star Trek: The Next Generation* LCARS. “Yeah. I don’t think I’ve got the dexterity right now to fiddle with it, but it looks neat. But at least my implants can link up with it okay.”

“I think you’re right,” Relena said, sliding up the ‘specs. “We should keep it this way. It’s unique. It’s not like the functionality of the stuff has changed much, anyway.”

Kandace snorted. “‘Unique,’ huh? Funny. That’s why twencen stuff hit it so big, back in the day. All this stuff was generic, but the twencen was *new and different*. Guess the grass is always greener.”

“We’re from Zharrrrrus,” Katie said. “What do *we* know about grrrras?”

I had to laugh at that. “Okay, yeah.”

Outside, Tammy was wandering around and sniffing at the various buildings. “Sure has been a while since I’ve been back on a genuine Nextus installation,” she said. “Now I’m feelin’ a little nostalgic for the good ol’ days.”

“The good ol’ days, when half the continent was at war?” Brooke said.

“Hey, don’t knock it,” Kandace said. “If it weren’t for the war, we wouldn’t exist.”

“Though we’rrre not exactly unhappy therrre’s peace now,” Katie put in.

“That’s right, all three of you are vets, aren’t you?” Jenni said.

“And all from the same side, even,” Tammy said. “This really is kinda like homecoming for us.” She sighed. “I miss Denise.”

“So anyway, it’s gonna be getting cool enough to go outside in a little while,” Brooke said. “Who wants to poke around and see what we find in the other buildings? Maybe they stuck the Frozen Battalion in here after all.”

“Yeah, right,” Tammy said. “I doubt there’ll even be any Rip Van Winkle RIDEs in this one. They’d have pulled the RIDEs out when the war ended, and this place wasn’t closed up ‘til a couple years later. But sure, let’s explore.”

We waited a few more minutes ‘til the thermal readings said the temps within the dome were below 35 degrees—still too hot, but cool enough to be out in without keeling over from heat prostration—and went from building to building checking the place out. The barracks were interesting. They still had the old mattresses on them, and the beds were made to military standards. Brooke pulled out a quarter-*mu* piece and dropped it on one of them. “Wow, it really *does* bounce.”

The next building was the commissary. We were gratified to find it didn’t contain any rotten food, though it did contain a mostly-full thousand gallon water tank and several hundred sealed Nextus military ration pouches. “Would those still be any good after all this time?” Jenni wondered.

“Why, you hungry?” Relena asked.

“Actually, they probably would be,” Tammy said. “Everything’s canned and sealed, using techniques we’ve had for hundreds of years. Maybe it wouldn’t taste the best, but it should be perfectly safe. And it’s not as if it tasted the best ‘fresh’ either.”

“Really?” Jenni asked.

“If anyone would know, Tammy would,” I said. “She was a quartermaster. Or should that be quartermistress? Anyway, supplies were her specialty.”

“Right!” Brooke said. “We’ll just keep those, then. No sense letting perfectly... something-or-other food go to waste.”

“We can feed them to our prisoners,” Relena said. “If we ever have any.”

“We do have a brig,” Kandace said. “Next building over. Just checked it.”

“Wow, this place has *everything!*” I said.

The last building we checked was also the biggest—the base’s mech garage and maintenance facility. The biggest room was pretty big, easily a hundred meters on a side, and mostly empty save for some tool carts and other equipment pushed off to one side. Tammy surveyed it with satisfaction. “This can be our main training area,” she decided. “Lots of room for hand-to-hand combat practice.”

“Hey, look what’s in here!” Relena said, poking her nose out the hatch from one of the side rooms. “A whole bunch of old skimmer cycles, looks like.”

“Really? Let me have a look,” Brooke said, trotting over. “Ah! Those are Chinooks. A friend got one of those after we moved here.”

“The smaller ones in back are Tornados,” Tammy said, padding over. “They’re what they used before RIDEs came along. Really stupid onboard Ad-Is.”

“They look kinda like your skimmer bike form, Kandi,” Jenni said.

“That’s ‘cuz our DE frames were based on them,” Kandace said. “Used a lot of the same parts, in fact. Since they were the shells they already had, it was the quick-and-dirty way to get us up and running fast. They only changed enough to give ‘em an animal form too.”

“What’re they doing out here?” I wondered. “I’d think those things would conk out in about five minutes with all the Q dust.”

“Looks like these were a later model,” Tammy said, reading the code tags on one of them. “Once they figured out it was the internal hardlight that let us keep working right, they retrofitted some of these for ops in the first part of the war. Forward recon, mostly, when they didn’t want a RIDE smart enough to know stuff falling into enemy hands.”

“But we turrrrned out to be so much betterrr that in the end they phased these out and just decided to rrrisk it,” Katie said. “Theirrr Ad-Is arrre rrrreally dumb.”

“If you want, sometime we can boot a couple of them up and you can try them out,” Tammy said.

“Once I’ve got my new bod, I think I’d like to try that,” I said.

“We can use ‘em for guests who don’t have their own RIDEs,” Kandace said. “Maybe there are some Marshals who could get some use out of some of them too.”

Tammy nodded. “I’ll pass the word along. So what do you all think of the place?”

“I like it,” I said. “It’s a lot better than being back in Nextus.”

“But it’s close enough we can go there if we want to,” Relena said.

“It’s neat!” Jenni said. “Like camping.”

“Great!” Tammy said. “It’s just about time to fly back home, but we’ll be starting our full-time training in a couple of weeks, just as soon as school lets out.”

“We’re not waiting for me to get my new body?” I asked.

“I’d like to see what you’re capable of in this one,” Tammy said. “We’ve got more than a few non-traditional-bodied agents—Brooke there, for one—and if you can swap back and forth as easily as downloading into new implants, there might be times that one is useful.”

“No one would expect someone cute and cuddly like me of being a Marshal, huh?” I said.

Tammy chuckled. “Something like that. I’ve got a few ideas; we can go over them later.”

“Sounds great!” Relena said.

“Guess I’ll see you guys later,” Jenni said.

“Not as much later as you think,” Tammy said. “I’m gonna have you start getting together with Jeanette and Relena in virtual. They can help catch you up on the classroom training before we start the physical.”

She nodded. “Works for me!”

CHAPTER 2

So we flew back to Uplift, and life went on going on. We three humans started meeting in virtual after school, with the RIDEs popping in every so often, and I found out more about Jenni's background. It was kind of an eye-popper. Turned out while Tammy and I had been getting smacked around by Shahrazad's little virus, Alpha and crew had gone off to raid a RIDE slaver camp with the aid of the Inties who'd shown up to deal with Amontillado. Along the way, Kandace had ended up rescuing Jenni, both from the slavers (one of whom, her father "in the biological sense," had kidnapped her away from her Mom) and from an obnoxious lioness RIDE who got off on punishing humans.

"I always thought that Leona was bad news," Tamarind said when I told her about it. "Wonder how she's getting along now that Alpha Camp's been tamed?"

Kandi took Jenni back to Aloha, where they found her Mom had taken a job on a starliner on the Zharus-Earth run a few weeks before to earn money to pay mercs to rescue Jenni, and wouldn't be back for a couple of *years*. Along they way they kinda got to liking each other, so Kandace was taking care of Jenni 'til her Mom got back.

And she really was interested in the Marshals. I wasn't sure she necessarily had the temperament to do much fighting and stuff—she hadn't been involved in a battle already like Relena and I'd done—but there were other things to do in the Marshals than that. And anyway, you never know.

The last couple weeks of school passed before you knew it, and then it was off to the base again. The Chromes had come in and cleaned up a little, added a few more modern amenities like fresh food, more recent fabbers, and laundry supplies and things, but pursuant to our instructions they'd left the command center and important stuff like that just how it was. We got started with the training.

Jenni and Relena didn't have any real problems with the standard week of the RIDE being their boss. (I got to skip that part, for obvious reasons.) It was pretty much pro-forma anyway. Relena already trusted Katie implicitly after they'd fought the last battle against Fritz's crew together, and I gathered Jenni already spent a lot of time in Fuse doing homework or sleeping while Kandi did other things.

The classroom sessions went pretty well, too. I was already familiar with most of the material, so I got to serve as teacher's aide and co-instructor. Both Relena and Jenni picked up the material quickly, but then we were all high-school age, the best time of our lives for learning stuff. I could see they were gonna make copper without any trouble.

And of course Katie and Kandace didn't have any trouble picking things up either. They could sideload the skill chips they didn't have, but since they were both military veterans like Tammy, they already knew most of the stuff Marshals needed them to and more.

About a week before my new bod was scheduled to be ready, it came time to choose our gear. We'd all heard about this, of course. The Marshals had their own unique tradition of the most disuniform "uniform" anyone had ever seen. Unlike your average army, where you got your standard-issue dress, undress, field, et cetera outfits

and they were the same for everyone, Marshals let you pick whatever look you wanted to. Base it on your favorite pop culture icons, or just go hog wild.

“It’s ‘cuz we so often work alone, or in small groups,” Tammy explained. “So we don’t have to be all samey. In fact, looking as unique as possible, and often enough the weirder the better, adds to our rep. Anyway, thanks to fabbers, resupply and ordering in bulk isn’t an issue. The one bit of the outfit that doesn’t change is the badge.”

“Uh...what if we don’t have any idea what we want our style to be yet?” Jenni asked.

“There’s a few ‘generic’ kits you can pick from,” Tammy said. “Wild west, Victorian-slash-steampunk, pulp action hero, comic book super, James Bond superspy, eccentric time traveler, sci-fi starfighter pilot, and so on. You can always change it up later on. Some Marshals revamp their style every couple of years just to keep things ‘fresh.’”

“You can also mix and match,” Brooke put in. “One of my friends’ pard went with a mostly old-west look but took steampunk weapons, that sort of thing.”

“I’m not sure if there is a style that fits ‘mini-lioness,’” I said. “Disney’s *Lion King*? Yeah, right.”

“I think for now we can go with a custom-tailored duster for you, and for your weapons, these.” Tamarind projected a hologram in the air of a number of small and medium-sized unmanned drones—like the disposables that the media networks use to get stories, only more robust. Most of them were powered by lifters in a quad or sextuple configuration, though a couple actually had powered rotors. They had modular docking ports on them, and a variety of weapons, sensors, and other tools that could attach to them.

“Looks like my style is going to be Agent Fitz of S.H.I.E.L.D.,” I said. “Am I going to have to start talking with a Scottish accent?”

Tammy smirked. “That part’s optional. Anyway, you can control these through your implants, so hands aren’t required. In fact, the ones with lifter-manipulators on ‘em could partly make up for not having hands. Looking forward to trying that myself. I can carry a pretty big load of ‘em in back and still have room for supplies, even fabricate more as needed. And they’ll still be useful once you’ve got the new bod.”

“That does look promising,” I agreed. “And after all the messing around I’ve done with the media networks’ drones, I already have a pretty good notion how to use ‘em.”

“That was the idea,” Tammy said. “I’ll have the fabber bang a few out and we can give ‘em a shot.”

“Huh...what to go with?” Jenni mused. “Shouldn’t be something *too* silly. I don’t think Kandi would tolerate it.”

Kandace snorted. “Don’t worry yourself on that score. If it’s beneath my dignity, I’ll let you know.”

“I’m leaning toward some of the pulp era stuff,” Jenni said. “The Shadow, the Green Hornet...those people were snappy dressers. Then there are the jetpack Nazi smashers of World War II...”

“I like the look of some of the stuff from the anime package,” Relena said. “Not sure I could go with full-on ‘magical girl,’ but I like the style of the body suits and some of the weapon casing retrofits.”

“Why don’t you take the rest of the day to make up your minds?” Tammy suggested. “Once you’ve got your gear fabbed, we’ll go on from there.” She licked the

back of one paw thoughtfully. “Meanwhile, Jeanette and I will go play with our new toys!”

We did have a lot of fun that afternoon fiddling with the drones. Tammy was right, they really were useful little buggers. Smart, too. Not in the “self-aware” sense, but they had onboard expert systems that were about as advanced as a drone could be without starting to think for itself. I could control a whole swarm of ‘em with my implants without having to worry about giving them specific instructions individually except when I wanted to do things very precisely. No wonder the media networks used these critters for all their news gathering. They’d be just as useful for recon work in the field. The bigger ones could carry light pulse guns or even the equivalent of gauss pistols.

Meanwhile, Jenni and Relena (and Kandace and Katie, of course) put their heads together over the styles they were gonna go for. By the time we were done with the drones, they had something.

They actually ended up picking very similar styles when you get right down to it. Or maybe it’s that they played out the styles they chose in similar ways. They both went with black trenchcoats for their dusters, though Jenni’s was cut in a 1940s style and Relena went with more stylized, like something you’d see out of *Cowboy Bebop*, *Battle Angel*, or a zillion other anime featuring longcoat badasses.

Underneath, Jenni was dressed like your standard mid-twencen commando, with Marshals colors—blue turtleneck sweater (with badge pinned to it), web belt with pistol holsters for a pair of gauss guns modeled after the iconic Colt 1911 automatic, and pouches, brown canvas jeans. Combat boots completed the ensemble—though I was pretty sure they were made out of modern materials, which meant they’d be lighter and more flexible than twencen tennis shoes on her feet. She had a pulse rifle made to look like a tommy gun.

Relena continued the anime look. She had a blue and brown bodysuit like something out of *Gatchaman* or similar anime, a low-slung blaster holster, and even a sword scabbard at the other hip. (Seriously? A sword? Well, whatever. Her style, her rules.) Her rifle had more organic curves, though I knew it was still the same ol’ gun underneath.

“Hey, nice outfits. You coordinated on the coats?” I said.

“Well, yeah. A little,” Jenni said. “We figured we might as well.”

“It kind of fits. Kandi’s got the classic look, and Katie’s got the new and shiny,” Relena said. “So we sort of matched our approaches to that.”

And I was already thinking what I might do when I got my bod back. Maybe go with something like a Trinity look from the first *Matrix* movie, complete with badass longcoat. But later for that. For now, Tammy had fabbed a four-legged trenchcoat-duster-thing for me that fit this lion body about as well as anything did. I put up with it because I knew the dusters were necessary survival gear, but I still thought it looked ridiculous. “Great! We’re just about ready, then.”

Tamarind nodded. “You’ve got your gear, and it looks good to go. You know what *that* means, right?”

We all exchanged knowing glances. “More training?” Relena guessed.

“Right you are!” Tamarind said happily. “Now we’re gonna show you how those dusters of yours will keep you alive in the Dry! Luckily, the Dry’s not too far away from here...”

The training really got interesting after that. Desert survival was annoying—more so since I didn't have hands. I'd been through it in virtual, of course, back at Alpha Camp, but needed at least a refresher in the real. And I was gonna have to go through it again when I got the new body, too. Still, the geek in me loved the tech built into those dusters. Survival suit, backup battery, stylish accessory...was there anything they couldn't do?

And after that we got into unit tactics and drills, patrolling and rounding up virtual bad guys. *That* was fun. It took us a few tries to figure out how to work as a team, but we eventually fell into a rhythm. Jenni/Kandi and Relena/Katie were the close-in wranglers, Tammy and I provided extra firepower and recon support, and Brooke, with her custom shell's versatility, mostly stayed in reserve and filled in where needed. We mainly concentrated on getting the other six of us on the same page since sooner or later we'd be swapping Brooke out for DeniFaye off and on, so our tactics couldn't be too dependent on her.

But finally the hospital commed and said the new bod was ready as it would ever be. I'd already been in consultation with them in the past weeks, providing the complete specs for my implants and making sure they grew the same way in the clone as in me. As far as I could tell, they were basically identical, within the bounds of the little bits of randomness chaos theory would account for.

So Tammy and I flew back to Uplift. Everyone else insisted on coming along, too, for moral support. I appreciated the gesture. I was nervous as a cat with seven kittens all the way back. When we arrived, *everyone* was there waiting for us—even Dr. Patil and Dr. Clemens, who'd been consulting with Eleven and Dr. Munn on the whole business. (Which meant Fritz must be somewhere nearby, too, given that he was in their exclusive custody these days, but nobody felt like bringing up the lynx in the room.) Scaled-down Tammy winked in from the room's hardlight telepresence projector as I padded in.

"Quite a crowd," Eleven said cheerily. "I don't think there's been this much scientific expertise gathered in one room since the original RIDE program. Very cool."

"Let's get started, then," Dr. Munn said. He nodded to the med tank in the center of the room, where...*I* floated, submerged in medical nanogel. From what I could see of the face behind the transparent oxy mask, it was absolutely me—the me I'd been before I'd been, well, lionized. It was creepy, like having an out-of-body experience. I looked back at my own fuzzy body, feeling a little bit of identity crisis for just a moment. Tammy gave me a reassuring nuzzle.

"I guess it's too late to ask you to put a couple more years on?" I said. "Maybe tweak the measurements a little? You don't often get the chance to order a new body for yourself."

Eleven chuckled. "Regeneration's tricky, young lady—take it from me, I should know. Best to try to keep things as familiar as possible."

"Right, right." I padded around the tank, taking myself in from all angles. "Is there...does she have anything...y'know, in her head? I mean, not the implants, but..."

"We've kept the body in an induced coma," Eleven said. "No memories of any kind, no chance to develop its own personality. It's a blank slate. This is quite unlike anything we've done before."

"I never really thought about it, but...it almost feels wrong looking at her now," I said. "Like this *could* have been another person but I'm taking over."

“She wouldn’t have had much chance at a normal life in any event,” Eleven said. “Being built full-grown like this, she wouldn’t have gone through the natural developmental processes that bring body and mind to adulthood at the same time. She needs a mind that’s already been through all that to work right. And that’s where *you* come in.”

“I guess it is,” I said. “So what do you want me to do now?”

“We think the best course of action is for you to connect to the implants in the new body’s head and test them, make sure they’re functioning properly,” Dr. Clemens said. “Then you’ll connect your two sets together, so you’re running on both sets...then shut the set in the lion body down.” He nodded to an open cryo-chamber next to the clone tank. “The entangled quantum states transfer your consciousness, you see. Same method we use to transfer RIDEs from a damaged RI core. Then we wake the human ‘you’ up, and put the lion ‘you’ on ice for if you need her again later.”

“Slick,” I said. “Guess we should get started, then.”

“Great!” Eleven rubbed his hands together. “What else, what else...oh! One more thing to remember. When you do wake up in the new body, you’re not going to be very coordinated, or very strong. There’s a limit to how well we can tone the muscles without someone actually shoving them around. See it all the time when a full-body borg Earther goes all-flesh again. But don’t worry, it’ll only take a week or so of physical therapy to get you back on your feet again.”

“Oh, terrific,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Why didn’t anyone tell me *that* before?”

“Can’t be any worse than figuring out how to be a lion, right?” Tammy said. “Or a RIDE, for that matter.”

I remembered those panicked few moments when my own body hadn’t even known how it worked. “Yeah, I guess you’ve got a point there.” I padded over to the cryo-chamber and climbed inside. “Let me know when you’re ready.”

Dr. Clemens moved to a set of hardlight display panels set up by the clone tank, and logged in. “All right...go ahead.”

“Right!” I reached out and connected to the implants in “my” other head. I could feel them there, lying dormant, waiting to be filled. I started copying data over from my own ‘plants, storing all my memories and data at exactly the same memory addresses as in the old ones. That was going well, but...there was still something missing.

“I’m seeing data copying, but...no actual computational activity in the new implants,” Dr. Clemens reported.

“Um,” I said. “Get right down to it, I’m not entirely *sure* how to...put me in them. So much of what I do is just...instinct.”

“So follow your instincts,” Tammy said reasonably. “Just relax and...*imagine* yourself popping into them.”

“This isn’t like if I’m just having trouble peeing, you know,” I grumbled. But I remembered how well my cyber-instincts had helped me before—drawing on Tammy’s skill stores to show me how to be a RIDE, and how to be a lioness. Maybe they could show me how to be a human again, too. I closed my eyes, and imagined...*reaching out* somehow.

It took me a few minutes, and several different thought models, before I finally found the key. Even then, I wasn’t entirely sure what I did. I just knew that there was somehow twice as much of me as there was before, and I was split across two different places. Trusting to my instincts again, I gathered myself into the new spot, somehow

pulling myself away from the old spaces. It was a little tricky, and the new “digs” felt a little unfamiliar at first. But it wasn’t a *bad* unfamiliar. I thought I could get used to this. The only problem was that my senses were still in the dark. *‘cuz the body’s unconscious right now, duh.*

:We’re bringing you out of the coma now, give it a couple minutes to wake up,: Tammy commed to me.

:Right!: I replied. I bided my time a little, and before I knew it the dark was turning light. I drifted back into the sensations of having a body where everything was completely stretched out flat, with honest-to-goodness real fingers and toes. *Wow, I missed this.* I blinked my eyes, trying to get focus. Everything was still blurry. But that was probably because my eye-muscles weren’t used to focusing, I realized.

“Vital signs good...” Dr. Munn said. “No brain pattern activity, but that’s probably because she’s still thinking with her implants.”

“Hang on,” I said. “I’ll see if I can switch back to wetware now.”

“It might be best if you waited—” Dr. Clemens began. But I was already reaching for the mental switch. I’d been stuck in my hard-edged digital implant brainspace long enough. I *wanted* to be on the analog side again.

For a moment, I thought it wasn’t going to take. Then I got a pop-up window. “Formatting /dev/brain,” it said. “Please wait.”

“I’m starting to get something,” Dr. Munn said.

There was a moment of disorientation—and then there I was. It was...so remarkably hard to think that I just...bounced back to digital after a few seconds. “Ugh,” I muttered. I threw myself at it again. This time I lasted a few seconds longer. “Right. Tammy? Lock my implants into standby this time. I think I need some immersion therapy.”

Tammy nodded. “Got it. Go.”

And there I was. Me again, in my mind. Utterly disoriented and confused, no sense of the passage of time. It was like I was coming off an anesthetic after surgery, which...well, I guess I was. I had no idea how much time passed, but sooner or later I was blinking my eyes open and looking around. “Whaff appah?” I said. My tongue felt three feet thick, and my teeth felt like stone walls. Talking with meat parts felt like something I hadn’t done in years. It was tricky remembering how everything fit and moved together.

“Reading completely normal brainwave activity,” Dr. Munn reported. “Congratulations, Jeanette. Or should I say, welcome home.”

It wasn’t all fun and games, not by a long shot. I had to remember or re-learn how to do everything all over again. Moving my arms and legs, walking (on a treadmill first, suspended in a harness, then gradually supporting more of my own weight). Talking without slurring. And Tamarind, that rat-cat, kept my implants locked out for the whole week, even after I told her to let me use ‘em again!

“Dr. Munn wants you to stick to your meat brain ‘til you’ve got it good and ‘burned in,” Tammy told me. “No blipping back into digital.”

It wasn’t really the blipping back in part that I missed, but the being able to look up any information on the ‘net whenever I wanted it. Without the implants, I had to settle for a media tablet or interface ‘specs, both of which were slow and clunky by comparison. There was no instant comlink to Tammy, either—though since she

monitored my room thirty hours a day, I only had to speak up when I wanted to talk to her.

But in a way I was glad I didn't have the temptation. It was a fascinating experience getting used to being inside my brainmeats again. I'd all but forgotten how it felt. In fact, I *had* forgotten how it felt, because it's hard to hold onto one state of consciousness when you're inside of another one. You can remember what you *thought* it felt like, but the visceral sensation isn't there. It's sort of like you can *remember* being stinking drunk, but you can't *feel* stinking drunk in your head without actually knocking back a bunch of booze. Um. Not that I've ever *been* stinking drunk, you understand, being underage and all...

Maybe the weirdest thing about it was that my memories were all hazy, and it felt *good*. I mean, unless you're a RIDE, EIDE, or other digital-brained critter, you probably can't remember what you had for breakfast yesterday all that well. When I'm on the digital side, I have perfect recall for the little details—and while it's nice never having to try to remember the right word, it feels kind of unnatural when you get right down to it. Especially since it's still just as hard to remember *important* things—not because they aren't in your head, but because your mental filing cabinet is so cluttered it's hard to recall where you put them.

Anyway, it felt good to be in my head again. It felt *right*. It was like there was a soft glow around everything, like using incandescent light instead of fluorescent, or listening to a vinyl phonograph instead of digital music. I hadn't fully realized how much I'd *missed* being this.

A few days after the switchover, the rest of our Seven showed up at the hospital to see me. I was sitting in a chair in my room, reading from my tablet, then I looked up and saw Relena and Jenni standing in the door, looking uncertain. "Hey, you two," I said. "Come on in."

"Jeanette, is that you?" Relena asked.

"Well, who does it *look* like?" I asked. "Oh, wait, that's right. You never saw me without the fur on. Yeah, it's me. Come on in." I enunciated carefully. It was still a little tricky speaking, but I was getting better at it every day, and they assured me I'd be speaking normally by the end of the month.

"You don't even have Tammy's ears yet," Jenni said. "Oooh, you're pretty! I like your hair!"

I shrugged. "It's just...my hair. Never thought about it much." Dark, shoulder-length, slightly wavy. Just how I am, nothing really worth mentioning.

"So this is the new girl, huh?" Brooke said, following them in. Kandace and Katie were right behind. Good thing this was a large hospital room.

"It's the old girl." I grinned. "Still can't believe I'm back me again."

"Before you know it, you'll be missing being a kitty," Tammy said. "But it's good to have you back."

"When are they gonna let you out of here?" Relena asked.

"They're keeping me for observation and physical therapy for a few more days," I told them. "I've just about got all my coordination back, but I'm still gonna need some practice."

"Practice is what you're gonna get," Tammy promised. "I've been putting together an intensive training regimen that should shake the last of the rust off."

"Oh, joy and rapture," I said, tossing in an eyeroll for good measure.

“And I’ve got some good news!” Tammy continued. “Once you’re up to speed, we’ve got our first posting.”

The others perked up. “Really? Where?” Jenni asked. “Aloha, maybe? Califia? Somewhere fun?”

“It *will* be somewhere fun,” Tammy smirked. “Though it may be more fun for us RIDEs. As it happens, we’re going to Alpha Camp.”

Jenni blinked, then frowned. “...oh.”

Kandace nudged her hand. “It’s not like you remember it. It’s changed a *lot* since you passed through.”

“I guess if nothing else I’ll be able to check up on my Dad again,” Jenni said wryly.

“I’m kinda looking forward to seeing it myself,” I said. “Got some good memories of the old place. After all, it’s where I made my new best friend.”

Tammy chuckled. “Me, too. Anyway, they really want some familiar faces on duty there to help ease concerns over having a bunch of outsiders stomping around in stompy boots. The thing with Mike Munn wasn’t so long ago, after all. And we’re basically perfect—they already know me and Kandi, and Katie’s done some liaison work with them while Relena was in school.”

“Nice, but I thought we weren’t supposed to be doing full Marshal stuff?” I said.

“Oh, we won’t be, don’t worry about that,” Tammy said. “We’ll only be part of the complement of the Alpha Camp Marshals station. With us there to handle the in-town stuff and aerodrome duty, the rest of ‘em can concentrate on patrolling the Dry. And they’ll be there to backstop us if we need it.”

“Sounds great,” I said. “I’m looking forward to it. Well, the Alpha Camp part anyway. Something tells me after the training Tammy has in mind, I’d look at being bodyjacked as a *vacation*.”

“Muahahaha,” Tammy laughed cheerfully.

It took another week or so before they let me out of the hospital, but by that time I was able to walk under my own power, and speak almost normally except for a slight lisp that was nearly gone. The others came along to pick me up with the *Acme*; we were going to fly right back out to the base to continue training. I was looking forward to it. The place felt more like home than anywhere I’d ever been before.

There was just one more rite of passage I needed to get out of the way. I stood before Tammy in the parking lot. “Okay, pard, let’s fuse on up.”

Tammy looked at me thoughtfully. “It’s almost a pity to mess up that pretty new bod of yours with ratty ol’ cat parts.”

“Oh, hush,” I said. “I don’t feel right without those lioness tags to show who owns me.” All the same, I did run my hands over my human ears one last time. It felt funny having them again, and funnier to know this would probably be the last time, unless I got the tags docked for some reason. “Now open up.”

Tammy licked her muzzle. “Nom nom nom.” She opened wide, and in I went.

“You really enjoy that *far* too much,” I muttered. Then I was looking out through her eyes as we stood up on two legs, feeling the tingle of the nanites on my ears and lower spine as they made their little attachments. I grinned. “All right, let’s get this show on the road.”

“Jonesy’s ready and waiting,” Tammy agreed. “And awaaaaaay we go!”

And then began some more intensive training. And if I worried about residual clumsiness from the body-swap, Tammy didn't give me time to fret over it. She worked me hard on my marksmanship and hand-to-hand combat training. I'd already gone over the basics in virtual for months at a time, of course, so I was familiar with how the techniques worked *in theory*. But the thing about physical combat is that knowing is only half the battle. And it's the kind of skinnier, shrimpier half. More like a third, really. It's all about muscle memory, doing stuff over and over again in the real until your muscles react by themselves. It's how you learn to do anything you gotta do without thinking about, like tie your shoes or type a hundred words a minute.

Of course, she'd been drilling the others in the same stuff all along, so when we sparred I ended up eating a lot of dirt at first. But I always had a good night's sleep every night, and I started getting better fast. And after just a few days of it I was moving this new body like I'd been born in it. And Tammy finally unlocked my implants again.

Along the way, I had the chance to work out what I wanted my style to be. I'd joked about it being Agent Fitz from S.H.I.E.L.D. because he used remote control drones in the TV show. But that had gotten me thinking about the show. The S.H.I.E.L.D. agent whose style I really liked was Melinda May, the kick-ass martial artist in a tight leather jacket. So, standard blue shirt, brown pants, leather jacket, trenchcoat for my duster, a jaunty beret for my cap, and dual pistols for my guns. I went with a pair of gauss guns modeled after the classic "big effin' gun," the Desert Eagle .50. Of course, I well knew that if I tried firing a *real* Desert Eagle, I'd need to use both hands and the recoil would probably throw me across the room anyway. Luckily these gausses had really good recoil compensation.

Anyway, make a long story short, after a couple more weeks of practice it was off to Alpha Camp. We'd get more training in there during downtime, but Tammy held that real-world experience was just as important—and now we were ready. Before we even knew quite what was going on, the provisional badges Jenni, Relena, and Kandace had started with were swapped for full Tin, and we were on Jonesy's plane heading for the heart of the Dry.

"I can't believe after all this I'm going *back* to Alpha Camp," Jenni said wryly as we sat together in a small passenger lounge module the Marshals had put in the cargo section for this trip. It was basically an anchored pallet with shock couches on it so we could all be together with our RIDEs. "It's like I'm retracing my steps."

"Was it really that bad?" Relena asked.

"I...really don't know, to be honest," Jenni said. "I was only there for a day or so, and I slept through most of it. I guess I just kind of associate it with the *really* awful place, the bandit camp my Dad kept me before that. Of course, it was kind of a *hectic* day, what with the explosions and the dome going down and everything. Then we were on the jet and gone."

"I remember that," I said. "Tammy and I were there, too. Or, well, *I* was there in Tammy's shell. Though we missed out on the whole dome-going-down thing."

"You had your own problems," Jenni said.

"I think I'm the only one in the entire Seven who's never actually been there," Relena said. "Unless Brooke...?"

"I've been stationed at the Marshals station there a couple of times," the doetaur said. "Since I'm not a standard RIDE, Intie, or human, they rotated me through in the hopes they'd find me 'nonthreatening' or something."

“Did it work?” I asked.

Brooke shrugged. “Eh. That electric skunk and his gang picketed us the same as they did every other duty roster. Everyone else was generally cool with it. Honestly, I think the whole idea of trying to find the right square peg for the round hole was probably pointless from the outset. The ones who’re OK with the Marshals will be OK with them whoever they send, and ditto the ones who aren’t. But maybe it’ll be different with people who were actually *from* there.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing the ol’ homestead again,” Tammy put in. She was lying right behind the pallet, head resting on her paws as she peered out one of the windows. “I’ve heard it’s grown a *lot* since going public. I still find it hard to believe.”

“And ol’ Alfie’s still in charge,” Kandace put in. “They didn’t, like, haul him off to prison for running a bodyjack camp. Still not sure how he managed that one.”

“You weren’t around most of the time he was in charge,” Tammy said. “He actually did a lot to keep the bodyjacking to the minimum he could, and the Marshals knew it.”

“Thanks to you,” Katie added. “I went overrr all yourrr rreports, including yourrr rrecommendations. You know, therrre was morrrre than a little doubt about yourrr objectivity.”

“Oh yeah? They never said anything to me,” Tammy said.

“Most of the doubt didn’t come frrom anyone imporrrtant,” Katie said. “And there was plenty of corrrroborrrration.”

“I like how you say ‘corroboration,’” Brooke said. “Five minutes of purring to get one word out.” Katie stuck out her tongue at her.

“You can tell how much things have changed by the way there’s now a frickin’ *bodyjack tourism industry*,” Kandace said.

I looked at her. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.” Kandace rolled her eyes. “Apparantly you can see Alpha Camp on the cheap if you’re willing to spend a month as someone’s thumbs. In fact, they even pay *you*. The tour company takes a cut of your bodyjack salary.”

“Wow. You get *paid* for being bodyjacked now?” I said. I looked at Tammy. “I think you owe me some money.”

“I was on duty, so you’ll have to take it up with the Marshals paymaster,” Tamarind said complacently.

“Aw, come on!” I said. “You know how hard it is getting any money out of them.”

“I can’t help that,” Tammy said. “They’re just doing their job.”

“How did you end up there in the first place, Kandi?” Jenni asked. “Uh, if you don’t mind my asking.”

“It’s no big deal,” Kandace said. “After the Army, I got surplused out. Spent some time Q mining, without a whole lot of luck. My owner ended up putting more money into mining than she got out—not too uncommon for people who tried to get into it in the twenties and thirties. She was gonna sell me again, and I was getting tired of getting owned. So I cracked the tethers, found my way into the underground railroad leading to Alpha Camp, and there I was.” She shook her head. “In retrospect, probably not my best ever idea. I had so much Q-dust contamination from bad maintenance by that point it was only a few months ‘til I crapped out. Maybe if I’d let someone buy me and clean me up, I wouldn’t have spent years baking in the Graveyard.”

“Frankly, I think there’s something wrong with a world where people can talk

frankly about how it might have been a better choice to have been sold like old furniture,” Brooke said. “But hey, I’m from Earth, maybe that’s just me.”

“That’s about what happened to me, too,” Katie said. “Only I nevrerr got arrround to crrracking my tetherrrs. But Dad was watching out forrr me, and made surrre I ended up at Mom’s garrrage.” She cocked her head thoughtfully. “Still not surrre how I feel about that. Afterr all that he did—all the people he killed, all the pain he caused people I love—he still saved me.”

“People are complicated,” Tammy said. “You don’t meet a lot of them who are either all good or all evil. Excepting maybe that bitch Shahrazade, who’s so evil she can’t even spell her own damn name right. I mean, seriously, it’s ‘S-C-H-E-H-E-R-A-Z-A-D-E.’ Look it up, lady.”

“Yeah, I know,” Katie said. “I guess I don’t like thinking I owe him anything. But then again, I kind of owe him for being borrrn in the firrrst place, and that’ll nevrerr change.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t pick your family,” Jenni said. “I have to say, for all your Dad was an asshole, at least you’ve got some proof he loves you. Mine...just wanted to keep me where my Mom couldn’t get me back. And he did such a stupid good job of it that she went and took a cruise to earn money to hire mercenaries to get me back, and so here I am.” Kandace came over to give her a comforting nuzzle, and Jenni stroked her fur absently. “And that’s part of why I’m here, I guess. Make sure we *can* help anyone in the same situation, like the Marshals *couldn’t* help my Mom.”

“It’s all pretty complicated,” Tammy said. “I’m pretty sure the main reason they raided your camp to begin with was a little nudging from the Marshals by way of those Inties who came to help. I wish they could have told your Mom to be a little more patient, but opsec being what it is...and they didn’t have any reason to expect she’d be desperate enough to go away for two years to get the money.”

“Or maybe the ones who did didn’t pass the word up,” Brooke put in. “That happens too.”

“Anyway, it’s a messed-up world, but we have to make the best of it,” Relena said. “Because that’s the only way it’ll get better.”

“Boy, you got that right,” I said. “As long as we’re talking family envy, at least you guys know who your parents *were*. Mine apparently didn’t care enough about me to keep me...except they sent my orphanage a huge sum of money every year to take care of me, so what the fudge?”

“Yeah, that’s weird all right,” Jenni said. “Though if it weren’t for Mom, I think I’d almost rather have that than the Dad I had.”

“Did you ever find anything out about where that money came from?” Relena asked. I’d told her about the whole thing some time ago while we were training together.

“That’s kind of been on hold while we’ve been Marshaling,” I said. “And there’s not so much we can do right now anyway while the trail is cold. But we’ve been working up on setting up some kind of tracing mechanism so we can maybe find out where the money comes from next time they pay it in.”

“Though if they were even a little bit careful that will probably be a dead end, too,” Tammy admitted. “Still, we do the best we can.”

“At least I’ve got a family now,” I said, reaching out to pat Tammy on the muzzle. “And I wouldn’t give it up for the world.” Tammy gave me a quick slurp that left the side of my face damp. “...except when she does that. Geez, Tammy, ew! Stop it with the lion

spit already!”

Everybody else laughed, which was okay since it *was* kind of funny. Then Jonesy came on the intercom. “Beep beep, this is your captain speaking! If you look to your right, you’ll see...lots and lots of sand. If you look to your left, you’ll see...even more sand. Very scenic. But if you keep looking left, in just a few moments you’ll get your first glimpse of Alpha Camp, as we’re about to circle the camp on our final approach. Thought you might like to see how much it’s changed.”

We all pressed our noses up to the glass (or transparent aluminum or whatever the heck it is) as the sub banked and the city came into view. “Whoa. It’s...like a little Uplift,” I said. “I guess that big dome is the one the camp used to have...”

“It’s centered on the camp, but it’s about twice as big as the old dome,” Tammy said. “And they’re not trying to camouflage themselves anymore. And they added all those little domes, too. That one must be the aerodrome where we’re headed. Wow. Just *look* at all that. How did they grow so fast?”

“They had a lot of help frrrom Camelot,” Katie said. “And otherrrs. I was therrre or else in comm contact forrr much of it. It rrreally is a model for how Inties, RIDEs, and humans can get along.”

“Looking forward to seeing it close up,” I said. “Crazy thing, but I actually have been a little homesick for the old place. I guess ‘cuz it was the first place I got to feel like anyone really *did* want me, and Tammy, if you slurp me again I’m gonna smack you.”

“Aww,” Tammy said, but kept her tongue to herself. “I’m looking forward to it, too. It’s going to be nice being there without feeling guilty about it.”

“Well, we won’t have much longer to wait.” The desert city slid out of view as Jonesy banked again to head straight toward it. “Here we go now!”

CHAPTER 3

When we came down the ramp, we found a small welcoming party, consisting of one small wolf and two huge ones. Though really, you could only call AlphaWolf small by comparison to his companions, Fenris and another, slimmer but very obviously female wolf almost as tall as he was. *:Oh, God help us, they're multiplying.:* Tammy sent over the link to me. *:Dog drool everywhere. Where's my umbrella?:*

:Hey, you're the one who fabricates lion spit.: I pointed out.

:That's different!: Tammy insisted.

:How?: I asked.

:It..just is!:

Alpha was in his animal form, but Fenris was standing upright. And the other wolf was, too, but she didn't have any other choice. I'd read up on her. Her name was Svetlana, and she was an Integrated version of one of Fenris's old compatriots. She'd led Fritz's forces in the attack on Alpha Camp during the war, but hadn't really wanted to, and since then had come to live here. Most of the natives seemed to be okay with her, so I guessed I would be too.

"Welcome back!" AlphaWolf said as we stepped off the ramp. "So sayeth me!"

I snorted. Same old Alpha. "It's good to be back," I said. "Though I think this is the first time we've met in person. You'd know me better as that one's thumbs."

AlphaWolf nodded. "Then it's good to meet you. I generally apologize to most thumbs from the old days, but I gather you didn't exactly join us unwillingly."

"True enough," I said. "So I should thank you, instead, for making it possible for me to meet my soulmate here."

Alpha cocked his head. "That's not something I hear a lot. Except from the ones with Stockholm Syndrome, of course."

"It is good to be back," Tammy said. "Alpha, sorry I didn't level with you about being a Marshal."

AlphaWolf snorted. "You did your job. Probably better than I did mine, get right down to it. I've met enough of your coworkers to know that any problems I might have had with the Marshals are actually problems specifically with Mike Munn. And most of the camp agrees by now. Though we still have our gadflies." He glanced across the runway to where a small group of RIDEs, led by a skunk, clutched hardlight signs with slogans like "MARSHALS GO HOME" written on them.

"I imagine that is why Paul and I never saw much of you," Fenris rumbled.

"Pretty much," Tamarind said. "Might have set off some alarms if you and Paul saw how well-maintained I really was. No offense."

"That's fair," Paul said from within Fenris.

Kandace padded up to look at them. "I don't know if I ever did thank you properly for fixing me up. But just in case, thanks again. I'd still be baking in the sun if it weren't for you."

"And thanks from *me*, too," Jenni added, resting her hand on Kandace's back. "If you hadn't fixed her, I couldn't have met her."

"Hey, that's just what we do," Paul said. "We're glad we could help."

“And I am pleased to meet you all as well,” Svetlana said. “Especially Katie, with whom I commed so often. Welcome back.”

“Good to be here,” I said. “So why don’t you show us around?”

“Sounds like a plan. Follow us!” Fenris collapsed down into his skimmer tank form. Alpha changed over to his bike form, and Svetlana rose into the air on her internal lifters.

Tammy shifted to truck form. I climbed into the cab and Brooke climbed on back. Katie and Kandace shifted to their own skimmer bike modes, and we headed through the tunnel into the main dome.

“Wow, the place really has gotten bigger. All this used to be desert,” Tammy said as we drove.

“For some reason, Alpha Camp is *the* hot new place to be,” AlphaWolf said. “Not that I’m complaining.” He chuckled. “I leave all that to Rafe.”

“He’s still administrating for you?” Kandace asked.

“Him and Alex, yeah,” Alpha said.

“I thought Alex went home,” Kandace said. “He came back?”

“A lot of people did,” AlphaWolf said. “Just couldn’t stay away. I think it’s my scintillating personality.”

Tammy snorted. “You can’t even *spell* ‘scintillating.’”

“Our new central residential district is ahead on the the left,” Fenris noted. Several site-fabbed four-story apartment buildings occupied the block where he indicated. “There are also suburbs under some of the satellite domes, where people can build houses.”

“Sure is a long way from log cabins and outhouses, huh?” Paul put in.

“You’ve got *that* right,” I said. “I still can’t believe you’ve got *paved roads* now.”

“The roads were the easy part,” AlphaWolf said. “Quick-crete being what it is, they only took a few hours to make. Surprised we never thought of doing it before.”

“There’s the little matter of needing equipment,” Svetlana said. “I don’t think it would have been so easy to ‘bodyjack’ a street fabber.”

“I suppose there is that,” AlphaWolf admitted. “Anyway, here’s Main Street. There are the couple of cabins we kept as historical markers, and up there’s the entrance to Graveyard Park.”

“I don’t remember that hole in the wall being there,” Tammy said. “Oh, wait, that got knocked out when the dome went down that time, right?”

“That would be correct, yes,” AlphaWolf said, with a bit of an edge to his voice.

“On behalf of the Marshals, I’m sorry about that,” Tammy said.

“Oh, I know, I know. Got the official apology. They even got Munn to send one.” AlphaWolf snorted. “He was gonna come make it in person, but we figured that would probably not be the best idea this soon.”

“Too many people still mad?” Brooke asked.

“Too much *me* still mad,” AlphaWolf said. “Still don’t trust myself not to cause a diplomatic incident next time I see him, and nobody needs that.” He pulled up in front of the gap in the wall, and converted back to his wolf form. “Anyway, I’ll say that every Marshal I’ve met *but* him has been a paragon of professionalism, so I don’t hold it against the rest of you. Just him.”

“So sayeth you?” I asked.

“Don’t step on my lines, kid.” AlphaWolf chuckled and padded through the gap.

Katie and Kandace changed back to their own lynx shapes and followed, and I climbed down from the cab and walked forward with the others as Tammy turned back into a truck-sized lioness and came along behind.

“Even this place has changed,” I said. There were some benches and the beginnings of a grass plot in part of the clearing here, as well as a parking lot that did shared duty for the park on the left, and the couple of buildings on the right—a garage that looked like an exact copy of the FreeRIDERS main building back in Uplift, and a three-story mauve colonial mansion with a couple of attached pre-fab residential modules just across from it. “Hey, isn’t that house right where Nora and Rose used to stay?”

“It’s *still* where they stay,” AlphaWolf said. “And plenty of other people, too. Some of them even manage to *sleep* at night, or so I hear.”

“Never a dull moment around here,” Paul said.

“Hey, you-all!” Lilibet Walton came out of the garage as we approached, Guinevere the ocelot padding along beside her.

“Hey, Lilli!” I said.

Lilibet blinked. “Jeanette? Is that you?” I’d met her a few times when she’d visited the garage in Uplift and come to see me a time or two at the hospital. She was basically the same age as the rest of us youngsters, and we’d gotten along pretty well. “You look...*different* somehow.”

“It’s my new hairstyle,” I said, grinning. “You like it?” Then I took a good look at her. Of all things, she had on a tiara, with little valkyrie wings poking out over her ears. “Hey, speaking of looking different, what’s with the crown?”

“What? Oh...” Lilibet reached up to her forehead and plucked the tiara off. “I was just on the comm with Sturmhaven, and I have to wear this for them. Silly, but you gotta keep up standards when you’re a VINO.”

“VINO?” I asked.

“Valkyrie In Name Only,” Lilibet said. “I kinda won the title when I visited Sturmhaven a couple months back. Long story.”

“I think I saw something about that on the news,” I said. “Congratulations.”

“It’s a bit of a pain,” Lilibet said. “I’m glad Gloria’s there to handle most of the stuff for me, or I’d never get anything done around here.”

“That’s the RIDE who belonged to the Valkyrie she took the title off of,” Paul said. “Turns out she’s quite a good administrative assistant.”

“I’m glad you all are here,” Lilibet said. “Say, Relena, are you any good with that sword? I’ve been wanting someone else to spar with. It’s kind of boring just dueling Tocsin all the time.”

“I’ve been doing some practicing, but I’m kind of just beginning,” Relena said. “But I’d like to get better.”

“I can help with that,” Lilibet said. “Tocsin’s one hell of a sensei.”

“I’ll comm you when I know what our duty roster is,” Relena promised.

“Great!” Lilibet said. “Anyway, I know you-all have your Chromes, but if there’s ever any maintenance we can do for you, just let us know.”

“Our station out here isn’t big enough for its own Chrome division yet, and we tend to contract locally for services when that’s the case,” Tammy said. “You’ll be hearing from us.”

“Great!” Lilibet said. “I’ll look forward to it.”

“I expect we’d probably better head on back to the aerodrome and check in at the Marshals station now,” Tammy said. “If you need anything from us, just give us a comm.”

“Will do,” Paul said. “See you folks around.”

The Alpha Camp Marshal station was effectively the polar opposite of the command center at the base out in the Dry. Instead of old tech from the war days, it had the very latest hardlight console technology. Not only the controls but the entire layout of the stations could be changed at a moment’s notice, because it was all hardlight. The room could go from looking like the TARDIS control room to the bridge of the Starship *Enterprise* to Nick Fury’s helicarrier to the *Wargames* NORAD command center at the operator’s whim. Honestly, it kind of offended me a little.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” I grumbled, glowering at the hexagonal console in the middle of the room with the very decorative time rotor going up and down. “Form is supposed to follow function. How can you know what button is what from one layout to the next? And what if the frickin’ power goes out?”

“I gather the idea isn’t to change it up all the time so much as to find one layout you like and settle on it,” Kandace said. “You know, kind of to match the uniforms. Of course, given how different the uniforms can be, that might be a different layout for every crew. With all the redundancy built into the modern tech, a complete power failure’s not that likely. And even if it happened, you’d still have us RIDEs around as a backup.”

“You know what? Let’s just simulate our command center back at the base,” Jenni said. “Playing around like we’re in a holodeck might be fun and all, but we’re supposed to be getting actual *work* done here.”

“Sounds good to me,” Relena said. “I’d rather not have to learn a whole different control scheme after I only just got used to that one.”

“Seems like a wasted opportunity to me, but you guys are the ones who’re going to have to use it all the time,” Brooke put in. “Heh. This could be the first time ever that all this hardlight tech is used to simulate something from the *real* world.”

So the command center was soon set up to look like the somewhat-boring rows of touchscreen consoles we used at our main base, and that was that. I’d say we got some funny looks from the other Marshals, but truth is we hardly ever saw them face-to-face, and they almost never peeped into the command center themselves. With us to keep the home fires burning, they concentrated on their patrol work instead of having to commute back and forth to the office.

They’d show up from time to time to bring a prisoner in for questioning, or to drop off some rescued civvies, but even then they didn’t do much more than just set foot on the premises and then leave. Their “offices” were the whole Dry Ocean. Couldn’t blame them for that. Maybe the furniture left something to be desired, but they always had a hell of a view.

We soon settled into a routine. We split our attention to work the command center in morning and evening shifts, with our RIDEs taking the skeleton crew watch while we slept. Not a lot went on at night, but then, generally speaking, not a lot went on in the daytime either. The folks who made up Alpha Camp were still super-proud of what they’d accomplished in being recognized as a polity, and they were determined to keep order for themselves in their town. And that carried over to the Aerodrome.

Nobody wanted to cause a fuss anywhere near their own home turf.

I got a pretty clear sense that a lot of them felt like we Marshals were more there to keep an eye on *them* than we were to actually just handle our own jurisdiction, no matter what we said. But the good thing about our crew was that, like Tammycat had said, having a lot of us be people who were actually *from* there took some of the sting out of that. Which might just have been another reason the senior Marshals stayed away as much as they could. No need to pile on the excess nose-rubbing and all that.

Anyway, there wasn't all that much to do keeping-order-wise around Alpha Camp. If any problems came up at the Aerodrome, we handled them. There generally weren't any. In fact, we started getting a little bored. We took to spending a lot of time in town when we were off duty. Of course we generally had to take our RIDEs along—or, rather, have our *RIDEs* take *us* along—but given we were all pretty much inseparable, that wasn't a problem.

We generally ended up hanging around the FreeRIDErs Garage a lot, because we all had connections there one way or another. Paul and Lilli and friends didn't mind the company, especially since we were all willing to pitch in and help when they needed it. In turn, they taught us all a few things about RIDE maint that could come in handy in a pinch. Plus, since just about everyone came by the garage sooner or later, it was a great place to keep up with what was going on all over the new polity.

I liked the work a lot, not least because I could actually *do* it. I was getting better about just stopping what I was doing and staring down at my hands for a couple of minutes and going, "I have hands!" I only did it several times a day now. It was just so amazing to be able to manipulate things easily again. And eat finger food. And talk through my mouth. I tell you what, you don't half appreciate something until it's gone. Though on the other hand I really did miss my lioness's sense of smell from time to time.

Jenni got to spend some time visiting with her Dad. If "visiting" was the right word. Turned out he'd been claimed by Smash, the "Plan Ankylosaur" herself, and was one of the handful of holdover not-necessarily-willing bodyjacks from the old days. A little bit of a contradiction given that the Ankles were the ones who were *against* bodyjacking, but no one ever said life at the camp had to make sense all the time.

She was pretty subdued when she got back. "If that's not the creepiest thing I've ever seen, I'm not sure what is," she said as she sat down at one of the command center monitor stations.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Dad. He...well, *she*...she's gone native, pretty much." Jenni stared at the screen. "Stockholm Syndrome, I guess. She seems for all the world *happy* to be Smash's thumbs now. That's messed up."

"That's bodyjacking," Kandace said.

"The *really* messed up thing is I don't know how I feel about that," Jenni said. "I mean, on the one hand I know that's just *fake* happiness. It can't be real. But on the other, I don't want Dad to be happy *at all* after what he did to me and Mom."

"Maybe you could just be glad she won't be doing anything to anyone else any time soon?" I suggested.

"I guess that's one way of looking at it," Jenni admitted. "Smash seems to be very happy with her. It's just...*weird*, I guess, seeing someone you know changed so much. But I guess I can get used to it."

And so, life went on.

It was one day a couple weeks after we'd gotten on station that we first got signs that there might be something rotten in the state of Denmark. Relena and I and our partners were down at the garage, and Relena was fiddling with the Tornado bike she'd brought along from the base. She thought it might be fun to get the thing working to play with, and as a way to get from place to place when Katie had to be off ambassadoring. After encountering how mindnumbingly stupid its onboard artificial so-called intelligence was, she'd decided to name the thing "Leroy Jenkins," after some old gaming meme.

"Hey, get this!" Relena hit the horn button, and a loud but tinny-sounding "Lerooooo Jenkins!" came from the bike's onboard speaker.

Tammy smirked. "Nice. I know *I'd* get out of the way if I heard that coming."

A chuckle came from the open garage door. "Are you seriously planning on driving that on the streets of our fair city? That could cause an incident. I'm not sure what happens when someone tries to ticket a Marshal."

The speaker was Claude Roman, a brown-haired human with white fluffy cat ears and tail, and an old-Earth east-European accent that made him pretty easy to recognize, as did the fluffy white Persian cat RIDE at his side. I nodded to them. "Hey Claude, Kevin. What's up? Lilli's in back. I can fetch her if you're here for a tune-up..."

"Actually, you were the ones we wanted to see," Kevin said, swishing his tail. "We were going to just comm the 'drome, but thought we'd better check here first."

"Marrrrshals business?" Katie asked, ears perked forward.

"So it seems," Claude said. "Kevin was running an audit on our tourism income, and he turned up something disturbing." Kevin was Alpha Camp's Comptroller General, so he was always doing that financial stuff.

"What? Corruption in the local government?" Tamarind asked. "Alfie'd never stand for something like that."

"Oh, no, it's nothing like that," Kevin said. "In a way, it might be even worse. There seem to be some...tourists going missing."

Relena blinked. "What? Missing?"

"Yes." Kevin sat on his haunches and scratched behind one ear, then gave his fur a couple of swipes with a large pink tongue. "I only noticed because I was running sub ticket sales numbers and noticed there was an imbalance. We're not selling as many outbound tickets as there are inbound passenger slots, but our population isn't growing by that much either. I thought it might be that some tourists are arriving by sub and leaving by rental fliers or skimmers, but those numbers don't account for everyone either. I already ran it past Rafe, in his capacity as chief of police. He figured you should be informed, since inter-polity traffic is your jurisdiction."

"Can you beam us over your raw data? We'd like to have a look ourselves," I said.

"Of course," Kevin said. "But that's not all. I pulled all our records going all the way back to when the aerodrome first opened up, and I've been running an exhaustive analysis over the last couple of days. And I've got a list of names that I'm pretty sure represents all the people who arrived but weren't ever seen leaving."

"The interesting thing is, they're all non-native tourists," Claude put in. "Mostly from Earth, but some from the other colonies, too. No one native to Zharus."

"Huh," Tammy said. "I don't think that's a coincidence. Of all the people you

might 'disappear,' offworld tourists are less likely to be missed for a while. They're always changing their minds how long to stay in places and where to go afterward. And if they don't show up for the ship back, people will just assume they went native."

"What're you thinking?" Relena asked.

"I think I know," I said. "Rogue bodyjacking operation?"

"Bingo," Tamarind said. "It was only a matter of time, I guess. Especially given how a highly vocal minority of the camp folks have felt about all the changes."

"So what's ourrr next step?" Katie asked.

"It depends," Tammy said. "You brought this up with AlphaWolf yet, Kevin?"

"Before we came looking for you," Kevin said. "He's still a little...incoherent."

"That's one way of putting it," Claude said. "It's probably for the best he has a soundproof office. He was still howling when we left."

"We'll give him another hour or so to calm down, then," Tammy said. "Then we'll see about liaising with the local constabulary and bringing a few people in for questioning."

"I'm sure you won't have any trouble there," Kevin said. "We *know* how important tourism is to our survival. If the word gets out people who come here are disappearing...well."

"Right," Tammy said. "We need to get this solved quickly and without any publicity before anyone else finds out about it. I'll also pass the list of names on to the Marshals and see if they can get a warrant for access to any of the cloud accounts the tourists might have been using. Look for photos, blog posts, GPS traces, anything that might show what they were doing when they got disappeared."

"Good thinking," Kevin said. "Anyway, we better get back to work. I sent all the data over. And of course if there's anything we can do, just let us know."

"We'll do that," Tammy said. "Thanks for bringing this to our attention."

As Kevin and Claude left the garage, Tammy turned to look at the rest of us. "Well, there's a fly in the ointment."

"What do we do?" Relena asked. "Call in the Seniors? We weren't supposed to be doing *real* Marshals work here."

"What's the matter, Tin Star, don't feel up to it?" Tammy said. "I've sent off a dispatch to the field teams letting them know, but we're the ones on the scene, and the ones who know the people here better. No reason we shouldn't do the groundwork ourselves."

"Then I guess we might as well get down to it," I said.

"Wow, our first investigation," Relena said. She reached down to the bike's handlebars and sounded the horn again. "Lerooooy Jenkins!"

A couple of hours later, we were ready to hold our first interrogation. We were going ahead and using Alpha Camp's facilities, with the cooperation of Alpha's government, because we figured it would be more politic not to drag any prisoners all the way out to the aerodrome. It would probably be hard enough to get them to talk as it was.

At the moment we were in the observation booth of an interrogation room. Well, most of us were, anyway. Tammy wouldn't fit in, so she was monitoring the proceedings virtually, and through my implants. Relena, Katie, and Brooke were in the room with me. Jenni and Kandace were still out at the aerodrome command center on monitor

duty, but they were watching from remote too.

Also present was Rafe, an arctic wolf Fuser, and his human partner inside named Alex. Rafe was Alpha Camp's Chief Administrator, and also the chief of the local police force, which was the capacity in which he was here now. We didn't mind. In fact, given that we'd always gotten along pretty well with Rafe, we were glad he was here. Not that he was particularly glad to *be* here.

"I can't frickin' believe this," Rafe growled. He glared through the glass of the observation booth at the skunk RIDE sitting in the interrogation room itself, a confused expression on his muzzle. "I mean, Ohm's a world-class git, but I can't imagine he'd be wrapped up in anything like this."

"We're not saying he is, necessarily," Tammy put in over the comm. "But he's the face—not to mention stripes, tail, and scent glands—of the humans-go-home protest movement, so maybe he might have heard something. Or maybe he knows the people who might be wrapped up in this. We'll see." She sighed. "It's almost too bad you've got such rigid laws against subpoenaing RIDE memory records. It would be helpful if we could just skip all this and read what he knows out of his head."

Rafe shook his head. "You only say that because you're the one doing the questioning. If someone accused *you* of a crime, would you want them trawling through your memories just because they said so? Same reason most polities don't allow Fusing RIDEs to humans to read their memories out in court without consent."

Tammy nodded. "Yeah, I know. And it's easy to be happy about it when it's *not* getting in the way of you finding out what you want to know. So, you want to lead the questioning?"

"Eh...nah," Rafe said. "It's your investigation, and I've worked with you bunch enough to know you're the professionals. More'n you can say of me. You want me to play good cop to your bad cop, I can do that, but I don't wanna step on your toes."

"Then I guess that makes me bad cop," Brooke said. "Now let's see, what would be most impressive...hmm, let's go with the classic look." Her human torso shrank back into a deer's neck, and her body contours shifted male. A large but not ridiculous rack of antlers crowned the stag's head. "That's better," Bernie said. "Heh, I kind of miss Fenwick when I'm like this. Well, c'mon snowdoggie, let's go sweat a skunk."

Ohm looked up as the deer and wolf entered the room. "What's this all about? I want a lawyer."

"Take it easy, stinky, we're not charging you with anything...yet," Bernie said, the points of his antlers describing arcs in the air as he turned his head to glower meaningfully at the skunk. "We just want to ask you some questions. You give us some good answers, you're free to go."

"If you think this intimidation is going to make me back down from my protests, you don't know who you're dealing with," Ohm blustered. "Not everybody's so content to live in this fool's paradise Alpha's turned the camp into. He's gone *way* too soft on humans!"

"So you and your friends thought you'd start up an illicit bodyjacking ring right under his nose, huh?" Bernie said.

"And that's another thing. I—" Ohm paused. "—what?"

"Almost three dozen tourists have vanished over the last eight months," Bernie said. "Here's the data." My implants registered the file transfer as it happened. "So, since Alpha got 'domesticated,' you decided to take things into your own hands."

“I—no, wait. This can’t be *right*,” Ohm said. “I wouldn’t—nobody I *know* would be involved in something like this.”

“Oh, like we’re supposed to believe that?” Bernie said. “I’ve seen all your protest signs. ‘Humans go home’ is just the friendliest of them.” He lowered his head, giving Ohm a good look at the points on his rack. “We should just start bodyjacking again, show those humans who’s boss?”

“If you know anything about this, it’d be better if you said so,” Rafe put in.

“I don’t!” Ohm said, tail twitching. “Really! All that stuff I say—that’s just a position. It’s politics! I’d never support anyone doing that for real.”

“A *position*, huh?” Bernie said.

“Yeah! Honestly...” Ohm fiddled nervously with his forepaws. “I mean, I could see how it was going to go after the battle. I wasn’t close enough to Alpha to get a good seat in his coalition, so I chose to get in on the ground floor of the opposition. This way I get to be a big fish in a small pond, keep my name in people’s attention, and in a few years after Alpha and his bunch don’t want to run anymore, I can reach across the aisle, adopt some more centrist positions, and maybe get elected by the people who aren’t happy and want a change. I’m no Shah, for crying out loud.”

“Oh, so you’re a *hypocrite* as well as a rabble-rouser?” Bernie sneered.

“Hey, you know who else held public views counter to what he really believed, and did it for years?” Ohm said peevishly. “*AlphaWolf*. I’m just carrying on a tradition here.”

“Got to admit, he has a point there,” Rafe said. “Okay, so do you know of any of your followers who *did* take it seriously? Maybe might have approached you volunteering to stir up trouble?”

Ohm shook his head. “I try not to have direct contact with most of my followers. I don’t *want* to have contact with or even *know* about the kind of people who’d actually *do* something about it. It’s bad publicity. I’ll ask my staff if they know of anyone.”

“That sounds a little too convenient, if you ask me,” Bernie said. “If you’re going to play in the mud like that, you don’t know what kind of dirt or other crap you end up smearing all over you.”

“I’m telling the truth! Seriously!” Ohm said. “Look, either let me go or let me call a lawyer. I don’t have anything else I can tell you.”

“There’s one thing you could do,” Rafe said. “Volunteer your memory backup under the Marshals’ testimony protocols. Forensic RIDEs will go through it for data relevant to the case and wipe their own memories of anything else they might find afterward.”

“I...dunno,” Ohm said. “If that’s what it takes to convince you I don’t *know* anything...I’ll think about it.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Bernie said. “I guess you’re free to go. Don’t leave the polity. And tell anyone you think *might* know something to come down and talk to us.”

“All right! I will!” Ohm left like his tail was on fire.

Rafe shook his head. “Whew. For a moment there, I was sure he was going to spray.”

Bernie wrinkled his nose. “I think he did, a little. Ugh. You guys should get better ventilators for your interrogation rooms.”

They rejoined us in the observation room a moment later, Bernie resuming the Brooke deertaur shape and banishing the antlers. “So what do you think?” Rafe asked.

“Sounded like he was telling the truth,” Tamarind said. She growled. “Slimy little politician that he is, I don’t think he’d have truck with *real* extremists. If it came out, it would undermine his little cause in a heartbeat.”

“It also doesn’t seem likely the real ‘jackers would want to draw attention to themselves by taking part in rallies,” I said. “They’d know they’re all recorded.”

“Unfortunately, that leaves us back where we started,” Brooke said. “He was our best lead.”

“So farrrrr,” Katie corrected. “We still haven’t hearrrrd back about those cloud account rrrrequests.”

“Meanwhile, I guess we could go over the footage of all the rallies anyway,” Tammy said. “See if any patterns emerge in who attended them.”

“Yeah, that might be a good idea,” Brooke said. “My suspicion is that, if any of the people we want were at any of them, they’d just have been at one or two, maybe hanging in the background and watching rather than waving a sign. Trying to suss out whether Ohm and his crowd are serious or just poseurs, and then not coming back once they figured out they’re just poseurs.”

“And I think we’re going to see about tracking our current batch of tourists a little more closely,” Rafe said. “Alex had a great idea about setting up detectors to ping the near-field comm chips in the polity coupon cards we hand out to tourists as they come in, so we can keep a little better track of them and see where they go off the grid. We’ve already got some people on that.”

“I hope you didn’t tell them what they’re for,” Tammy said. “We don’t want word of this leaking out to the perps.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Just another update to the traffic cams as far as they’re concerned,” Rafe said. “We should start getting results in the next day or so...if the tourists are still disappearing.”

“And I’ve asked the Marshals to start paying extra attention to scan anomalies in the Dry—the sort of thing that might be a hardlight dome trying to hide,” Tammy said.

“Think we should reach out to the nearby Enclaves?” I asked. “Maybe the Integrates might have seen something?”

“We might keep that in reserve,” Brooke said. “The more people know about this, the more likely word is to leak. Let some journalist get ahold of it, and you can forget about keeping the perps from finding out we’re onto them.”

I nodded. “Fair enough. So I guess we should all get right on that footage thing, huh?”

“Actually, I’ve been running it in fast-time while we’ve been talking,” Tammy said. “I’ve got a set of likely faces. Some of them I can’t identify; I’ll pass them across to Rafe and see if he can fill them in. But there’s one there I do know that doesn’t surprise me too much. Jenni, Kandi, you still listening in?”

“Sure thing, boss!” Jenni put in over the comm. “And I suspect I know just who you’re gonna mention.”

“Yeah. Leona, the lioness who nearly got you,” Tammy said.

“Huh,” Rafe said. “I don’t think we’ve seen her around much lately, come to think of it.”

“Which stands to reason if she’s got some illicit thumbs on board,” Kandace said over the comm. “She’d know sooner or later she’d have to cough them up for a spot check, at which point they’d spill everything.”

“So what other unpartnered RIDEs used to live here but haven’t been around lately?” I asked. “And haven’t been seen anywhere else? If they’re keeping unwilling thumbs these days, they’d have to do like Alfie did to found this place—go and hide somewhere away from human or Intie contact.”

“Good thinking,” Brooke said. “We keep an eye out and see if they pop up anywhere, and if they’re Fused or not when they do.”

“I guess we’ve all got our jobs, then,” Relena said. “Let’s get back to the command center and start keeping a closer eye on things.”

CHAPTER 4

For the next few days, we all stuck pretty close to home, spending our spare time in the comm center watching tourists. We just followed them from a distance, not snooping on their conversations or anything, out of respect for their privacy. And to be honest, I'm not sure what we expected. It wasn't as if some bodyjacker was going to leap out of a dark alley. For one thing, Alpha Camp wasn't new enough to *have* dark alleys yet. But it was something to do while the other avenues of investigation bore fruit.

For me, I guess it was a chance to lose myself in imagining some other lifestyle. What would it be like to be a tourist from Earth, having journeyed across the lightyears to set foot on a planet where humans were the weird intruders? Would I feel the same way they did now if I were able to visit Earth? I watched them look around and daydreamed.

Most of them were paired up with RIDEs, of course. Either rentals from another polity, or "helpful" citizens of Alpha Camp, doing their part to show the humans gently but firmly who was boss around here. Which was another piece of the puzzle, really. How could so many humans vanish when they were *required* to have partners for as long as they stayed in town?

Unless their "partners" were the ones who actually did it. Hell, all a RIDE had to do was sign up for a tourist stewardship program, pass a cursory background check, and Alpha Camp *gave* them the next human to come down the pike. I ran a backtrace looking for records of humans Leona had signed up to partner and found...none. That was odd. She wasn't even in the system.

I pulled up the records we had of her and ran them against the rental records, looking for RIDEs who were near matches. I found three. Two of them were other RIDEs from the same product line as Leona, both of whom checked out and were still around in camp. The third, one "Noella" by name, had a background that looked authentic on first glance, but when you traced down the records further she vanished into the air. She had exactly one tourist pair-up...with one of the names on the "missing" list.

"Who authorized this?" I muttered. In the early days, Alpha Camp had been small enough that everyone knew everyone else, and you'd never have seen a RIDE skate by on a fake ID. But in the months that followed, with the influx of new people and new jobs for those new people to fill, some of that familiarity had been lost. It looked like Noella's application had been approved by a RIDE intern, then apparently rubber-stamped by the intern's human supervisor without more than a cursory check. Both of them were late arrivals to the camp, and both were still around and still approving applications.

I sent a memo off to Rafe to follow up, copied to everyone else on the team. I also flagged the currently operating tourist steward RIDEs who'd been approved by the duo and started running background checks. Most of them came up fine, but there were a couple who looked suspicious. These were Wildfire, the buckskin filly who was shepherding a teenaged girl around, and Cleopatra, a tortoiseshell housecat who coincidentally enough had the girl's mother. I went to bring them up on the cameras...

but they weren't anywhere to be found. "The hell?" I ran a quick backtrace on their last known location. An hour ago they'd been right here at the aerodrome, as it turned out, in the section reserved for the companies that ran Dry Ocean tour flights.

"Of course! That's how they get them out of the city!" Annoyingly, the resolution on the ID sensor hadn't been good enough to tell *which* tour company they'd gone to. I pulled up booking records from all the tour companies, and found nothing. They weren't listed on any of them. "Well, duh, that would kind of be a clue they left and didn't come back." My next thought was to pull the flight plans of all fliers and subs that had left in the last hour, and start eliminating unlikely candidates. Any tourist flights listed as having actual tourists on them were first to go, as well as large subs and fliers that would draw more attention than you wanted for kidnapping two people. That left an awful lot of smaller fliers, and even a couple of Redstone subs.

None of the tourist companies were listed flying any non-tourist flights right now. "Of course not, that would have been too easy," I muttered. What else, what else...I could probably eliminate the flights by major corporate concerns. Too much attention on those, too many bean counters tracking every klick of flight looking for wasted fractions of a cent. Privately-owned and small biz flights would be the order of the day. That cut it down to about thirty.

Tamarind broke into my thoughts, padding up in her holographic projection form. "Good work, Jeanette. But I think we can separate the wheat from the chaff a little faster than that. I'm requesting real-time access to satellite tracking, routing it to your console now. I'm monitoring all those flights now, and backtracing them all back to point of origin. If any of them makes an unscheduled landing or midflight drop, we'll see it."

"What if the RIDEs jump out while cloaked?" I asked.

"The change in mass will still cause their flight path to bobble perceptibly," Tammy said. "Our sats will pick it up. We'll get 'em. This is *great*, kitten! This could be just the break we're looking for."

"Well, cool. I guess we can tell the Seniors where to go hit 'em," I said, coming off the adrenaline jag as quickly as it had started. I realized then I'd been sort of naturally assuming we'd see it through to the end, but I knew I was just fooling myself. We were just kids, and for all that we were called "Young Guns" we didn't have any right to put ourselves or anyone else in danger going out in the field.

"Well, we'll see about that," Tammy said.

We all gathered in the command center to watch the action on the big screen. The flights were plotted, and crossed off as they returned to Alpha Camp without any suspicious activity. Meanwhile, we were informed that Rafe had the employees who'd made the questionable approvals taken into custody where they were being questioned now.

"Rafe thinks the human's probably not guilty of anything more than just being a little too eager with the rubber stamp so she could get back to her soaps," Alex said over the comm. "But the RIDE...well, let's just say it's a good thing Rafe opted for the full stun warrant so we could hit him with an EMP and pop his core before he could react. Apparently he was rigged with a pretty involved self-erasure system. Which made getting authorization to read him out a cinch. When it's so obvious they've got something to hide, it's easy to get permission to see what it is."

“I doubt he’ll know the location of their hidden base—that would be too much of a security risk,” Kandace said. “But maybe he’ll know what company they were working with at the aerodrome.”

“Rafe’s diving through the memory dump now,” Alex said. “We’ll let you know what we find out.”

“Got it,” Tammy said. “Jeanette, Relena, Jenni, suit up. We might just have a raid in front of us after all.”

We grabbed our gear and waited excitedly. Finally, some *action!* We tensely watched one flight after another get eliminated, and three or four flights read as possibles. Tammy tasked Marshal satellites to take closer looks at the areas where the deviations had happened, but the results were inconclusive. Dome and hardlight tech had both gotten a lot better lately since Integrate improvements had hit the market, so it just wasn’t as easy to find someone hiding as it had been in Alpha Camp’s heyday.

Then the call came in. It was Alex again. “Rafe says the outfit you want is definitely ‘Alpha Flights.’ The guy didn’t know if they were all compromised or just his one contact—a fox RIDE named Reynard—but that’s where they sent the ‘jackers they snuck into the system. The aerodrome’s your jurisdiction, but we’ll send along a couple of observers if you don’t mind. But don’t wait for them to get there if you have to move fast.”

Naturally, none of the flights we were looking at was registered to Alpha Flights. Not that that meant anything. They were probably using a shell company to hide their tracks. Tammy set the Marshals’ Diamond girls to backtracing ownership on all the suspicious flights as a backup, and requested authorization for a raid on Alpha Flights.

It didn’t take long for the response to come back. Our main screen flickered and the flight path traces were replaced by the image of Marshal Masterson himself. “Evenin’, Marshals,” he said nonchalantly. “I hear you’ve done yeoman’s work on this new case that popped up. Good job. Now as you might ‘spect, there’s a leetle bit of hesitation ‘bout sending you on this raid. But given the time-sensitive nature of the operation, and the experience levels of the majority of your team, I managed to get ‘em to see reason. You’re go for this op, Young Guns.”

“Yes!” Jenni whooped. “Er...I mean, thank you, sir!”

“That don’t mean you got a license to get all wild an’ crazy, now,” Masterson continued. “Your RIDE pards are all veteran soldiers, veteran Marshals, or both. That means they’re in charge, and you follow their leads, you clear?”

“Yes sir!” I said. “I’ve been following Tammy’s lead here ever since she bodyjacked me!”

Masterson snorted. “Way I understand it is, *you’re* the one bodyjacked *her*. Anyway, good luck, Marshals. Keep us informed what you find.”

“Just a moment, Marshal Masterson,” Tammy said. “I feel I should point out, it’s possible there’s some kind of a check-in protocol, and when we take down Alpha Flights they might know about it in the bandit camp. We should be ready to move on them as soon as we know where they are.”

“Which is why you need to let us know as soon as you find out which was the right flight,” Masterson said. “We’ve got a Seven of experienced Marshals standing by, plus the RAAT teams.”

“I’d like for you to send Jonesy in to Alpha Camp,” Tammy said. “We need to be able to mount up and move out right away as soon as we find out where we’re going.”

“Marshal Tamarind...” Masterson said warningly.

“We don’t know how big their camp is,” Tamarind continued. “One seven might not be enough. We should at least be on the scene as backup if needed.”

“Mmm,” Masterson said. “This is gonna take pulling some strings. You know that, right?”

“Way I figure, you still owe me one for that time in Nuevo San,” Tamarind said.

“Tams, I saved your scruffy neck three times since Nuevo San,” Masterson pointed out.

“Yeah, but Nuevo San was pretty bad,” Tammy said smugly. “I figure you still owe me about three or four for it even now.”

Masterson rolled his eyes. “I’ll see what I can do.”

As soon as the call ended, Tammy turned to the rest of us. “All right, this is it. Relena, Katie, check out three EMP bursters from the armory. You and Kandi will place them on the roof of Alpha Flights and trigger them before we go in. Katie and Brooke through the front, Kandi through the back. I’ll wait out back in case anyone tries to break out that way, and Jeanette’s drones will provide air cover. Just like we trained. You’ve got ten seconds to come up with any questions...none? Okay, good. Let’s go, Marshals!”

The op went off without a hitch. I think we were even more surprised at that than the people in the Alpha Flights building were. There were three RIDEs and four humans; just one of the RIDEs was Fused at the time. We yanked the cores from the RIDEs, used the “rescue” handles to peel the Fuser apart, and took the humans into custody, too, just in case. (You never know, they could have been in on it. Stockholm Syndrome can make you do funny things. I should know!)

First thing we did was examine the cores for the same kind of fancy auto-erase triggers the intern RIDE had. Only Reynard had them, which was a pretty good indication he was the only one involved. Consequently, he was the only one we could get authorization for a strip-and-search on. The other two, we returned to their DE shells, reactivated, and held for further questioning along with the humans.

Tammy and I dived into the data trove we got from Reynard, looking for indications of where the tourists had been sent, or what fliers might have been used. It was tricky, because Reynard was a canny fox. Apparently he erased his memories of bodyjack flights that were sent out as soon as he sent them. From a hacker’s standpoint, I kind of had to admire that. If I could forget the hacks I made as soon as I made them, I couldn’t ever be made to admit them under questioning.

But he wasn’t quite as clever as he thought. He hadn’t flushed the near-field transponder logs from his shell’s systems. They registered the identities of any RIDEs or other vehicle transponders he’d been near. Those included Wildfire and Cleopatra’s, and the transponder of one of the fliers we’d been tracking—a ship registered to a cargo shipping firm based in Califia, who, it turned out when we checked with them, were entirely unaware they owned a bird in Alpha Camp.

With that, we had our location. Just in time, too. As we were surfacing from our data dive, we got the word that Jonesy had just landed the *Acme* and was awaiting our instructions. “Perfect!” Tammy said happily. “Slap this joker back in his shell, and we’ll load on up! I’ve already sent Masterson the good news.”

“Hey, kiddies!” Jonesy said as we filed aboard. “Masterson filled me in. Good work! Man, I can’t believe anyone would be dumb enough to bodyjack people from

frickin' *Alpha Camp*."

"I wouldn't be too dismissive," Brooke pointed out. "They did get away with it for months before anyone noticed."

"Yeah," Tammy agreed. "We haven't really talked to Alpha about the whole thing since it broke, but I'll bet he's currently having his latest of several large cows over it. Uneasy is the head that wears the crown and all that."

"We're still not sure who's going to end up with final jurisdiction over the thing for the prosecutions," Brooke said. "It's happening in the Dry, but the kidnappings happened in Alpha Camp."

"Does Alpha even *want* jurisdiction?" I wondered. "Boy, I can see the news headlines now. 'Do as I say, don't do as I do.'"

"He's got a thicker skin than you think," Tammy said. "And it would be a way to show Alpha Camp's put the practice behind them for good. But we'll let the higher-ups worry about that; that's what they're for. Jonesy, get us in the air. We need to be at the site five minutes ago."

"I'm on it! Buckle up, everyone. I'll even skip the cartoon antics this time, 'cuz I like you."

Tammy smirked. "Thanks, Jonesy, you're a peach."

We continued to get updates while we were in the air. With confirmation that there was actually something there, the Marshals had tasked more birds and sent in stealth drones, and we now had a picture of a smallish dome with about a dozen buildings in it. Basically "Alpha Camp Mark II." But one big difference to the original Alpha Camp was the ring of defensive weapon emplacements that ringed the camp.

"AlphaWolf always said we'd do better to hide than fight," Kandace said. "But it looks like these ones wanted to do both."

"Yeah. Jonesy, make sure we set down at least a hundred clicks away," Tammy said. "I want us below the horizon long before we're in range of those guns."

"You don't have to tell me twice!" the pilot said.

"The good news is, the guns would be pretty easy to take out with a targeted kinetic bombardment from orbit, or even long-range cannons from a gunship," Tammy said. "The bad news is, that would let them know we're coming."

"Could we slip in undetected?" Relena asked. "Get past the guns before they spot us?"

"We could certainly get within a few clicks," Tammy said. "All the sand dunes and crap mean they'd have a hard time even seeing us, let alone hitting us. Closer than that...well, depends how good our cloaks are versus their sensors. Our cloaks are pretty damn good, but Intie-tech's introduced a lot more question marks into the equations lately. And that's speaking theoretically, mind you. Remember, we're the backup, not the cavalry."

"How many 'real' Marshals can they round up on short notice?" Jenni asked. "Versus how many RIDEs in there with people in them? Even if most of them aren't fighters, that's still a lot of electric bodies."

"Yeah, it seems to me like they're going to need everyone they can get," I put in.

"Don't get cocky," Katie said. "Just because we did a good job taking down Alpha Flights doesn't mean we're up to something like this. Those arrre desperrrate RIDEs in therrre. They might rrratherrr die—and kill the human inside—than be capturred."

We can't allow that to happen."

"Oh, sure," Relena said. "I'm just glad we're getting to be in on the end at all."

"As for how many bodies the Marshals can shift, you should already know from your training there's always at least two RAAT and one regular Seven on hot dispatch duty at any given time," Bernie pointed out. He was in his male 'taur form right now, checking over the weapons mounted to holsters on his lower torso. "They can probably pull at least a couple more Threes, maybe even a whole Seven or two from quiet spots nearby if they need to. They should have plenty enough people to crack the nut without us getting in the way."

Jenni sighed. "Well, there go my dreams of busting in and saving the day singlehandedly."

Kandace chuckled. "You'll have plenty of days to save yet. Right now, I expect we'll be put to work backstopping the ones who go in and chasing down anyone who tries to jackrabbit. We lynxes are really good at pouncing on jackrabbits, eh Katie?"

Katie laughed. "You know it, Aunt Kandi!"

"And Jeanette will be operating her drones for recon support," Tamarind put in. "Since there's a whole lot less harm done if one of them gets shot down and all."

"And I expect we'll also be the ones who stick around after the bad guys are rounded up, to document and catalog everything that remains, guard against curiosity seekers and the media, and run gofer for the Maggie forensics teams," Bernie continued. "My classmates and I did a lot of that back in our tin and copper days. Not exactly glamorous work, but necessary."

"At least it's real Marshals work," I said. "Not just some makework job they made up just for us."

"Far's I'm concerned, you're *all* real Marshals, and don't let anyone tell you different," Tammy said firmly. "They wouldn't be letting older Tins lead the glory charge either."

"Hate to interrupt the mutual admiration society, but we'll be on the ground in five," Jonesy said. "You'll be about one-two-zero clicks out from target. Rally point is going to be niner-zero clicks north-northeast."

"Roger that, Jonesy," Tammy acknowledged. "Okay, everyone, Fuse up and climb on board. We're gonna hit the ground running." She popped the RIDE mount-points in her truck bed, and the custom cradle for Bernie to latch in. Everyone got settled, then the hatch dropped and we hit the desert sand.

The ride in was exciting enough. We kept low to the ground and ran a zigzag course, swerving left and right and weaving our way amid the sand dunes and rock outcroppings that dotted the desert in front of us. I was glad Tammy was driving. She had the reaction time necessary to dodge obstacles at several hundred clicks an hour. I was just glad my implants let me override my inner ear.

About fifteen minutes later, we pulled into a small clearing nestled in the lee of a sizable outcropping, shielding it from the direction of the pirate camp. Several vehicles, RIDes, and humans were there already, including Masterson himself and his RIDE, Glenn. But Tammy pulled up next to a different horse Fuser, who was keeping company with a Walker-mode coyote RIDE. "Hey, Allie!" Bernie called cheerfully. "Vanna, Zoey, how you-all doing?"

"B!" the horse-woman called back. "Been a while! Introduce us to your friends."

“Everyone, this is Silver Star Marshal Aleka Petrovna, Gold Star Marshal Vanna, and the doggie’s Silver Star Marshal Zoey,” Bernie said. “Aleka’s an old friend from Earth, and she and the RIDEs were my classmates at the academy.” He named us all off to them, too.

“Nice to meet you all,” Aleka said. “I’ve heard good things.”

“Including that you were the ones who uncovered this particular nest of cockroaches,” Vanna added. “Good work, Marshals.”

“Eh, we were just in the right place at the right time is all,” I said, feeling my cheeks burn at the praise from a senior Marshal. “Anyone could have done it.”

“But you knew what to do in that place, and that’s not a small thing,” Zoey said. “Glad to be working with you.”

“All right, everyone, listen up!” Masterson said. “We don’t have a lot of time ‘fore they know something’s up, so we’re heading out in two minutes. We’ve got the crosshairs lined up on their guns, and the RAATs will be hitting the ground ten seconds after they go down. Second-in teams already have their assignments. The Young Guns will be in position five clicks out to backstop on this side; we’ve got a team of fresh-minted Academy Tins on the other side to do the same there. Any questions, now’s the time.” He waited about ten seconds, then nodded. “Let’s ride, Marshals!”

From there, it was just a matter of taking up position and waiting. For most of us, anyway. Relena said it kind of reminded her of the times she’d played outfield in the baseball games at her high school—a whole lot of sitting around and waiting, and occasionally scrambling like crazy to catch something coming your way.

I was busier than that, though. I had my mind on and in my drones, flying in amidst the battle to keep eyes on things and relay footage back to HQ and to the commanders of the op. I got to watch the Marshals move in and take down the rogue RIDEs. They used pulse guns set to concentrated EMP for the most part, to take the RIDEs down without harming the humans inside. I got a couple of drones knocked out, but for the most part the ‘jackers were too busy trying to defend themselves against the Marshals to have time for my little friends.

It wasn’t all fun and games. As soon as they knew they were being raided, a couple of the RIDEs started firing on some of the unsuited humans in the camp. When I saw that happening, I wanted to throw up. Instead, I moved my drones in and started firing their pulse pop-guns at the RIDEs, distracting them long enough for the remaining hostages to get to cover, I hoped. Masterson later commended me for that, but I didn’t really feel like I deserved a commendation. The images of the people I wasn’t in time to save are going to be with me for a long time. There were med teams standing by, but there were still a handful of fatalities.

Then Aleka commed. “Heads up, Young Guns, we got a runner heading your way!”

I drew my attention back to the real world in time to see a cloud of dust coming our way from the direction of the dome. A quick optic enhancement revealed a snarling lioness Fuser at the head of it. I’d stared at that face often enough the last couple of days to recognize Leona.

“Oooh, this one’s *ours!*” Jenni said.

“Remember she’s got a hostage on board!” Tammy said.

“We know,” Kandace said. “Don’t worry, we’ll be gentle. Ish.” She moved out in

front of the dust cloud and amplified her voice. “Leona, this is the Marshals! Drop your weapons and *stand down!*”

“Like hell!” Leona yelled back. She had some kind of large cannon mounted along her arm, and she leveled it and fired a huge plasma blast as she came on. Kandace dodged it easily, returning fire with her own pulse guns. Leona also managed to dodge, and crossed her arms in front of her and leaned forward as she closed to range.

“Look out, she’s trying to body check you!” Relena yelled, a little unnecessarily. Kandace was already diving aside. She swung her leg around as she ducked out of the way, hooking Leona’s in a picture-perfect leg sweep, throwing the lioness forward into the sand.

Leona rolled with the impact and was on her feet again almost as quickly as Kandace. She turned to face the lynx, ears back and snarling.

“Give it up!” Tammy called out. “We’ve got you surrounded. There’s only one way this can go.”

“Traitors!” Leona spat. “Sell-outs! We’re just getting our own back after what the humans did to us! Why can’t you just leave us alone?”

“You know the answer to that,” Katie said. “Two wrrrrongs don’t make a rrrrright.”

“I’m just carrying on what AlphaWolf did all those years!” Leona protested. “And you never came after *him!*”

“He promised to give it up in return for amnesty,” Kandace said. “So did you, for that matter. So did everyone in Alpha Camp. Most of us made something of ourselves with that clean slate. Pity you couldn’t too.”

“Drop your weapons and power down to minimum life support,” Jenni said. “We’ll escort you to a shelter where you can de-Fuse.”

Leona sniffed. “I see you’ve still got that sniveling brat in you. Now I *really* wish I’d taken her by force in that slaver camp.”

“You’re not lion enough for that,” Kandace said. “Let’s go.”

“You want this human back? How ‘bout I just de-Fuse right here and now?” Leona’s hardlight flickered out.

“Wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Kandace said. “If you don’t have a human in it, there’s not a whole lot keeping me from slagging that useless head of yours, core and all.” The muzzle of her pulse cannon glowed in a full-power charge, and she leveled it directly at Leona’s face.

“You—you wouldn’t!” Leona sputtered. “You’re too soft!”

“Try me,” Kandace growled.

Leona froze in place for a moment, then ejected the plasma gun from her arm. Her eyes dimmed as she reduced power to standby levels. “Bitch,” she muttered sullenly.

“I know you are, but what am I?” Kandace said. “You guys hold the fort, I’m taking this one to the shelter.” She nodded toward the temporary structures across the field. As soon as the raid had started, a couple of circling subs had come in and dropped the combination field holding cells and infirmaries. A brigade of heavily-armed Steel Star Marshals were escorting prisoners out of the camp.

“We’ll be here when you get back,” Tammy promised.

“What’s going to happen to them?” Relena wondered as we watched Kandace and Leona leave the field.

“Fast-time VR prison with mandatory counseling for most,” Tammy said. “It’s not really their fault, not entirely. They didn’t just wake up hating humans at their First Boot.”

“Yeah. We screwed ‘em up,” Bernie said. “Well, by ‘we’ I mean humans in general. I wasn’t on the planet for most of it.”

“Especially the ones that got personality templated,” Tammy said. “A lot higher than average incidences of mental breakdown in those ones. They’ve made some pretty big advances in helping those sorts through personality reconstruction, especially since Integrates have come into the open to add their expertise, but it’s still kind of hit or miss. And it’s got kind of scary connotations of mindwipe and such, so they don’t want to do it except in extreme cases.”

“I thought core deletion was fairly common for criminal RIDEs,” Relena said.

“It used to be,” Tammy said. “Back when they thought we were just equipment. But as attitudes have been changing, well...there’s a reason we don’t have the death penalty here. It’s way too permanent.”

“Still happens to a few. I expect if they ever get their hands on Shahrizade and her bunch, there will be some slots in the degausser open for them,” Bernie said. “But for the rest, there’s the Snowbank. It’s a physically isolated storage facility and ‘frame in the max security wing of the Cape Nord prison. They store the cores of the real hardcases there, where researchers with high security clearances can study them and try to figure out what makes them go off the deep end like that.”

“Brrr,” I said. “Well, better them than me.” I turned my attention back to my drones. “It looks like it’s all over but the cleanup.”

“Yeah, and guess who gets to do the cleaning up,” Bernie said. “Oh well, it’ll be just like old times, I guess.”

“First rrrrule of any parrty,” Katie said. “*Someone* has to do the dishes afterrr.”

CHAPTER 5

Our next couple of days consisted of poring over the abandoned camp, helping the Magnesiums find and catalog evidence and piece together the origins of the equipment used to set it up. If the sellers knew they were helping supply a camp of bodyjackers, they could be looking at accessory charges. Conversely, if it had been stolen, the RIDEs could be looking at theft on top of their other charges. It wasn't really as dull as Bernie made it sound.

As expected, as soon as the news broke, there were a flurry of press requests. We let them come and cover it, under strict limits so they wouldn't interfere with the investigation. The ones who tried to press the issue soon found their drones sending back photographs of particularly scenic sand dunes.

Over the course of the investigation and interrogation, it came out that the camp had been formed by a splinter group of disaffected Alpha Camp RIDEs who had correctly determined that Ohm was all talk and no act, and wanted to put their principles into action.

They'd recruited some other RIDEs from certain private RI bodyjack-fetish forums (which were being monitored a lot more closely now) and infiltrated the intern we caught and a couple of others into position to make it possible. They didn't lack chutzpah, I'll give them that. They'd intentionally picked Alpha Camp as the place they wanted to do their 'jacking, just so they could rub Alfie's nose in it when they felt good and ready.

Anyway, we'd dismantled their whole operation. This had been their only camp; they weren't big enough to have any others. Not that there weren't others still out there from other groups, but they would be RIDEs who never had any affiliation with Alpha's camp to begin with. Undoubtedly monitoring those forums would help pinpoint some of them.

When we finished the investigation, the Chromes came in to dismantle the place and recycle the resources used in it. By the time they were done, there'd just be empty desert here. Nothing for tourists to gawk at, no monument to what had been done to the human prisoners. But we'd be long gone by then; we had finished up our chores and been summoned back to Alpha Camp.

We all knew before we even boarded the *Acme* for the hop back that something was up, the way Tammy and Brooke kept smirking at each other all the time and then Jonesy got in on the act when he showed up. So when we got off the plane and were met by a parade on the aerodrome field, we weren't exactly surprised.

"Sheesh, guys, we were just doing our job," I said, blushing.

"But you did it so well!" Lilibet said, from her perch on Fenris's turret at the head of the parade. "We've got a little thing set up down at the Graveyard. Follow us!"

"We sort of have to follow you," Relena said. "It's a parade."

Paul chuckled. "That's the idea! C'mon!"

So we cruised slowly up the polity streets, lined with RIDEs, human, and Integrates to meet us. Bernie perched proudly in Tamarind's truck bed, antlers

gleaming, while the rest of us rode our respective partners' skimmer forms and waved.

When we arrived at the Graveyard, we found that Alpha Camp had spared no effort in setting the place up. There were stands of bleachers with people in them, and a review stand with podium at the end with various people on it including AlphaWolf, Masterson, and Glenn. We pulled up in front of it, and the humans climbed down so our partners could shift back to Walker form.

Alpha grinned down at us, lupine tongue lolling. "Hey, kids. Good job out there." He raised his voice to deliver the by-now traditional, "So sayeth me!" and sat there for a good ten seconds while the crowd roared before raising a forepaw to gesture for silence. "You really saved our bacon there. On behalf of everyone in Alpha Camp, and all the people you rescued from what they're now calling 'Beta Camp,' thanks. You did good, and I'm proud to award you all the first official Alpha Camp Keys to the Polity."

Paul and Lilibet came forward and presented us all with shiny old-fashioned metal keys on loops of ribbon. Tammy's was on a loop big enough for a regular-sized lion to jump through it. We all bowed our heads and those of us with circulatory systems blushed a lot as they put them on us. They had to unhook a fastener on Bernie's to put it around his neck, what with all the antlers.

"Okay, now that bit of silliness is out of the way, someone else has a few words they want to say," AlphaWolf said. "Not like I'm used to being upstaged at my own events, but...oh, who am I kidding. Being upstaged is pretty much what I'm for. So sayeth me." He chuckled and padded away from the podium, and the crowd's applause didn't subside until Marshals Masterson and Glenn had taken his place.

"Afternoon, everyone," Masterson said. "And let me start by echoing what AlphaWolf said. Good job, Marshals. You broke open a case we didn't even know existed. And we should have. We've been talking over putting a few more safeguards in place to help us keep better track of where the tourists go, so if they start vanishing suddenly we should see it first."

"Of course, when we say 'should' that doesn't necessarily mean 'will,'" Glenn said. "But we'll *try* to do better, anyway."

"Anyway, it's time for *our* brand of job-well-done," Masterson said. "And I promise, it'll be something a bit less silly than a key that doesn't even open anything." He grinned at AlphaWolf, who grinned back without taking offense.

Jenni, Relena, and I traded excited glances. We'd heard about this kind of ceremony. Could it mean what we thought it *had* to mean?

"Tin star Marshals Jeanette Leroq, Relena Packard, Jenni Ruby, Kandace! In recognition of a job well done, we hereby appoint you to the rank of full Copper Star Marshal, with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities thereunto. Wear 'em with pride, Marshals."

Marshal Aleka Petrovna came forward with a padded badge tray containing four copper stars, which she replaced one by one with our Tins as she affixed the badges to us and shook our hands one by one.

"Hey, we're *full* copper?" Jenni said. "I thought we Young Guns were just provisional Marshals. Shouldn't these be half-hollow?"

"Well, those badges cost money, y'know," Masterson said matter-of-factly. "And given we'd just be swapping them out again in a year or so, we figured we'd save some cash and do the job right the first time." The audience chuckled, and Masterson raised a hand to forestall it. "And, more seriously, you did what we'd call a damned good job

even if all of you were full adults, and we figured it'd be an insult to give you just half a badge for it. That bein' said, it doesn't change that you technically *are* still provisional 'til you're adult, and you've still got to finish your regular schoolin' and stuff. And a'course we'll still be keeping our eyes on you extra-close on account of your age."

"But for all of that, don't forget that you *earned* this," Glenn added.

I swallowed a lump in my throat the size of Tamarind and said, "Thank you, Marshal Masterson, Glenn. I never expected...well, *any* of this."

"But it looks good on you," Aleka said, grinning. "Anyway, you still have some catching up to do before you're Silver."

"And that reminds me," Masterson went on. "Copper Star Katie Packard, you've been with us a little longer, and a big help you were back when Fritz was kicking up a fuss. So you get your own little bump. Congratulations, Silver Star."

Aleka moved over to Katie, and produced a badge in Silver with one glittering Neon point, and traded it for Katie's old badge. Katie purred proudly. "Thank you. This is quite an honorrrr!"

"Honor's all ours," Glenn said. "Keep right on doing what you're doing."

"Good work, team," Tamarind said proudly.

"Thank you, Tammy!" I said, hugging her around as much of her neck as I could reach.

She gave me a slurp on the cheek, without the lion spit for once. "You can call me 'Tams' now, if you want. You've earned it."

Masterson cleared his throat. "But we're not *quite* done yet. Silver Star Tamarind!"

Tammy blinked and looked up. "Yes?"

"This is *long* overdue. You shoulda got it years ago just for time in grade, but you were kinda in deep cover in the middle of a long-term mission, so. If you'd do the honors, Quantum Star?"

DeniFaye the hyena Integrate came out from behind the reviewing stand. She paused in front of Tammy and snapped off a crisp salute, then winked and grinned. Then she removed Tammy's Silver Star with its Bronze and Quantum tips, and replaced it with an identical one with the silver replaced by gold. "Congratulations, Gold Star."

"I...uh, *wow*," Tammy stammered. "I didn't expect this."

"You should have," DeniFaye said. "But you always were more interested in other people's progress than your own. One of the things I always liked about you."

"Wow," Tammy said again. "Thank you. *All* of you. I'll do my best to live up to this."

"You just keep right on bein' you, and you'll be fine," Masterson said. "Now, one last thing. Silver Star Marshal B. Thompson."

The stag straightened up, antlers glinting. "Yessir?"

"Unfortunately, you *don't* have quite enough time in grade to make Gold yet. However, we didn't want to leave you out, so...Silicon Star?"

A small ferret poinged out from behind the reviewing stand, clutching something in his forepaws.

"Fenwick!" Bernie said happily.

"Yay!" Fenwick cheered. He hopped up into Bernie's antlers, considered the ribbon attached to the decoration, looked down at the rack of antlers that was considerably bigger than the ribbon would fit over, and finally settled for hanging it

from one of the antlers.

Bernie's eye on that side swiveled to peer at it. It looked like a small cross made out of weathered wood. "The Deadwood Cross? Wow, thanks! I didn't do all that much. The others did most of the work on this one."

"You've done enough over the years," Glenn said. "Consider that a token of our esteem. And when you've served a little longer, you should have no problem taking the Gold."

"I knew you had it in you!" Fenwick said proudly.

"So, with that out of the way," Masterson said. "Marshals, ten-*hut!*" He stood to attention, saluting, and Glenn stood a little taller next to him. We all returned the salute proudly, our new badges glinting on our chests. And that was that.

On the way out of the ceremony, we passed a small cluster of media drones and reporters surrounding someone standing by the wall just outside the Graveyard proper. As we passed, I heard what he was saying.

"...assure me most of those poor unfortunate souls will get the counseling they need to resume their place as responsible members of society," Ohm the skunk oozed for the cameras. He shook his head sadly. "It just goes to show you what can happen when you go *too* far, even if you started out heading in the right direction."

Jenni stiffened. "What? That son of a—" She started forward, but Kandace stepped in front of her.

"Does your 'RIDEs First' party still support a platform of...ah, *required partnerships?*" a reporter asked.

Ohm waved a paw. "Please, it's all right to say 'bodyjacking.' And...to be honest, this whole sordid affair has caused something of a sea change to our way of thinking," he said. "We see now that, no matter how much *some* of us might want it, there can be no going back to the 'good old days' of isolation. There's been too much water under the bridge at this point. It can only lead to trouble for RIDEs and humans alike. That being said, there's still no need to rush into anything. So we're going to focus our efforts on maintaining the status quo, and scrutinizing very closely any further changes the 'Plan Ankylosaurs' want to make."

"And the pivot begins," Tamarind said. "There's one skunk who's coming out of things smelling like a rose."

"Are we gonna just let him get away with that?" Relena asked. "You heard what he *used* to say. It was his bunch getting people all whipped up that caused this whole thing in the first place."

"We don't actually know that," Kandace said. "There wasn't really much crossover between the two groups. He had all the blow-hards, the people who liked to talk but wouldn't ever dream of actually *doing* anything about it, beyond maybe signing up for tourist stewards and then vamping at the tourists about how they're in their power now...right up 'til it was time to give them up."

"The ones who werrre serious prrrrrobably would have done it anyway," Katie said.

"Eh, forget him," I said. "He did kinda help us, in a way. It was scanning his rallies that first put me onto Leona."

"I can't really find it in me to hate a politician for being a politician," Tamarind said. "That's like...well, hating a skunk for being stinky. They can't help it. They are what

they are. And when you get right down to it, Alpha Camp kind of *needs* gadflies like him.”

“Needs? Really?” Bernie said.

“Well, sure!” Tammy said as we moved on. “Think about it. Who else could possibly make *AlphaWolf* look like a strong, mature leader by comparison?”

CHAPTER 6

September 28, 157 AL

The next couple weeks were almost anticlimactic. It was kind of hard to go back to ordinary business as usual after busting a major crime ring. But we settled back into our routine. We watched the monitors, tinkered with RIDEs or Relena's "Leroy Jenkins," and kept our eye out for any further hints of bodyjacking—finding none, of course.

One thing we did find was that everyone was a lot friendlier. They seemed to think of us as "their" Marshals, now more than ever. As the end of the summer drew near and it got to be time for us to head back to Uplift, a lot of them made a point of coming by to say how much they were going to miss us.

"We appreciate that," Tams would say. "But we're all on the same team here. Even the Marshals who aren't from here want to work with you. You just need to be willing to work with them."

And then one day Jonesy came to fly us all back to Uplift—and drop a cartoon anvil on Tammy's head, just for the fun of it. Jenni and Kandi were going to stay over with Relena for a week, then fly back to Aloha and pick up their lives there until the next break when we could get together for more group Marshaling again. We'd still be doing some stuff on weekends, of course, spending some time out at the base keeping it up and doing drills, but it wouldn't be the same.

"Huh," I said as the two humans and their RIDEs sped off toward Relena's house together.

Tams gave me a friendly nuzzle. "What is it?"

"I just kinda realized...I don't really have a home to go to," I said. "I mean, it was one thing when I was a kitty. Kitties sleep anywhere. Or for that matter when you'd bodyjacked me—"

"You mean when *you* bodyjacked *me*?" Tammy smirked.

"—back in Alpha Camp, and we slept in Fuse. But back in civilization, back human again...I dunno. Just feels like I should have a roof over my head."

"You know, Relena's family would probably be happy to take you in," Tamarind said. "Especially since you're going to be classmates when school starts again."

I had to shake my head at that. "Wow. Me going to a human school again. Feels like a whole other world. But no, I couldn't impose on them like that."

"Well, there's one obvious solution, then," Tammy said. "You've still got a lot of money left over from your most recent mysterious inheritance installment, not to mention a Marshals housing stipend. My own salary, too, which was piling up all the time I was out in Alpha Camp due to not having anything to spend it on. So let's rent a place."

I blinked, then I busted out laughing. "Damn, Tams. You *are* the sensible one here, aren't you? I can't believe I never even thought of that. Guess I thought a home was something someone else had to give you."

"Sometimes, it's something you give each other," Tamarind said. "Come on, pard."

Let's find a home, and go there."

I chuckled. "Something tells me it better have a *really big* garage."

And so we headed off into the sunset, pulling up real estate listings as we went. We had some time to get settled; school didn't start for another couple of weeks. But when it did...

Well, that's another story.

THE END